

Love in a Time of Organized Crime

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Love in a Time of Organized Crime

by [weiwei \(ih8snakeu\)](#)

Summary

Raised as the Yakuza's Wakagashira, Shane Hollander only knows discipline. The Bratva Pakhan's son, Ilya Rozanov, has only ever been feared.

When their worlds converge, what begins as a rivalry becomes something far more dangerous: a secret, forbidden relationship forged in violence, restraint, and yearning neither of them should be allowed. In the criminal underworld, love is leverage, and survival means knowing when to hide the truth and when to pull the trigger.

A mafia AU about their forbidden romance, rivalry, violence, and what it means to choose each other in spite of it all. Enemies by design. Lovers by choice.

-prev. titled "The Yakuza Enforcer and the Bratva Prince"-

Chapter 1: The Meeting

Chapter Notes

help i've been hit by the HR mass psychosis...i haven't written anything in years and yet here i am cranking out this short story after sitting with this idea in my head for less than 24 hours.

imma be totally honest, this is rated mature but like nothing really explicit happens other than mentions of killing and violence...i'm terrible at writing sex, which is not great for a story built on it lol so its more implied than anything

also there are only 10 chapters so things are going to be moving quickkk

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

Neutral territory is a lie people tell themselves so they can sleep.

Shane knows this before he steps out of the car. As always, he's cautious of his surroundings and has been since the meeting place was set.

The building is an old hotel on the edge of the city, abandoned in all the ways that matter. It's not run-down or dilapidated, but not functional in the way that random guests would happen into its doors during an inconvenient moment. Renovations had been started, too many polished surfaces that gave the building a look of imitated elegance.

In the crisp, winter months, like today, the sun and snow reflected off its surfaces with a sort of blinding radiance that just gave Shane a headache.

He adjusted his jacket in a practiced manner, the windchill nipping at his cheeks, and the gun holster under his coat pressed closer to his sides.

He straightened his spine and began his assessment of the environment before turning around to open the car door for the Oyabun.

Yuna slips out of the black vehicle with a practiced ease, stopping for a moment as the rest of the Yakuza delegation settles around her, every man tilting their head downwards in respect to their leader.

They are quiet, yet coordinated in the way Shane expects them to be. They move with an understanding and few words exchanged, their footsteps are measured as they walk through the entrance, members peeling off swiftly and efficiently to guard posts in a way that should make Shane proud. Afterall, he's vetted and trained every single one of them.

Shane walks half a step behind the Oyabun, not out of deference, but by design. He is her shadow and a weapon to be used at her disposal.

The remaining delegation fan out into the already set-up boardroom, forming a semi-circle around their Oyabun before sitting, silently in their chairs to wait for the start of the meeting. Shane takes up position behind the head chair, right over Yuna's left shoulder, eyes still assessing the room.

The Bratva arrive late. It's a calculated move.

When they arrive, there's a subtle shift in the air. An adjustment of stances, a tension from the Yakuza's side at the way they enter, loud and boisterous. Shane catalogs the new faces the same way he catalogues exits- quick and exact. He recognizes their hierarchy immediately. Those in front are loud, broad-shouldered, and meant to be seen. They chat with one another in Russian, trading friendly jabs as they settle in their chairs. A few pull out cigarettes, passing them to one another.

Then he sees *him*.

Ilya Rozanov.

When the Pakhan's previous Brigadier passed from old age (or something more sinister...in this line of work, one could never be too sure), the Pakhan's only son, the *Bratva Prince*, was chosen to step in. He had come directly from Russia to Boston to take over the operations and secure his title. Shane had been in a few business interactions with the old Brigadier and knew of him well enough, but the minute he heard of the old man's death, he was quick to do research on the newcomer.

The pictures in his profile that Shane had put together didn't do him justice.

Ilya Rozanov didn't look like someone who feared anything. Especially not this room. He moved through it like it was a temporary inconvenience. A thick wool jacket thrown over his blazer, an especially gaudy, silk button-up with the top two buttons open. A glint around his neck showed off a shiny gold chain with a cross. Rozanov's posture was loose, one hand casually in a pant pocket, smile sharp enough to draw blood, and eyes glinting with something Shane couldn't quite dissect. His curls were brushed back, carefully styled in a way that accented his facial features.

Without much instruction- a slight gesture of the hand- someone had taken the Russian's overcoat and was already holding a lighter to his parted lips, where a cigarette had found its way. Shane watched as Rozanov took a drag, long and relaxed, blowing smoke as he sat almost nonchalantly in his chair.

He didn't take up space like a king. He took it up like someone who had never been told no.

His eyes sweep the room- exits, blindspots, threats- and then land on Shane with the kind of attention that made him feel like he was being selected.

Not assessed.

Selected.

Shane didn't look away, no matter how much his mind was telling him he needed to move.

That was his first mistake.

Yuna clears her throat, the Bratva- at least with some understanding of respect- quiet almost immediately.

The meeting begins.

Words move across the table. Numbers, routes, conditions, trades. The negotiation is all business, dull on the surface, but Shane understands the tension underneath it. This is not peace. This is bargaining over where the violence might be directed next. Balancing a thin line between the two companies.

He watches hands. Breathing. Microexpressions. Looks for ticks or slight twitches when someone mentions money or a name or a port.

Rozanov doesn't bother pretending to care.

He leans back in his chair like everything bores him, one arm casual over the back, the other loosely holding the cigarette, tapping it every once in a while on an ashtray that seemed to magically appear.

His eyes don't leave Shane.

Shane tells himself it's tactical, that being watched is information. He can use it, measure it, can ignore the low, unwelcome heat that gathers behind his ribs and ears whenever Rozanov's gaze catches him and holds.

He doesn't like being looked at.

He likes it even less that Rozanov seems to know that.

"You're very quiet," Rozanov says suddenly, cutting off a Bratva lieutenant mid-sentence. His English is accented, but sharp and deliberate like a knife. "Is intentional, or do you pretend not to listen?"

The room stills.

There's an almost awkward shift in the room, as Bratva men glance at one another, and Yakuza men tense without expression.

Yuna's fingers twitch ever so slightly, the only indication to Shane that she's warning him.

"I don't pretend," Shane answers anyway.

Rozanov's gaze sharpens, like he's pleased. "No," he agrees softly. "You don't."

A pause. A breath held too long.

Yuna cuts in, voice smooth and unwavering. “You’re very forward for a son. A newcomer.”

Rozanov's eyes snap to her, grin widening. “You’re very polite for someone holding a knife.”

The words are aimed at the Oyabun, but his gaze lands on Shane.

Shane’s pulse spikes- not fear. Recognition.

This is not attraction. He reminds himself. Attraction is safe, simple, clean. *This is friction.* A challenge that feels like it was made just for him.

Rozanov's head tilts, studying Shane openly now. “You’re her knife,” he says. “Not her shield.”

Shane doesn’t flinch. “You’re observant.”

“I’m bored,” Rozanov replies with the swat of his hand. “Observation keeps me entertained.”

Shane should look away, should somehow steer the conversation back to the business at hand.

He doesn’t. He shuts his mouth.

Mistake number two.

The meeting continues, but the room is no longer only about routes and money. Something else has been established- an undercurrent no one else can name, but everyone can feel. Shane sees the way a Bratva lieutenant observes him and Rozanov now. Sees the way Yuna’s eyes flicker, sharp and assessing.

Then the meeting breaks for a moment. Bratva turn to one another in hushed tones; some stand and leave to find the facilities. The Yakuza rotates, relieving one another from their posts. The Oyabun turns to one of their accountants to ask him a question about the paperwork in his hand.

A sharp bang from the outside snapped everyone’s attention to the windows. It was distant enough to avoid an all out panic, but close enough that Shane started to move to evaluate.

Another shot, farther away happens, a shout from outside has Shane up and moving toward an exit, murmuring ever so slightly as he passes Yuna. “Will assess.”

Someone is testing the edges of the perimeter, seeing what they can get away with.

Shane slips through a side door, almost immediately feeling the heat of someone close behind him.

The weightlessness in which they followed him into the corridor, their scent, the air feeling all sorts of tense but also a sense of...playfulness? Shane knows exactly who it is within the

second. He whips around, glaring at the perpetrator.

“Why did you follow me?” he spits out at Rozanov, watching as the man smiles and simply shrugs. There’s a glint in his eye that has Shane second-guessing everything he knows.

They stand there for a moment as Shane tries to convince himself that his heart is pounding only from annoyance and frustration. He finally makes the executive decision that he’s simply wasting too much time seeing if the other will react.

Shane rolls his eyes and swiftly turns around to start down the stairs.

“Just don’t get in my way.”

“Yes, sir,” Rozanov murmurs, far too amused.

As they slip through a side door, then another, Shane is on a small radio asking the men outside what is happening. They’ve confirmed they apprehended the shooter, and it was really just a minor delay, nothing worth checking in on them for. He is good to return to the Oyabun’s side.

Shane stops in his tracks to turn around, Rozanov almost bumping into him.

He starts to notice how empty the space is and how alone the two really are. They're in a narrow stairwell where the light flickers and the walls look dusty and smell of rust. The sounds of the building have faded behind them, replaced by their breathing and the echo of boots on concrete.

It suddenly feels too tight for distance and too hidden for witnesses. Shane can possibly hear his heart beating in his chest.

He turns to speak- something practical or biting. Something that keeps inside the rules.

He doesn’t get the chance.

Rozanov steps in close, not touching, but just near enough that Shane feels his body heat. Feels his presence, can practically hear his thoughts.

“You don’t like being looked at,” Rozanov says quietly, his piercing pale blue eyes practically boring holes into Shane.

Shane stiffens. “That’s not-”

“But you let me,” Rozanov continues, voice low, “You could have avoided my eyes. You did not.”

Shane’s breath catches, a betrayal of his own body. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rozanov hums, a small grin spreading on his lips. “I do.”

He reaches out, slow, deliberate, and hooks a finger lightly into the edge of Shane's suit jacket. Not pulling, not forcing. Just suggesting.

"This is where you tell me to stop," Rozanov says, voice lowering into something Shane can only describe as seductive.

He doesn't tell the man to stop.

Something hot coils lower in his gut, not exactly desire, but maybe want. Or need. The need to understand why this man feels like a miscalculation he can't correct. Why the idea of stepping back feels almost like stepping off a ledge.

Rozanov is now so close that Shane can feel his breath. The faint smell of smoke is still there.

"Still your move, дорогой," Rozanov murmurs. (*sweetheart*)

Shane swallows. His fists are clenched tight.

He doesn't understand the words, doesn't understand *this*. The pull, the heat, the way his thoughts fracture at the sight of Rozanov's mouth, his voice, the smell of smoke and spice and something dangerous. But he understands rules, and he understands when they are already broken.

Shane closes the distance.

The kiss is brief but brutal in his restraint. Mouths colliding more than meeting, all pressure and breath, and suppressed sound. There's tongue, and teeth, and Rozanov makes a low noise that goes straight down Shane's spine and settles somewhere it doesn't belong.

Shane has grabbed the front of Rozanov's blazer with both hands, pushing him with force up against the wall. The Russian doesn't stop him. He simply tilts his head and takes more, like he's always known Shane would break exactly this way if pushed.

When they finally separate for air, it's Rozanov who's smiling, hands grabbing gently at Shane's waist.

"That," he breathes out, "Is what you wanted."

Shane quickly detangles from the man, pushing back lightly. His hands are fisted at his sides, knuckles white, as he tries not to look at the other man's red and slightly swollen lips.

"That was a mistake."

Rozanov's eyes burn. "Hmm. Of course it was."

Footsteps echo somewhere too close for comfort.

They separate instantly, expressions going neutral. Shane smooths his jacket with a mechanical precision, making sure his gun holster is fixed properly, as if the task can erase

the taste of Rozanov from his mouth. The blonde adjusts his own collar, swiping at his mouth with the back of his hands, eyes still bright with the thrill of the moment.

“You will think about this,” Rozanov tuts, tapping his pointer finger lightly on Shane’s chest. “Even if you pretend you do not.”

Shane glares, swatting at his fingers. “Fuck off,” he grumbles, trying to ignore the way his stomach turns when Rozanov grins at him, smugly.

Shane watches him leave first. Leaving first means control, and Shane needs control right now.

He doesn’t have it.

By the time he makes it back to the meeting room, it has already resumed with the familiar droll of negotiations. Yuna’s gaze flicks to Shane once- sharp, assessing. He nods at the Oyabun in confirmation that the problem has been handled.

Shane’s posture doesn’t change after that. His face doesn’t betray him. But his pulse refuses to settle.

Across the table, Rozanov is lounging again, bored *again*, as if he hadn’t just been pressed into a wall with Shane’s mouth on his. His eyes flick up once- quick, satisfied, maybe even delighted- then back to the negotiation like Shane is a passing thought.

It feels like he’s taunting him. Maybe it’s a promise.

The deal comes to an uneasy pause, terms are postponed. “We’ll have to reconvene.”

Everyone leaves with the same number of men they arrived with, so that was a small success.

Outside, Shane walks next to the Oyabun in silence. When they reach the car, Yuna pauses.

Her voice is calm. Too calm. “You were gone.”

“I assessed the situation,” Shane replies.

Yuna looks at him for a long moment. “Be careful.”

It’s not a warning about the gunshot.

Shane nods anyway. “Yes, Oyabun.”

He opens the car door, head bowed as Yuna steps in. The door closes, and he turns to disperse his men before hopping into the passenger side.

Back in Russia, the Pakhan receives a call about the small disruptions at the meeting. He hears his son’s name mentioned in the same breath as the Yakuza’s Wakagashira, and his mouth turns down. Grigori Rozanov does not imagine desire. He imagines recklessness. He

imagines disobedience. He imagines the need for correction. His son has had to step in quickly as the new Brigadier, and some of the old guard are not too happy about this change. The Pakhan cannot afford mistakes.

The thought that his son could want men does not enter his mind.

It can't.

And that ignorance is its own kind of weapon.

Later, alone in his apartment in one of the Yakuza owned complexes, Shane sits on the edge of his bed and stares at his hands.

Images of the way Rozanov had tugged at his jacket, slid his hands under the material with an almost impossible gentleness, brushed lightly against the handle of one of his guns, the way Shane gripped tightly onto the blonde's collar.

He tries to categorize that encounter as an anomaly.

He doesn't believe it.

He runs through the moment again and again, like a problem he can solve, but it doesn't resolve. It only replays Rozanov's mouth, his breath, his smell, the way he waited for Shane to make the decision.

Shane's phone vibrates once.

No name, just a number he doesn't recognize, but knows immediately who it's from.

A single message.

Unknown: You will think about this.

Shane stares at the words until the screen dims.

He doesn't reply, but he doesn't delete it either.

He sets his phone on the nightstand and fails to sleep.

this story is roughhh. i didn't really give this a lot of thought or direction before i started typing, but i've been really into the idea of mafia shane and ilya and a forbidden romance so here we are lol

im going to keep this story short, so there won't be a lot of time for world building or tons of plot/character development

i hope you guys enjoy, i'd love to hear your opinions on this. i'm out of practice so please don't flame me too hard 😞

thanks for reading!

Chapter 2: Rules of the Game

Chapter Summary

Shane learns the rules of the game. The Oyabun has given him an order, and he knows he must follow.

But Ilya...Ilya has other plans

Chapter Notes

i'm having fun with this:)

also i don't know russian so let's just hope google translate doesn't fail me...moving forward, i'll try to include the translated words or phrases in italics after the sentence it's spoken in.

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

The first rule is that nothing happened.

The second rule is that Shane ignores the first rule.

He can't stop thinking about the meeting.

He runs ten kilometers before dawn, not because he needs the exercise, but because his body needs somewhere to put the chaotic energy. The city is still half-asleep- empty streets, low noise, the rattle of a train nearby. The pavement is crunchy from snow and salt, the sharp smell of cold air burns his lungs. His rhythm is steady.

It almost works.

Until he catches himself thinking about the look in Rozanov's eyes, basically inviting him, how he had hooked his fingers around Shane's jacket, like a claim he had no right making.

Until he remembers how easily he gave in.

The run ends quicker than he anticipates, his pulse is too high when he gets back to his apartment. He stands in the shower for too long, staring at the drain, pressing his thumb into his palm so hard it leaves a mark.

An anomaly, he tells himself.

An anomaly.

He makes his way to the compound.

Yuna is already awake, staring out a window that overlooks the garden. She's always awake.

Her office smells faintly of tea and paper and the kind of calm that only comes from being the most dangerous person in the room.

To Shane, the smells and the quiet remind him of his childhood. The patience Yuna had when teaching him how to read, or write calligraphy, or when he was old enough, learn about the hierarchy of the Yakuza. In some cases, he was a quiet observer in the corner of the room when an especially important business transaction was being handled.

She doesn't look his way when he slides the screen door closed, leaving his shoes at the entrance.

"Sit," she says.

Shane lowers himself onto the floor cushion on both knees, hands planted firmly ontop. His head is bowed down.

Yuna finally turns around, setting a folder on the desk between them as she sits in a mirrored position across from him. "Report."

Shane's voice is even as he stares at his palms. "Gunfire outside the meeting was a test. No direct threat to the negotiations going on. Likely an independent."

"Likely?" Yuna asks.

Shane blinks once. "Certain. The pattern didn't match Bratva tactics."

Shane can feel Yuna's gaze on him. It's sharp. "And Rozanov?"

Shane doesn't flinch. "Ilya Rozanov is reckless in his speech, but controlled in his movement. He is not the kind to outsource chaos when he's perfectly capable of causing it himself."

Shane can feel how Yuna's mouth curves slightly. "That's an opinion."

"It's an assessment," Shane replies.

Silence stretches.

Yuna taps her finger once on the folder. "Your separation was noticeable."

"It was brief," Shane says.

"Rozanov followed you."

Shane's pulse quickens, but his voice stays level. He tries not to clench his fists, tries not to show his weakness. "He followed me out. I chose to not engage with his tactics and moved to

assess the threat.”

Yuna is silent as she studies him as if she can see through him. She sighs.

“Shane,” she says softly. At this, Shane looks up. His name on her mouth always sounds like a blade. “You understand that we survive on rules.”

“Yes, Oyabun.”

“And you understand those rules apply to you most of all.”

“Yes, Oyabun.”

She stares into his eyes, as if looking for the weakness, before nodding once. Not because she believes him entirely, but because she believes in what he will do to keep control.

“Good,” she says. “Then you will do what you’re told.”

Shane’s stomach tightens. “What am I told?”

Yuna’s gaze doesn’t waver. “You are not to be alone or have direct contact with Ilya Rozanov outside of preplanned meetings.”

There’s a pause.

“And if that becomes unavoidable,” Yuna continues, voice still calm, “You will not allow anything that can be leveraged against you.”

Shane’s throat feels too tight.

“Yes, Oyabun,” he settles on saying.

Yuna watches him for one more long second, then looks down at the paperwork on her desk like Shane isn’t holding a live wire inside his chest.

“You’re dismissed,” she concludes.

Shane bows his head once more before standing and walking towards the door.

Outside the office, he exhales slowly, carefully, and tries to unclench his fists.

He tells himself it’s easy.

She gave him a directive that should stop him from trying to explore more.

He tells himself he has discipline.

That he’s survived worse than a kiss.

He almost believes it.

The second contact happens three days later.

It's not face-to-face, Rozanov isn't that careless.

Shane is overseeing the training for some of the new members when his phone buzzes. The number is still unknown, but Shane knows it anyway.

The message is short.

Unknown: You run too much.

Shane stares at the screen. He doesn't reply.

Another buzz.

Unknown: You think you can outrun the want. Is funny.

Shane's jaw tightens, his thumb presses hard into his palm. The noises of the training room seem to get farther away as he stares at the screen.

He types back.

Stop it.

Three dots appear immediately.

Unknown: Stop what?

Shane doesn't answer because answering would show his weakness.

He puts the phone away, interrupting a sparring match, inviting them to attack him instead.

He hopes the distracting movements will cover for the unsteadiness in his hands.

The next meeting happens in a different part of town. A different building, a different lie of neutrality.

Shane is once again at the Oyabun's shoulder, all posture and silence. Across the room, Rozanov walks up with his Bratva men and that same loose, dangerous ease.

He looks at Shane once. Just once, and it's enough for him to feel like he's being touched.

The negotiations begin. The air is tight, a discussion about a rival syndicate moving on shared routes. Small hits, pressure tactics. Enough to force coordination between the two groups, not enough for either to declare war.

The Bratva wants to respond loudly and aggressively.

The Oyabun wants to respond precisely.

Rozanov leans back, bored, and says. "If you want to find rat, don't stomp around like elephant. You make him run."

A Bratva lieutenant mutters something in Russian, probably unhappy with the way Rozanov wants to handle the situation.

Shane knows he shouldn't speak. He does it anyway.

"He's right," Shane says evenly. "We have to apply pressure asymmetrically to find the leak."

Another beat of silence.

Rozanov's eyes flick to Shane- quick, pleased.

Yuna's gaze shifts to Shane- sharp, warning.

Shane tries to keep his pulse steady. It's not. Neither are his choices.

After the meeting, Yuna is next to him.

"You spoke in support of him," she says.

"I spoke in support of the strategy," Shane replies. "One that would align more with our ways."

Yuna's head tilts. "Support of him, support of strategy. Those can become the same thing."

Shane's throat tightens. "They're not."

Yuna's expression doesn't change. "They can be."

That night, there's an attack.

Not on the Oyabun, not on the Bratva leadership. Something smaller and smarter. A Bratva courier is intercepted while passing through Yakuza territory. A driver beaten bloody and left alive, a message sprayed onto the side of the shipment crate by someone who wanted it to be seen.

It was a warning. A test.

Shane arrives at the warehouse shortly after with his men. He moves through the scene with control, cataloguing evidence, checking bodies, giving orders that slice clean through the uneasy air. He is not gentle or kind. He's effective and efficient.

Then he sees Rozanov.

Rozanov, with his golden curls that somehow glow under the fluorescence of the limited warehouse lighting, is crouched beside the driver, speaking low in Russian, one hand on the

man's shoulder. He looks up when Shane approaches, and the intensity in his face is not for the wounded man.

It's for Shane.

"You," Rozanov says quietly. His English roughens when emotions leak through, "You show up fast."

"I was close by," Shane lies.

And the way the Russian's mouth twitches tells Shane he knows.

The air between them is dense with smoke, blood, and everything unspoken. Rozanov stands up straight, brushing at some dirt on his pants.

"Come. We must talk to the others," he murmurs, leading Shane towards more of the commotion.

Shane follows without resistance.

They work together, side by side, but never too close. Shane's arms stay crossed, as if it's the only way to keep him from reaching out and touching the other.

Until a shadow moves wrong at the edge of the warehouse.

Shane reacts first- knife flashing in his hand like it's simply an extension. He catches the intruder, flips him swiftly over his shoulder, and pins him down hard, knee on his chest, blade to his throat.

The man coughs, wincing.

Rozanov steps in, pressing the barrel of his gun against the man's cheek, smiling like it's all just fun.

"You picked wrong night to test me," Rozanov says, shoving a little at the man who has now gone silent, eyes wide.

Shane's jaw tightens. "We don't have to kill him."

Rozanov glances at him, eyes bright as he shrugs. "We do whatever is necessary, да?" (*yes*)

The intruder immediately starts babbling. It's mostly lies and pleas to trade information.

Shane watches the man's pupils, his breath, the way his hands shake.

"He's not the source," Shane says. Rozanov is looking at him with focused attention now. It burns through him.

Shane shifts, gripping the knife tighter in his hand, diverting his gaze away from Rozanov's.

"He's bait," Shane clarifies. "They're watching our response."

Rozanov's eyes flicker down, he pokes at the man's cheek again. "Good," he murmurs, and then surprisingly stands up, slipping his gun calmly back in its holster next to his ribs.

He turns to walk away, barking out a short command in Russian, before looking Shane directly in the eyes once more.

His shoulder brushes Shane's as he passes, the backs of their hands touching for a moment.

It's nothing.

And yet, it's everything.

Later, when the warehouse has been cleared, the wounded moved, and the night has gone quiet in the way it does after violence, Shane finds himself in a secluded corner, phone in hand.

His screen lights up.

A message from an unknown number.

Unknown: You were beautiful tonight. Like machine. Maybe like monster.

Shane's breathing goes shallow.

He types quickly.

Stop it.

The reply comes immediately.

Unknown: Make me.

Shane closes his eyes.

He thinks of Yuna's warning. Of rules. Of leverage.

He thinks of Ilya's mouth and the way he waited for Shane to choose.

He thinks of the gun pressed to the stranger's face and how the smile on Ilya's face should have repulsed him.

It doesn't.

Shane doesn't answer. He doesn't delete the message either.

He simply walks out of the warehouse, telling his men it's all done, and goes home.

He's once again sitting at the edge of his bed, hands clenched tight in his lap as he tries to decide whether what he wants is a weakness or a weapon. He doesn't know.

He only knows this:

Ilya Rozanov isn't going away.

And neither is Shane.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed! once again, this was not edited...i hope the flow of this story isn't too choppy.

thoughts?

Chapter 3: Dead Drops

Chapter Summary

Tensions arise as Shane and Ilya give in to their temptations.

Chapter Notes

the story be getting juicyyy

this chapter has been my favorite to write so far (thats not saying much since theres only 3 in total lmao)

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

The next time Shane meets Rozanov alone again is not because he wants to. It's because the rules have been prearranged, and he has no other choice.

That's how Shane's world works. You're not forced into confession. You're forced into decisions that look like simple logistics until it's too late, and you realize they've been engineered to test the exact thing you're trying to hide.

It's the middle of the week, almost midnight, and Shane is going over shipping manifests in a Yakuza owned business office when one of his lieutenants appears outside the door.

He hadn't texted or notified Shane that he was coming.

That was a message in itself.

"The Oyabun wants you at Pier Eight," the man says, face unreadable.

"What time," Shane asks.

"Now."

Shane doesn't argue, arguing is for people who believe they can negotiate with gravity.

He simply closes the folder in front of him, standing to leave. Readjusting the gun holster around his shoulders, slipping on his jacket over top. He checks his phone once (no new messages) before sliding it in his pocket. Two lightweight knives are secured to the belt at his waist and the side of his leg.

Outside, the city is wet, the snow turning to slush in the most depressing of ways. He rides in the passenger seat of a black sedan with no plates and tinted windows.

He thinks of the encounter in Yuna's office. Her warning. Her rule.

You are not to be alone or have direct contact with Ilya Rozanov outside of preplanned meetings.

He understands this is preplanned, but also understands this is her testing him.

No direct contact?

Then stop making it so easy. He thinks grimly.

What he doesn't think about- doesn't allow himself to think about- is the message that came the night before.

No coordinates, no names. Just three words from the number he shouldn't have memorized.

Unknown: Still breathing. You?

Shane had stared at it for a full minute, until he was forced to blink from the dryness in his eyes.

Then he stared again.

He started typing.

Fine.

Deleted it.

Busy.

Deleted that too.

What he finally sent was so much worse.

Where.

They meet in a place that isn't supposed to exist yet.

A half-finished condominium complex that no one would be moving into any time soon. Parts were still raw concrete, exposed rebar, security cameras wired but not yet installed. It sat between their two territories, neither laying claim just yet.

Nothing official passed through there, making it somewhat safe.

Shane arrives first. He checks the perimeter, the stairwells, the blind spots, listens to the echo. He tells himself this is habit, not anticipation.

He hears Rozanov's car outside, the gravel under his tires. He hears the man before he sees him. Boots on concrete, unhurried. Rozanov never hides when he wants Shane to know he's coming.

"You pick ugly place," the man says, when Shane swings the metal exit door open, almost cringing at how loud it squeaks in the relatively silent night.

"It's empty," he states, letting his gaze linger on Rozanov's frame a little longer than necessary.

Ilya's mouth curves. "You like empty when you want quiet."

"I like empty when I want control," Shane exhales.

Rozanov steps closer. "That too."

They're barely an arm's length apart. Shane swallows before tearing his gaze away from Ilya's lips. He nods jerkily inside.

"Get *in*."

The city hums below them, distant and irrelevant. Although the room is still an open layout without walls, it feels like the space around them and between them tightens with everything unsaid since the first meeting, since the warehouse, since restraint stopped being optional.

"You shouldn't be here," Shane says.

"Да (yes)," Ilya replies easily. "You say this last time."

"Your father-"

"Is not here," Rozanov interrupts gently, a hand coming up to gently brush against Shane's jaw. He hates how much it affects him. "Neither is your mother."

He leans in, grabbing Shane's jaw lightly. He can feel his warmth, the smell of leather, spice, and smoke. It's all unmistakably Ilya.

"This is between us," Ilya murmurs. "For now."

Shane swallows.

He hopes Rozanov can't hear how loud his heart is beating in his chest.

He doesn't step back.

"I can't stay long," Shane says.

Ilya smiles, slow, knowing. "You never do."

His hands slowly trail down, fingers brushing against Shane's wrist. A test. Shane doesn't pull away. Rozanov's hand slides higher, catching the seam of his jacket, tugging just enough that Shane stutters forward slightly.

"Still shaking," Ilya mutters, face unbelievably close.

"I'm not."

Ilya hums. "You lie. Is lie, I know."

Then he kisses him.

It's not frantic or careful, it's deliberate. Like, Ilya is reminding Shane exactly what he's choosing to risk.

Shane's hands react immediately, pulling at the front of Rozanov's leather jacket, melting into the heat of the other's mouth. Rozanov responds, crowding him against a concrete pillar, body pressed up against Shane's, hands snaking around his waist to grip at his ass. Shane makes a small sound in the back of his throat that he will most definitely be embarrassed about later.

They don't speak, they don't need to.

The chemistry is unmistakable- hands, mouths, breath pressed close. Ilya controls the pace with a practiced ease. Shane gives in with the kind of intensity that comes from restraint held too long. It's rougher than it should be and quieter than it wants to be.

At some point, they'd both shed their outer layers, Shane enjoying the way Ilya's muscles ripple as he removes his leather jacket. At some other point, Shane starts to reach for Ilya's belt buckle, fumbling with shaking hands. The man is patient, stroking the back of Shane's neck with one hand, the other, planted along Shane's jaw, thumbing over his bottom lip.

Shane's brain was telling him to stop, and yet, his hands refused to listen.

He rested his forehead briefly against Ilya's shoulder, breath uneven.

"This is stupid," he muttered.

"Да, Yes," Ilya agrees.

"We're going to get caught."

"Mm, maybe," Ilya shrugs slightly, "But not today."

Shane is gripping the buckle tight. "I'm serious."

"So am I," Ilya replies softly, cupping his hands to Shane's face, forcing the man to look at him. "But right now, I need you."

The words feel like a punch to the gut. Heavier than any weight.

Shane stills.

Then, carefully, turns them, so Rozanov is pressed against the wall. His hands manage to unzip the front of his trousers, pulling them swiftly down, as he gets on his knees. Ilya's breath catches, eyes gleaming with a mixture of surprise and pleasure. His hands gently thread their way into Shane's hair.

"You learn quick."

"Don't mistake this for control."

Rozanov laughs under his breath. "I never do."

Some time later, when they're both satiated and returning to reality, Ilya presses a light kiss to Shane's forehead as he straightens his jacket.

"Tomorrow," he says. "We pretend this did not happen."

Shane exhales. "We already are."

Rozanov winks, a faint smile on his lips as he turns to leave.

Pier Eight smells like salt, gasoline, and old fish. The kind of place that doesn't bother pretending it's clean because no one with power spends enough time down there to care.

The Yakuza delegation are already waiting. Two cars, three men each, spaced around the perimeter. No one speaks, bodies are stiff, it's controlled.

Shane should be proud of the discipline he's instilled in his members, but for some reason, it just makes him uneasy.

Then he sees the second perimeter. Bratva.

They're on the opposite side of the pier, equally disciplined, equally silent, which only makes Shane's skin crawl even more.

And in the middle, near a stack of shipping crates that cast long shadows, stands Ilya Rozanov.

Hands in his pockets, collar of his coat turned up, he has a cigarette between his lips.

His smile is absent, eyes sharp.

Waiting.

Shane keeps a neutral face as he approaches Yuna, bowing as he reaches her.

The Oyabun stands beneath a single floodlight, highlighted like some sort of angel in the darkness. She's dressed immaculately in a long dark trenchcoat over top a power suit. Her

heels are wickedly sharp and shiny- spotless, except for the red painted on the underside of the soles.

Her expression is calm, and that calm is more threatening than rage.

“We have a leak,” Yuna says without preamble. “This needs to be a collaboration.”

Shane nods. “The courier route?”

“From between,” Yuna replies. “Someone is either playing both sides or someone from outside is paying for access.”

On the Bratva side, two older men mutter conversely in Russian before turning to Rozanov. The man sighs, flicking his almost finished cigarette into the damp floor and smushing it with his shoe. He steps forward, hands still in his pockets, eyes meeting Yuna’s.

“We will cooperate,” he says. “Temporarily.”

Yuna’s lips pull into a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Temporarily is all we require.”

Rozanov's weight shifts. His eyes flick to Shane briefly. Something in Shane’s chest tightens like a hand closing.

“We have to follow courier,” Rozanov says. “We have to watch who comes for package.”

“We’ll need a dead drop,” Shane supplies, before realizing too late he’s spoken out of turn. He keeps his gaze forward.

Rozanov's mouth curves. “да (*yes*). We will make trap.”

Yuna’s eyes flick between them for half a second- then back to the operation.

“My Wakagashira will coordinate the route. Brigadier, you can handle the Bratva assets, yes?”

Yuna let their official titles hang in the air

Shane feels the trap snapping shut.

“You will be the only two with full visibility of the plan.”

And now Shane understands.

This isn’t about exposure.

It's a punishment.

The first dead drop is a decoy.

Shane personally sees to this task. He sets it in an abandoned storage unit near the port, a place that smells like mold and dust. He positions cameras inside a broken vent and places trackers on any surface he deems important. He times patrol routes, constantly asks for updates, and leaves just enough vulnerability to invite the leak to act.

Rozanov watches him work in silence, leaning against the doorway like he's trying to admire the precision. Shane tries not to think about how Ilya's eyes feel like they're burning holes into his skin, making the hair stand on the back of his neck.

"You are very organized. You have many systems," Rozanov murmurs finally.

Shane doesn't look up. "Systems keep people alive."

"They also make you..." Ilya searches for the word, English slipping under the weight of something personal. "...заволаживающий (*mesmerizing*). Beautiful. In your way."

Shane's hands still for a half second.

"That's inappropriate," he says.

Ilya is grinning widely, wicked. "Да (*yes*)."

Shane forces his focus back to the task at hand. "I'm not here for-

"For what?" Ilya asks softly. "For me?"

Shane's throat tightens. He presses his thumb into his palm, hard, grounding. "We're exposed."

Ilya jerks his head slightly. "Mm, we are alone," he counters, accent thick on the last word.

Shane exhales sharply. "There are cameras."

Rozanov's gaze flicks to the corner. "Not on this side."

Shane stills again.

He hates that Rozanov knows the room as quickly as he does. Hates that he trusts him to.

"This is a mistake," Shane says, voice low. He's already moved towards the blindspot.

Ilya steps closer- slow, unhurried, controlled. He doesn't touch, not yet. He just closes the distance until Shane's body registers him.

"You always say this," Ilya murmurs, dipping his face close to Shane.

"Because it's true."

Rozanov tilts his head. "And yet."

Shane's breath catches when Ilya's fingers brush the inside of his wrists- light and deliberate. He's testing.

The touch is nothing. And yet, Shane feels it everywhere.

For a second, Shane leans his head back against the wall, eyes closed.

"I don't understand why-" he begins.

Ilya's mouth curves. "Yes you do. You just don't like answer."

Shane swallows. "It's stupid."

"Is dangerous," Ilya corrects. "Stupid would be easier."

Shane's eyes open once more, his jaw tightens. He can feel the line he's about to cross. The warning Yuna gave him settles like a hand at the back of his neck.

Rozanov leans in, close enough that his breath ghosts Shane's mouth. His eyes flicker down to his lips. "Tell me to stop," he whispers, in the same calm, patient tone that makes Shane feel like he has control.

Shane doesn't.

The kiss this time is quieter than the others. No adrenaline, no chaos. Just the slow, devastating pressure of Ilya's mouth, the way he takes exactly what Shane gives and then some.

Shane's hand catches at Ilya's waist, grips hard enough to bruise. The blonde makes a sound like approval against his mouth, a soft Russian syllable that Shane doesn't need to translate to understand.

They break apart only when Shane forces it. He's breathing hard, pulse too loud for the silence around them.

"We can't," Shane says, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya's eyes are dark. "We already did."

Footsteps echo outside. A beep from Shane's walkie-talkie has them separating instantly. Their defenses are up in seconds.

Shane's hands shake when he picks up the tool kit again.

Ilya watches him with something like hunger and something like respect.

"You will think about this," Ilya says quietly.

Shane's voice is rough as he tries to glare back. "Stop saying that."

Ilya's grin is blinding. "Make me."

The dead drop is successful.

In the early hours of the morning, Shane's computer lights up with an alert. Someone enters the storage unit.

The cameras catch only a hood and a gloved hand, the body moves cautiously like someone who is trained. Shane tracks the movement through his feeds, finger hovering over the trackpad.

Ilya stands behind him, hand on the back of his chair, close enough that Shane can feel him without looking.

"Not Bratva," Ilya murmurs.

Shane nods. "Definitely not Yakuza. I would never allow such sloppy footwork."

Shane doesn't turn around, but can hear the smirk on Rozanov's lips.

The intruder retrieves the package and leaves. Shane's tracker system pings and starts moving. The target is fast- too fast for someone casually picking up a scheduled package.

They follow his movements through Shane's computer. Hacked cameras from cars, buildings, even the traffic lights. Shane has already compromised most of the city's security along the route.

The tracker stops at a hotel on the edge of the city. A place where the curtains are clean and the art cheap. More importantly, it's boring. No security.

It's a meeting point.

Rozanov's jaw tightens. "We go."

"We can't both go," Shane says immediately. "Too visible."

Ilya looks at him. "Then you stay. I go."

Shane's stomach twists. "No."

Ilya's brows lift. "You don't trust me."

Shane's voice goes cold. His eyes narrow. "I trust you to be reckless. This is a joint effort. I can't have you go in guns blazing and fucking everything up."

Ilya smiles faintly, like it's a compliment. "This is true."

Shane forces a breath. Thinks, calculates, chooses.

"We go separately," Shane starts. "Different entrances, different floors. We can trap him in that way. If it's a setup, we don't get caught together."

Ilya nods, satisfied. “Fine.”

The hotel smells like bleach and stale cigarettes. Shane moves through it like a ghost, shoulders squared, eyes scanning. One hand is at the side of his belt, where he keeps his tactical knife. He reaches his assigned stairwell and pauses, listening.

Above, a door opens.

Voices.

Low, male, unfamiliar.

Shane does a quick comm check.

Ilya’s voice comes back, barely audible through the earpiece. “I’m here.”

Shane’s pulse quickens. Not because of the mission, but what he knows this mission signifies and what happens if he fails.

The voices shift. A laugh. The scrape of a chair.

Then, sudden movement.

Shane hears the scuffle before he sees it. A muffled grunt, a thud, the slam of a body against a wall.

He moves.

He rounds the corner just in time to see Rozanov standing in the hallway, pinning a man twice his size against the wallpaper with one arm. The other is holding a gun to the man’s throat. Rozanov’s expression is calm. Not angry, not excited, just focused. There’s another man, much shorter, slumped face first on the floor beside them.

The big man looks like he’s struggling, trying to get some air to his lungs, clawing at Rozanov’s forearm for release.

Rozanov doesn’t look at Shane. “He was going to run.”

Shane’s voice is steady. He exhales. “Don’t shoot him here.”

Rozanov accent thickens. “Why.”

“Because we don’t know how deep this runs, or if they were planning to meet more people,” Shane replies. “And because the cameras-”

The focused look on Ilya’s face transforms, and now he’s smiling faintly at Shane. “You and your cameras.”

Shane doesn’t respond, but steps in, grabbing the man’s wrist and twists. It’s controlled, yet brutal. The man cries out as a gun drops from his hands and clatters to the floor next to Ilya’s

feet.

The Russian looks down at the weapon and back at Shane, winking in a way that seemed to say 'Whoops, I didn't notice that. Thanks for the assist.'

Shane doesn't move. His hand is still pressing the man's wrist at an odd angle.

"You can stop strangling him. He's not going anywhere. Hand me his gun."

Rozanov's eyes flick over Shane's mouth as he licks his lips.

For half a second, something else flares in the room. Dangerous, intimate, wrong.

And then Rozanov bends down to hand him the gun like nothing happened.

Shane presses in closer, the muzzle now against the man's cheek. Not hard enough to bruise, but enough to warn.

"You're the middleman," Shane says. "Who sent you?"

The man now has tears in his eyes, as he harshly breathes in and out. He shakes his head.

Ilya gets in his face, voice suddenly soft in Russian- gentle the way a knife is gentle when it's choosing where to cut. His face might seem friendly, but his eyes tell another story.

The man cracks.

Names spill out. A broker, a fixer, and a meeting point tomorrow night. Something bigger, more central, more confident.

Shane listens without expression. He files everything away.

When the man is done, Shane produces two syringes with a green liquid. He knocks the man out, before injecting him and his friend in the neck. He pulls out his phone to tell his team to come clean up the mess.

The Wakagashira and the Brigadier leave, the hallway silent like nothing ever happened.

But Shane's hands aren't as steady.

Ilya notices.

He says nothing until they're outside. The rain has started again.

"You didn't flinch," Ilya murmurs as he passes the earpiece back to Shane.

Shane's voice is low as he tries to busy his hands. "Neither did you."

Ilya's smile is shallow and sharp. "I like this about you."

Shane's throat tightens. "That's dangerous."

“Да (yes),” Ilya agrees softly. “That’s why.”

At home, Shane sits in the dark with his phone in hand.

A new message had come through from the burner number.

Unknown: Tomorrow night. Same city. Different room. Don’t be late.

Shane just stares at the screen.

His mother’s voice echoes in his head. Her rules, her warnings.

His pulse still hasn’t settled.

Where.

The reply comes almost instantly.

Unknown: Fairmont. 1410.

Shane’s hand tightens around the phone until his knuckles ache.

He wonders if he’s walking into a trap set by the Bratva, or a trap made by his own hand.

He only knows he’s going anyway, because the truth is:

Shane Hollander was never good at walking away from a problem he couldn’t solve.

Chapter End Notes

they've finally had their first official secret rendezvous, yall have any thoughts?

im really happy with the way events played out in this chapter. hopefully you got a taste of the yearning these two have for one another.

thanks for reading!

Chapter 4: The Cost of Silence

Chapter Summary

The infamous “Room 1410” and the consequences that come after it.

Chapter Notes

i think i put way more world building into the first three chapters than i anticipated lol
when dialogue is in italics, its usually signaling a language switch...we love our
multilingual kings (and kweens) 😊

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

Secrecy doesn’t protect you. In Shane’s case, it only changes who gets hurt.

Shane arrives at the hotel the next night, ready with a name that isn’t his. He wears clothes very different from his usual business casual, with his gun still strapped to his side. He doesn’t alert his team, he tries to remain invisible.

Everything about the plan is wrong and careful at the same time.

The lobby is bright in a way that sears into Shane’s senses. The carpet is too clean, the air smells like citrus cleaner and expensive perfume. It’s a place designed for the ordinary working class to feel comfortable and relaxed.

Shane knows better.

He takes the stairs, avoiding cameras, counts his footsteps, and listens at landings. He tries to keep his breathing steady.

Room 1410 sits at the end of a corridor near an emergency exit. Convenient.

He knocks once, the agreed pattern.

The door opens immediately.

Rozanov is inside, white button down opened, hair still damp from a shower. He’s looking infuriatingly handsome and relaxed, like this isn’t the most reckless thing either of them has ever done. The room is dim, curtains drawn, one lamp on.

Ilya steps back to let him in.

The door closes behind Shane with a soft click that sounds louder than a gunshot.

They stand there for a moment, too close, the air thick with everything they haven't said.

"You came," Ilya says quietly. The look on his face is soft, almost vulnerable.

"I shouldn't have," Shane replies, hands clenched tightly by his sides.

Ilya's mouth turns up. "But you did."

Shane presses his thumb into his palm. "This is a risk."

Ilya steps closer. "So are you."

The heat between them isn't sudden tonight. It's been building for days. Every glance during a meeting, every message that felt like a dare, every moment Shane caught himself picturing Ilya's mouth when he should've been cataloguing exits.

Ilya reaches out slowly and hooks a finger under Shane's chin, guiding his face up. Shane can see a few stray water droplets sliding down to the base of his neck. The gold cross necklace is glistening against his chest.

"Tell me to stop," Ilya murmurs.

Shane's voice almost betrays him. "Stop."

Ilya's eyes flash, amused and hungry. "That was not convincing."

Shane's hands catch at Ilya's wrists, pushing them down.

His voice is low, "This shouldn't be happening. It's not logical."

Ilya's accent thickens as he leans in, lightly ghosting his lips over Shane's. Shane hates the way he almost chases it. "Not everything is logic."

Shane swallows. "It's not smart."

Ilya smiles, slow, tugging Shane closer by the waist. "I didn't ask for smart. I ask for you."

And then he kisses him.

The world seems to fall apart around them.

Ilya kisses like he's claiming something that was already his. Like he's been patient long enough and is done pretending he can be polite about it. Shane's resistance lasts exactly three heartbeats before it dissolves into the same hard, desperate pull that's been occupying his mind since the very first meeting.

They move as one, speaking without really using words. Hands on fabric, mouths bruising, breath catching and breaking. Shane backs Ilya toward the bed, and Ilya lets him. Both of them are semi-naked by the time the backs of Ilya's knees hit the edge of the bed. He lets out a quiet laugh as he falls, bringing Shane down with him.

Shane has never heard a sound so beautiful. So light and carefree.

Ilya flips them around, and Shane's mind fractures into sensation. Ilya's weight, his heat, the press of a thigh between his, the way Ilya murmurs Russian when his control slips, and the way his hands roam Shane's body like he's worshipping him.

Shane can't think straight, he doesn't want to. For probably the first time in his life, he lets someone else take control and doesn't feel any sort of way about it because he knows this is what he wants. This is *who* he wants. The way Ilya is gentle, yet confident, the way he constantly asks for Shane's permission, the way he presses little kisses all over his body as he works him open.

Shane grips Ilya's shoulders hard enough to leave marks.

Ilya's teeth catch Shane's lower lip, just enough to feel something, just enough to make Shane's breath stutter.

"Mine," Ilya whispers, not as possession or ownership, but as confession.

Shane hates how much it affects him, how much he wants to answer.

"Yes, yours," he gasps out, voice hoarse.

The room spins into something messy and inevitable. Their clothes are gone, their bodies pressed close. The sheets are a tangled mess around their limbs, and the bed has shifted with the force of their actions.

Nothing about it feels like a transaction, nothing about it feels like a one time thing.

They stop only when Shane hears a sound outside the door.

A footstep.

A pause.

Shane goes still instantly, hand already reaching for his gun on the nightstand.

Ilya's hand closes over his wrist, steady. "Wait."

The silence stretches, their bodies are pressed so close together, Shane can feel Ilya's heart beating in his chest.

The silence stretches.

Then, the footsteps move on.

Shane's pulse is violent under his skin, but the tension falls away by a fraction.

Ilya leans in and kisses his throat softly, like an apology and a taunt. "See? Even fear is part of thrill."

Shane exhales shakily, it almost sounds like a laugh. "That's sick."

Ilya smiles against his skin. "Maybe."

They rarely sleep.

Not since that night in 1410 when they made an unconscious decision to continue whatever this was.

Instead, they lie in the dark, bodies still warm and loosely tangled. The old motel breathing around them-pipes ticking, a distant slam of a door, the soft, anonymous hum of a place that forgets its guests as soon as they leave,

Shane's arm is draped over Ilya's waist, absentmindedly tracing the line of his hip like he's trying to memorize it. Ilya's head rests against Shane's shoulder, hair brushing his collarbone, one hand splayed warm and heavy over Shane's chest.

This isn't the first time.

That truth settles between them, quiet but undeniable.

It hasn't been a single reckless night or a momentary lapse in judgment. It's been weeks of stolen hours and borrowed spaces. Back stairwells, empty offices, the unused rooms of safe houses on the far outskirts of the city. Time carved out between meetings, between rules that say *don't* and for bodies that say *I need you*.

They've learned each other in fragments. The way Ilya runs warm even when the room feels like it's entered an Arctic freeze. The way Shane goes still when he's overwhelmed- not distant, just listening and absorbing harder. The way both of them pretend this is temporary, even as they become more reckless and exposed.

Ilya shifts slightly, fingers tracing a slow, idle pattern over Shane's ribs.

"My father would kill me," he says quietly.

Shane exhales, thumb brushing over Ilya's knuckles. "He would try to make it a lesson," he says after a moment. "Something public. Something humiliating."

Ilya huffs out a humorous laugh. "Yes. He likes drama."

"And he'd probably kill me too," Shane adds, not flippant, just honest. "But he wouldn't rush it. He'd probably interrogate a why out of me first. Even if deep down he knows why."

Ilya turns his head, studying Shane's face in the low light. "You don't sound afraid."

“I am,” Shane says, before pausing. “I’m just not surprised.”

Ilya is quiet for a long moment.

“And your mother,” he says carefully, “She would let it happen? Would she defend you?”

Yuna didn’t tolerate weakness. She didn’t tolerate betrayal. And she absolutely didn’t tolerate a weapon that she could not control.

Yet, deep down, Shane held out hope that her loyalty to him ran further than the organized hierarchy of the Yakuza. That she cared deeply about him, not just as the Wakagashira, her second in command, but as her son.

“She suspects,” Shane says eventually.

Ilya’s fingers go still. “How?”

“Patterns,” Shane replies. “Timing, Absences, the fact that I’ve been... less careful.”

Ilya’s accent thickens as emotion creeps in. “And she will punish you.”

Shane gives a slight nod, his voice unbelievably quiet. “She already is.”

Ilya’s hands slide into Shane’s, fingers threading together deliberately, like he’s anchoring them, trying to keep Shane from drifting away. “Then why do you still come?”

Shane presses his fingers tight into Ilya’s, grounding himself in the warmth there.

“Because being without you feels worse,” he admits. “And because every time I think I should stop, you look at me like this.”

Ilya is smiling, soft and unmistakably pleased. The glint in his piercing blue eyes makes Shane's heart beat a little faster.

He brings Shane’s knuckles to his mouth, kissing the tops gently, in a way that makes Shane’s stomach turn.

“Good,” he murmurs in Russian. “Потому что ты мой.” (*because you are mine.*)

Shane understands none of it, but understands the weight of it all.

He tightens his grip on Ilya’s hands.

He never wants to let go.

The punishment comes sooner than Shane expects.

Two days after Shane and Ilya’s meet at the motel, Yuna calls him into her office.

She doesn't raise her voice, she doesn't accuse him, she doesn't even look angry. Somehow, that feels worse.

She sets a file on the desk between them, and Shane sits up to open it.

Inside is a photograph.

Not explicit of damning, just Shane entering a hotel stairwell. Time-stamped, grainy, taken from far enough away to suggest they'd been tailing for a while.

Shane feels his stomach drop, but his face remains still.

"Do you think I don't have eyes?" Yuna asks calmly.

Shane's stomach twists without warning.

She's slipped into her native tongue, something she rarely does unless she wants what she is saying to be *heard*. As a child, Shane would only hear her like this when she was reprimanding him.

He blinks hard for a second before following suit.

"I didn't think-"

"That," Yuna cuts in sharply, *"Is the problem. You **did** think. Just not with your head."*

Shane's jaw tightens. He says nothing as he bows his head.

"This is not about morality," Yuna continues. *"I don't care who you sleep with. This is about leverage."*

Shane swallows. *"I know, Oyabun."*

"And yet," Yuna says, tapping the photograph once, *"You've made yourself visible. Predictable. Interesting."*

Her gaze sharpens. Shane can feel it piercing into his head. *"Do you understand what they would do with this if it escaped our control?"*

"Yes, Oyabun."

*"Rozanov isn't just some low-level member. He's the Brigadier, the son of the Pakhan, the Bratva's **Prince**."*

"I'm sorry, Oyabun."

"I don't want apologies," Yuna sighs, *"I want you to correct it."*

Shane's head whips up. His pulse spikes. *"How?"*

"Distance."

The word cuts through the air like a blade. It's surgical.

Shane exhales slowly, head dropping again. *"You're sending me away."*

"Yes," Yuna says. *"Effective immediately."*

His fingers curl into his palm. He knows he shouldn't say anything other than a confirmation, but the words leave his mouth before he realizes.

"That won't stop him."

Yuna's eyes harden. *"It will stop **you**."*

Shane finally meets her gaze, something cold settling into place behind his ribs.

"You're wrong," he says quietly, yet determined. The abrupt switch back to English leaves his mouth feeling uneasy. "It will only make it worse."

Yuna holds his star longer than necessary. Something flashes behind her eyes.

Then, voice softer, almost dangerously so, she sighs. "That is exactly what I'm afraid of."

That night, Shane's burner phone vibrates.

Unknown: Where are you.

Shane stares at the screen, chest tight. He types.

You have to stop.

Three dots appear.

Unknown: No.

His breathing goes shallow. Another buzz.

Unknown: Tell me what she did.

Shane closes his eyes. He shouldn't answer. A third message comes through.

Unknown: If they hurt you, I will burn this city down.

Pain spikes as Shane presses his thumb hard into his palm. *That's what I'm afraid of.*

He finally types.

Don't. Just wait.

Before he can second guess himself, he sends another text.

Please.

The reply is almost instant.

Unknown: Always.

Shane stares at the screen until it goes dark, the words seared into his brain. The inevitability settling into him.

Distance was coming. So was violence.

So was the reckoning that their secrecy had tried to delay the inevitable, but it would never erase it.

The worst part was that Shane knew exactly how much it was going to hurt.

And he still wanted Ilya anyway.

Chapter End Notes

does the pacing feel weird to anyone else or is it just me haha i'd love to know yalls thoughts

thanks for reading!

Chapter 5: The Crack in the Shield

Chapter Summary

Suspensions and tensions are rising, but it seems they just can't stay away from each other.

Chapter Notes

uhhh so i changed the title of the story...do we like it ? or should i change it back ? 🦴

warning: depictions of violence (gore blood etc.)...will (**) at the beginning and end of the action

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

At first, distance doesn't really present itself as such.

It feels more like schedule. Or necessity.

Shane's removal from the city isn't framed as punishment. It's sent as a reassignment memo delivered in Yuna's calm voice, like it's just another operational adjustment.

A refinery on the coast of a neighboring state has become unstable. Fuel is disappearing, someone is testing margins. Someone is pressing on arteries they shouldn't even know exist.

Yuna doesn't need to explain her decision, the order arrives clean and finished, already justified on paper, already approved by the board Shane himself helped build, routed through channels he designed.

To anyone watching, this looks like trust.

The Wakagashira sent to stabilize a critical artery.

Which is how Shane knows it's his punishment.

Yuna doesn't punish with screaming or physicality. She punishes with logistics. With distance that can be defended in a meeting and never questioned out loud.

This is the way she protects. This is the way she cages him.

She removes you from the place where your instincts are most dangerous.

She removes you from the person.

Shane packs in silence- not because he's obedient, but because resistance is useless in a system that raised him on inevitability.

He folds a shirt, placing it precisely in its spot in his bag. Tactical shirts, clean dress shirts, a suit he hopes he doesn't have to wear. His movements are clippy and controlled, the way they always are when he's thinking too much.

His burner sits face-down on the table next to him, silent.

He checks it anyway.

Nothing.

The reassignment is for five weeks. At least on paper.

Five weeks is long enough for habits to break, long enough for people to learn how to breathe without you.

Yuna's reason for the move is airtight. Fuel is their bloodstream, and the money flows where fuel does. Violence follows both if left unchecked. The refinery needs oversight- Shane's oversight. The quiet, organized, exact kind. The kind that makes men feel safer without ever drawing attention to itself.

To anyone watching, it looks like competence being deployed.

To Shane, it feels like exile.

The phone buzzes.

He doesn't need to look to know who it is.

Unknown: You die already or only pretending.

Shane exhales through his nose, sharp, despite himself.

He types. Deletes. Types again.

Still alive.

Three dots appear instantly.

Unknown: Disappointing. I had jokes prepared.

A small smile ghosts over Shane's lips.

Asshole. He sends another text. ***This isn't safe.***

Unknown: Neither is breathing but here we are.

Shane's jaw tightens as he presses his thumb into his palm.

They're watching.

A pause. Longer this time.

Unknown: Mm yes. I notice.

That matters more than it should.

Then you should stop.

Unknown: No

Three dots appear. Disappear. Reappear.

Unknown: I miss you.

Shane is blinking hard as he stares at the message Ilya has just sent. His brain has gone fuzzy and yet frighteningly clear all at once. He tries to ignore the slight tremble in his fingers as he types.

I can't fix this.

The reply comes almost immediately.

Unknown: I know моя любовь. You don't have to. Just don't disappear without telling me. (my love)

Shane stares at the screen, tries not to think about the way his throat tightens when he reads the message.

He might not be fluent in Russian, but he's picked up a few words here and there, especially when Ilya uses them frequently enough.

Plus, he knows how to use Google translate.

Not that he's been Googling phrases that he remembers Ilya whispering in his ear or texting his burner...

Shane sighs and sets the phone down without answering. He can't make a promise, can't ask where they should meet.

Not yet.

The refinery sits between salt air and steel, a sprawl of machinery and pipelines humming like something alive. Shane arrives to heavy equipment and men who watch him like they've heard stories.

They probably have.

Wakagashira isn't just a title, it's like a gravitational pull. People orbit whether they like it or not. Even far from the city, Shane's presence changes how men breathe and stand, how quickly they correct mistakes.

He walks the site personally. Inspects ledgers, questions supervisors. He cancels two contracts before lunch and reroutes another through a shell no one here knows exists. He doesn't raise his voice, doesn't threaten. Doesn't need to.

Men move faster when he's nearby, and conversations end when he looks at them. In some terrifying way, Shane sees Yuna in himself. Understands who he has become in her image.

He doesn't mention to anyone how he barely sleeps four hours a night or checks his phone every fifteen minutes, even though he knows there won't be a message. He doesn't mention that he can still taste smoke and spice when he lets his mind wander.

At the end of the first week, his regional supervisor hands him a folder. Kenji is older than most of the men here and careful with his words. He's also the most competent Shateigashira Shane has ever worked with.

"Intercepted chatter," Kenji says, tapping the folder. "Broker network is alive. Someone is asking around about the leak investigation."

Shane flips through the pages. Names, numbers, routes. He reads faster than Kenji can track. Then, he gets to a line that makes his stomach drop.

Rozanov. Movement restricted, Pakhan displeased.

Shane keeps his face blank. "Source."

"Broker network," Kenji replies. "Not confirmed."

Shane closes the folder. His voice stays calm. "Confirm it."

Kenji hesitates.

He might not know exactly what happened, but he's Shane's second in command. No one has to tell him to his face to understand why Shane is there.

Unlike the underlings in their organization that followed the Oyabun's rules without much question, he could spot the threatening tone behind all of Yuna's bureaucratic bullshit a mile away.

"The Oyabun said-"

"I know what she said," Shane cuts in quietly. "Just confirm. Please."

The words aren't loud, but they carry weight. The conversation stops there.

Kenji nods once before bowing. "Yes, Wakagshira."

Shane turns back to work like he hasn't just swallowed glass.

Boston does not belong to Grigori Rozanov.

That is why this matters.

Grigori doesn't cross oceans for discipline, he exports it.

The order comes from Moscow, transmitted through men who do not question, and systems designed to ensure compliance before dissent ever surfaces. By the time it reaches Boston, it's already inevitable.

Ilya understands this before he's even summoned.

The room is not Grigori's, neither is the building. And yet, the authority saturating the air is unmistakable. The men waiting inside straighten the moment Ilya enters, not out of fear of him, but fear of what watching eyes will think if they don't.

One of the men steps forward, computer already opened. Grigori's face fills it.

Older than the last time Ilya saw him in person. Thinner. Sharper. His expression is neutral in a way that men get when they've already decided on an outcome.

"*You are becoming inefficient,*" Grigori says in Russian. Calm. Precise. Final.

Ilya keeps his posture loose. Performatively bored. "*Boston is stable,*" he replies, "*Revenue is up. Routes are secure.*"

"Yes," Grigori agrees. "*And yet you attract attention.*"

The real accusation is the one he doesn't say outloud.

Two men are brought forward- dragged, really- and forced to their knees beneath the harsh lights. Blood crusts one man's split lip, the other is shaking hard enough that his teeth are chattering. Fear radiates off them in waves. They smell like sweat and desperation.

"*This is the consequence of attention,*" Grigori continues. "*Instability invites parasites.*"

The men start talking immediately. Too quickly, most likely lies layered on other lies. They contradict each other, they beg.

Grigori watches Ilya through the camera. "*Handle it.*"

Not kill them, handle them. A test.

Ilya steps forward slowly, crouching in front of the first man and bringing him level with his face.

“You understand,” Ilya says, voice low, “That your usefulness ended the moment you were brought here.”

A strangled sob leaves the man’s lips.

Ilya stands, the knife in his hand appears quick, almost invisible.

(**) He kills the first man swiftly- a clean jab into the man’s jugular. Practiced, efficient, blood spilling in a constant, vivid stream. The man’s lungs fill with blood, and he starts to choke, a garbled noise leaving his mouth as the concrete below turns red.

Ilya doesn't flinch when a spray of blood leaves the man's mouth, some landing on his jacket and shoes like splatter paint.

(**) Ilya turns to the second man, whose face has already paled.

“You,” he says conversationally, “Are going to tell me the truth.”

Words fall out of the man’s mouth in a mess. He stutters, Ilya, nodding almost encouragingly as he patiently waits for him to finish. He smiles without warmth.

“If you’re innocent, then you die for nothing. If you’re guilty, you’ve died for something.”

And then he ends the second man like the first.

When it’s done, there are bodies on the floor, blood smeared underfoot. The smell of iron, panic, and inevitability tints the air.

Grigori nods once. Approval without the satisfaction of plesantry.

“You remember who you are,” he supplies. “Good.”

The screen goes dark.

Ilya remains standing, blade still dripping, chest heaving steadily. There had been no hesitation, no performance.

Boston had not softened him.

In fact, it had given him something Grigori couldn’t reach. And that was the part the Pakhan would never be able to forgive.

Ilya heaves a sigh, attempting to wipe the blood off his hands and blades as the familiar, yet unwanted, burning behind his eyes threatened to come forth.

Shane would hate this.

And worst of all.

Shane would understand.

Shane gets the update a few days later.

Kenji returns with eyes that are too careful. “Confirmed,” he says, setting a new folder on Shane’s desk. “The Brigadier is under restriction. Increased oversight, movements monitored. The information was gathered from a trusted Bratva connected source.”

Shane flips the folder open.

It’s a photo. Ilya leaving a Bratva compound at night, flanked by men who aren’t his usual. His posture mimics being relaxed with his hands in his pockets, but Shane can tell by the tension in his shoulders and the look in his eyes. His eyes look like contained violence.

A second photo shows two bodies being carried out, wrapped in tarps. The hems are stained dark red.

Shane’s stomach tightens.

“Do we know if he’s okay,” Shane asks, despite knowing this is crossing a line.

Kenji hesitates. “Define okay.”

“Alive,” Shane says, jaw tightening, as he just stares at the first photo.

Kenji nods. “Alive.” He clears his throat. “The Oyabun wants you invisible, Wakagashira,” he adds softly, almost carefully.

Shane’s grip on the folder creases the paper.

His voice grows colder. “I’m always invisible.”

Kenji doesn’t say anything else, just bows and turns to leave.

Four and a half weeks have passed since Shane has been at the refinery. He wants to think he’s done a decent job of not contacting Ilya, but the pictures that Kenji handed him a week ago burn in his brain.

Everything in him screams ‘don’t do it’, but the longer he waits, the longer he lets those images of Rozanov tense and eyes wild sit, the longer it tears him apart.

He blames his brain and the lack of sleep he’s had for his impulsive decision to grab the burner phone.

He types one word before he can stop himself.

Alive?

It takes until the next night for Ilya to respond.

Unknown: Unfortunately

Shane doesn't know if he should roll his eyes or just feel relief. Another message comes through.

Unknown: You sound worried. This is new.

Don't joke.

Unknown: I joke when people aim guns at me. Keeps them confused. Is only form of entertainment for me.

Shane closes his eyes. *At least Ilya can joke.*

They're watching you more closely. You should behave.

Unknown: No.

Of course.

Unknown: If I stop you stop thinking about me. I don't like that option.

I could never stop thinking about you. Shane wants to say. Instead, he presses his thumb hard into his palm. He types.

This is going to end badly.

Unknown: Maybe. Everything ends badly. But моя любовь (my love). You are more interesting way to go

Shane swallows.

The conversation is a mistake. He knows he shouldn't be thinking about what he's planning to do. He stares at the screen, exhales, and reads the message again. He's silent, and his vision has grown blurry from how many times he reads the text over and over.

This is such a bad idea. He thinks.

He sends coordinates.

The service apartment above the closed tailor shop exists in a city and a space that belongs to neither of their organizations. If Shane wasn't so wrapped up in his head about seeing Ilya after five weeks apart, he might've gotten some clarity and kicked himself for actually driving two hours away in the middle of the night to meet him.

He arrives first. The carpet was old, minimal cameras, and the door locked manually. He disables the camera out of habit, checks the stairwell, the window seals, and the fire escape.

Back straight, he sits on a chair in the corner of the room, waiting in the dark, knife at his wrist, and gun under his belt. His pulse is too loud in his ears.

Some time later, a swift knock at the door snaps him from his thoughts, and he stands abruptly as Ilya steps inside, closing the door behind him.

Shane inhales sharply.

Even when he looks tired as hell and slightly battered, Shane is always taken aback at how beautiful Ilya is.

The soft, golden curls on his head, always styled, now look disheveled, like Ilya hadn't stopped running his hands through them. His features were still sharp, piercing blue eyes still alert, but now he seemed weathered. Eyes slightly rimmed red from lack of sleep, eyebrows drawn tight like he was in a constant state of thought. His thick, full lips were settled in a tight line, not quite a frown, and definitely not a smile.

For a moment, neither of them moves.

Then, Ilya exhales, long and unguarded, like he's been holding it for days. Shane practically sees the tension releasing from his body.

"You look like you want to break something," Ilya says quietly, an air of amusement in his tone.

Shane's mouth tightens. "You look monitored."

Ilya smiles faintly, almost tired. "Always."

The word hangs between them, not as a joke or a warning. Just the truth.

They stand there, close but not touching, the air thick with weeks of restraint and sleepless nights. Five weeks of distance, five weeks of discipline that had sharpened into something painful.

"This is a bad idea," Shane mutters, because it's the only thing he can ever seem to come up with.

"Yes," Ilya agrees easily. "You keep saying that."

"I mean it."

"Me too."

Ilya steps closer, slow and deliberate, like he's approaching something skittish. He doesn't crowd Shane, not just yet, but closes enough distance that Shane's body starts to betray him, his breath hitching. Ilya's eyes go soft, a mixture of worry and concern.

"You are shaking," Ilya murmurs.

“I’m not.”

Ilya hums softly, amused but not unkind. “You lie bad when you are tired.”

His fingers hover for a heartbeat, like he’s waiting for permission. Then, they brush the inside of Shane’s wrist, right over the pulse point.

Light, intentional, intimate.

Shane’s breath stutters despite himself.

“МОЯ ЛЮБОВЬ,” Ilya murmurs. (*my love*)

Shane swallows. “This is dangerous.”

“Да (*yes*)” Ilya agrees. “Is why you came.”

That lands harder than an accusation.

“You look like you’re bracing for impact,” Ilya adds, studying him, hand coming up to cup Shane’s face.

Shane’s hand absentmindedly ghost over Ilya’s hips.

Shane’s jaw tightens. “You look like you don’t care.”

Ilya’s mouth curves faintly. “I care.” Then, quieter and more honest beneath the teasing, “I just don’t show it where people can use it.”

And softer still, like a confession meant only for the space between them, he says, “Я скучал по тебе.” (*i missed you*)

Shane closes his eyes and exhales.

When he opens them again, he’s already lost.

He moves first- not rushed or desperate, but inevitable. His hands fist in the front of Ilya’s jacket, pulling him close like he needs the contact to stay upright. Ilya makes a low sound at the back of his throat, something like relief edged with pleasure, and meets him halfway.

The kiss is slow. Deep.

This one isn’t about hunger. It’s about being present, in this moment with Ilya.

Ilya kisses him back like he’s memorizing him. The shape of Shane’s mouth, the way his breath shudders when he’s held, the exact moment his shoulders finally loosen. Shane responds without thinking, mouth parted, breath in sync, hands sliding up Ilya’s back like he needs proof that this is real. Like the weeks apart hadn’t hollowed something out of them permanently.

Ilya's hands are cradling Shane's face. It's soft yet grounding. His thumbs trace the line of Shane's jaw, slow enough to feel intentional.

"You don't have to be strong here," Ilya murmurs against his mouth.

Shane pulls his head back slightly, hands still wrapped tightly around Ilya's torso. He bites his lip, something deep in his chest practically pinching the air out of his lungs.

His throat is tight. "I-i don't know how not to be."

Ilya rests his forehead against Shane's, breath warm, steady. Shane practically melts at the feeling of it all.

"Then let me hold it for you. Just tonight."

And that is what breaks him.

Shane pulls Ilya closer, pressing his face briefly into the hollow of his neck, breathing him in. The smoke, clean fabric, the unmistakable smell of *him*. Ilya's arms come around Shane's back, firm and certain, holding him like he's not going anywhere. Shane's eyes and throat are burning with emotion, but he refuses to let any tears fall.

They stay like that for a moment as Shane tries to collect himself. The synapses in his brain are firing so fast it makes him feel dizzy, his heart is pounding. He starts to press light kisses into the crook of Ilya's neck, throat, up his jaw, and to his lips. It's slow and purposeful, like every time Shane touches Ilya's skin, it's a new promise.

Ilya's hands slowly travel down to Shane's ass, and he immediately understands. Without breaking the kiss, Shane's arms wrap around Ilya's neck as he hops up, legs around the man's waist. Ilya carries him like he's weightless, gripping under Shane's thighs as he moves them toward the bed.

Clothes come off slowly. Deliberately. Fingers linger. Knuckles brush skin. Breath stutters and steadies again. Ilya murmurs Russian, Shane doesn't understand, but feels anyway. Words of endearment, reassurances, something that sounds possessive but is more devotion than anything.

Their bodies are tangled as one, heat heavy and real. Time dissolves.

Ilya's hand settles over Shane's heart.

"моя любовь (*my love*)," he whispers. "You're safe."

Shane huffs a breath that might be a laugh. "That's a lie."

Ilya smiles against his skin. "Yes. But is a good one."

They stay like that- warm, tangled, unguarded- until the world feels very far away. Until the edge dulls, and the ache eases into something survivable.

And for the first time since the distance began, neither of them feels alone.

After, Ilya is leaning back against the headboard, Shane's head on his shoulder, tracing nondescript shapes into Ilya's leg. Their breathing had slowed, but not yet calmed, when Shane gets up to grab the first-aid kit out of his bag.

Ilya watches him, eyes soft. "You are very...what is word...efficient."

Shane sighs as he sits back down on the bed, opening the antiseptic. "Well, if I'm not, you certainly won't be."

Shane is gentle as he brushes the hair back from Ilya's forehead. He tries to ignore the way his heart skips a beat as Ilya stares up at him with his piercing blue eyes.

"Ah, yes. I cannot do anything without you, Hollander. I am, how you say...ill equipment."

Shane almost barks out a laugh, but manages to stop himself by biting his lip, a small snort escapes instead.

"I think you mean ill-equipped, but close enough." Shane watches as Ilya winces when he cleans the cut near his hairline. His finger pauses for a moment before he continues. "What happened."

Ilya's gaze drifts to the window, the dark city stretching below them. "My father wanted loyalty. He wanted to see...if I am still his."

Shane's stomach tightens, and he tries to busy himself by checking if there are any other cuts. "And are you?"

Ilya turns back, eyes sharp again. "I am his son. Not his property."

Shane nods slowly. "He won't accept that."

"No," Ilya says softly. "He will punish until I break."

Shane's jaw tightens. "Then don't break."

Ilya's smile is small and dangerous. "I won't." One of his hands comes to settle against Shane's hip, almost like he's holding him in place. "But... you have to be careful too."

Shane exhales, relishes the feeling of Ilya's warm hand on his body. "My mother-

"Is not stupid," Ilya interrupts gently. "She is... scary smart."

"Yes," Shane agrees.

"And she loves you," Ilya adds, thoughtfully. "But maybe she loves loyalty to Yakuza more?"

Shane doesn't argue. He tries to busy himself with putting away the items in his first-aid kit.

Ilya's hand finds his, stopping his movements. He laces their fingers together, it feels certain and illicit. The room is quiet as Shane stares at their intertwined hands, feels the way Ilya thumbs over his skin.

"We can't do this openly," Shane settles on saying. "Ever."

He doesn't look up at Ilya, doesn't dare because he knows that if he does, he won't be able to hide the emotion.

"I know."

"We have limits and rules."

Ilya smiles faintly. "You and your rules."

"If we break them, we die."

Ilya kisses Shane's knuckles like a vow. "Then we don't break. We bend."

They separate before the sun comes up.

Shane is the first to leave, hopping in his car to start the two hour drive back to the coast before any of his men can notice his prolonged absence.

The drive doesn't feel like nearly enough time before he's pulling up to his temporary housing, and reality comes crashing back down.

He's barely made it through the door when his phone buzzes. He pulls out his burner.

Unknown: Back safe?

He sets his bag down to type.

Yes. Don't forget to delete everything.

A reply comes a second later.

Unknown: Yes sir.

Shane's mouth twitches, almost a smile, before he pockets the phone to go get ready for the day.

When he returns to the refinery, Kenji is already waiting with another folder.

"An update," he says carefully.

Inside the folder are notes and graphs, then pictures and descriptions.

Broker meeting. Central. High-value, escalation risk. Oyabun requesting backup, Wakagashira stationed back in the city.

Shane blinks once. Then twice, before he's standing and grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair.

"Tell her I'll be on the next flight back," He says, shrugging on his coat and handing the folder back to Kenji.

Shane's heart stutters, and not because of work or the threat of an outsider worming its way into the organization.

But because he's going back, and distance won't be distance anymore.

Now, it's proximity.

Chapter End Notes

ik i said i wouldn't do any more world building, but writing shane and ilya as morally grey, competent leaders has just been too fun

i also love that we're starting to see a more playful, banter-y side of them.

any thoughts? thanks for reading!

Chapter 6: Blood and Action

Chapter Summary

After more than a month apart, Shane and Ilya will be back in the same city with the hope of secret rendezvous happening more frequently.

But how long will that hope last?

Chapter Notes

oooof. this chapter was fun to write...its basically just one big fight scene haha

graphic depictions of violence are described later in the chapter, i'll use the (**) to tell you generally when the scene starts and ends:)

this has been a lot of words and chapters to crank out in the past week so i might be taking a little bit more time to upload the next one

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

The city doesn't welcome Shane back, it simply absorbs him.

Things feel indifferent, as if the weeks he spent away were nothing more than a scheduling choice. And to everyone on the outside, it was.

But he feels it immediately. The pressure behind the quiet, invisible power that comes from stepping back into Boston's Yakuza territory.

He reports to the Oyabun first.

Yuna's office is exactly the same as when he left. She's sitting behind her desk, hands folded, posture straight.

"You're back," She says without looking up from the files in front of her.

"You called," Shane replies.

She raises her head, studying him for a long moment. Her eyes are sharp and assessing. "You look...corrected."

Shane doesn't react. "I'm functional."

Yuna hums softly, neither suggesting she likes nor dislikes his answer. She slides a folder across the desk.

“The broker meet is tonight,” she says. “Central warehouse, high value and visibility. Someone is looking for a crack in the organization.”

Shane opens the folder. It’s photos, timelines, known intermediaries- but none of them central players- all of them disposable. Not amateurs, not loyalists, but the kind of people who profit from friction and survive by never standing close enough to get burned.

“Someone is trying to force escalation,” Yuna continues.

Shane doesn’t look up. “Between us and the Bratva.”

“Yes.”

“What’s the objective?” Shane asks.

“Identify the buyer and stop the leak. Do not escalate the situation,” Yuna replies.

“And if the Bratva interferes.”

“They will be present,” Yuna says. “And so will Rozanov.”

There it is.

Shane feels the shift internally before he allows a reaction externally. Yuna knew what she was doing by throwing Rozanov’s name around, she wanted to see if Shane would flinch.

He doesn’t.

“Understood,” he says.

Yuna leans back slightly, assessing. *“This is not a date, Shane.”*

His jaw tightens once. He keeps his voice even. *“I’m aware, Oyabun.”*

“You will not be there alone with him.”

It wasn’t instruction, it was a boundary drawn for Shane's benefit and Yuna’s leverage.

“I can’t guarantee our paths won’t cross if the situation turns,” Shane says. It's childish, but the words escape his lips before he can stop himself.

Yuna gives him a tight look.

“Then you control yourself,” she replies.

The silence stretches.

Shane presses his thumb into his palm behind his back. The pain is sharp and familiar.

"Yes, Oyabun," he says.

Yuna doesn't immediately dismiss him. The pause is intentional, she wants the next words to land.

"Whatever you think you're doing," she says, voice softer now. *"Affection is leverage, Shane."*

He tries not to think about the way she says his name, the way she's slipped into her native tongue, almost as if this conversation was a secret meant for his ears and his ears only.

"I remember," he says.

"If you forget, I can't protect you," she continues.

Shane bowed his head.

"I understand."

He leaves with the folder heavy in his hand.

By nightfall, the warehouse district buzzes with a sort of nervous energy. The rail lines hum nearby, metal singing faintly under the weight, but the building itself sits like it's holding its breath.

Floodlights hum. Chain-link fences gleam. Everything smells like oil and cold iron.

Shane arrives early. He always does.

He deploys his men without having to give a word. Silent, disciplined, efficient. No chatter. No unnecessary motion. Two elevated sightlines, one on the fire door, another watching the railroad tracks. Each man knows his sector, his angles, his fallback routes.

This is how Shane trained them.

Across the street, the Bratva presence forms its own perimeter. Heavier muscle. Tighter clusters. More eyes on vertical access points.

Shane sees Ilya immediately- hates that he always seeks him out first.

He's positioned near the loading dock, coat dark, posture imitating relaxed in a way that signals control, not carelessness. He's about halfway through a cigarette, the smoke curling around him in a way that Shane shouldn't find so intoxicating. Shane notices the tension instantly. The tightness in his shoulders, the way his gaze keeps sweeping reflections instead of faces.

Surveillance pressure.

Father pressure.

Their eyes meet for less than a second. It's brief. Controlled. Nothing that could be called indulgent.

But Shane feels it anyway. The heat behind his ribs, the sharp awareness of where Ilya is in space.

Shane looks away first, because someone has to be the adult here.

At 9:17 p.m., the broker's van arrives.

White. Generic. The driver keeps both hands visible.

Shane's gaze sharpens.

At 9:18, a second vehicle pulls in- black, unmarked, clean lines. It doesn't hesitate at the gate.

That's the first red flag.

Shane feels the shift instantly.

"Second vehicle wasn't briefed, hold positions," he murmurs into his comm. "Can we get confirmation of affiliation?"

Kenji responds immediately. "Copy. No affiliation. It's not ours. Not Bratva."

Shane watches the driver step out.

The man moves like a professional- balanced, deliberate, not scanning wildly. He's not afraid.

That's when Shane knows.

"Hold," he orders softly. "I need information on the driver."

The exterior lights cut out.

Not all of them. Just enough.

Interior lights flicker- half the rows plunging into shadow, half burning harsh and white. Cameras go blind. It becomes nearly impossible to get a clear line of sight.

Shane exhales sharply.

It's tactical. Someone planned this.

Shane's voice snaps low and lethal through the channel. "This looks like a third-party ambush. Nobody fires without confirmation. I need eyes on the ground. "

Gunfire cracks from inside the warehouse- short bursts, controlled, not panicked. Warning shots.

“Shit,” Shane snaps. “Definitely ambush. Maintain the perimeter. Identify and eliminate targets when needed.”

His men move exactly as trained. No one breaks cover. No one fires without a confirmed lane.

Shane drops behind a steel crate as bullets bite into the concrete above his head. The smell hits him immediately- oil, iron, burned powder.

He fires twice- controlled, surgical. Two bodies drop, and he switches to his knife without thought.

Bullets echo. Knives don't.

A noise behind him has his head snapping, catching the movement of an attacker swinging his hands in front, a gun trained at Shane's head.

(**) Shane pivots, catches the wrist mid-swing, twists hard. Tendons snap with a wet sound. The gun hits the floor. Shane drives his knife into the man's thigh instead of his throat- deep, disabling. Blood pours hot and dark, splattering Shane's boots.

The man screams.

Shane moves on.

Another man lunges in a similar fashion, Shane drives him into a steel beam hard enough to hear cartilage tear. He takes his knife, turns, and buries it under another attacker's ribs, feeling resistance give way to wet heat. He tries not to think about the blood, warm and thick, coating his hands and getting everywhere.

He hears Ilya before he sees him.

Not the noise, but the pattern. A gunshot followed by a dull, heavy impact. Another body hitting concrete. The sound of breath forced out of lungs.

Ilya fights like he doesn't care if anyone is watching.

Shane catches a glimpse of him between rows- blood already smeared across his knuckles, jaw clenched, eyes bright and feral. Ilya fires once, then closes the distance and slams a man face-first into a steel support beam hard enough to leave a streak, a satisfying crunch of the nose that even Shane can hear from his distance and over the chaos around them. Another man comes in from behind. A knife flashes, and the man drops, choking, clutching at his throat, blood pumping between Ilya's fingers as he steps aside without breaking stride.

(**) Another body hits concrete with a sound like a sack of meat.

This is why they fear him.

This is why Grigori cages him.

Shane's pulse kicks, sharp and unwelcome.

Focus.

A third-party fighter emerges from behind a forklift. Shane drops him with two precise shots, center mass. The man crumples, blood blooming fast across his chest.

Shane tracks everything. Angles, exits, *Ilya*, without letting his focus narrow.

Then something shifts.

Not gunfire.

Movement.

Behind him.

Shane turns-

A stun round slams into his side, and he grunts from the force, pain flaring in his side as he tries to stay upright. Something clatters across the ground, rolling towards him. He already knows what it is before he sees it, and tries to get out of the way, but it's too late.

White light. Pressure. A loud bang. His ears ring violently. He stumbles, vision fracturing.

He tries to blink the spots out of his eyes, shaking his head. *Focus. Stay Alert.*

An attacker tries to come at Shane low. Shane steps into it, knee driving into ribs, feels something give. He follows through with the butt of his gun, cracking the man's face sideways. Teeth scatter across the floor like dice.

Shane swears, still blinking and disoriented. His body is sore, and the blood coating his hands is starting to dry and crust.

This isn't a hit. This isn't chaos. This is controlled.

He scans the area, trying to find a way out of this situation. Everyone seems to be occupied, back-up for the third party must have come not long after the first two vans arrived.

He needs visibility.

"Rozanov!" Shane barks into the open, already moving toward the breaker panel near the loading dock. If he can restore lighting, he can regain some control.

He doesn't get there.

Three men converge- not rushing, not sloppy. One goes high, one drops low, one comes from behind.

Professionals. Coordinated. Trained.

Shane fires once- clean. One drops, blood spraying the concrete behind him.

(**) The second tries to kick the gun out of Shane's hand, but instead, forces his body to swing. He punches Shane hard in the ribs. Air explodes out of his lungs. Shane stumbles, boots slipping in oil and blood. He drives an elbow back, feels bone crack, but the third man is already there.

Something slams into the back of Shane's head.

A baton. Weighted.

White detonates behind his eyes.

He drops to one knee, snarling, gun still up. Fires again- lucky this time. Another body hits the floor.

Then arms wrap around him from behind. His elbow connects, he hears his attacker grunt. He reaches for the knife at his leg, sinks it into the person's thigh, feels the muscle seize. Another body hits him low. A baton cracks against his ribs, pain searing white and hot. Something feels broken.

(**) He's still on his knees.

"Roz-" Shane starts, voice already rough, but the word dies as a forearm locks under his jaw, pressure exact- cutting blood flow without crushing his windpipe.

Shane thrashes, claws at the arm, tries to find purchase on a face, drives his heel back, and connects with a knee. The grip tightens instead of loosening.

A needle punches into his neck.

Cold floods his veins, fast and invasive.

That's when it clicks.

"Fuck-" Shane growls, clawing at the arm around him, vision tunneling.

This isn't about eliminating him.

It's about taking him.

Across the warehouse, Ilya turns.

Their eyes meet through smoke and shadow.

Just for a second.

Something inside Ilya fractures, his face changes- rage, recognition, something naked and furious. He moves immediately, lethal intent written into every line of his body.

But gunfire forces him to turn away. A round tears through the spot where his head was a second ago. By the time he surges forward again, Shane is already being dragged backward, unconscious and limp, his boots scraping against concrete.

Then the loading dock doors begin to lift.

Ilya shouts- Russian, sharp and violent- and breaks from cover. He drops one man with a shot to the throat, another with a knife driven up under the ribs.

But he's too late.

The doors slam shut.

Engines roar as the van tears out, tires screeching as they leave.

Ilya stands in the middle of the warehouse, chest heaving, blood dripping from his hands and sleeves.

"*This*," he says quietly, voice shaking with contained violence, "*was not business*."

Shane Hollander disappears into the dark.

Shane wakes in pieces.

Cold concrete. Zip ties biting into his wrists, hands behind his back, ankles bound together. His head is splitting, and every breath he takes feels like he's inhaling shards of glass. The taste of blood is heavy in his mouth.

A low hum- generator, nearby. One overhead light, intentionally dim.

They want him awake.

He tests his fingers. Sensation intact.

Sedative. Short-acting.

Footsteps approach.

"You're more trouble than expected," a man says, accented, careful.

Shane lifts his head slowly. Blood drips warm down his temple.

"Your planning was lazy," Shane replies calmly.

The man smiles thinly. "I have you, don't I?"

"Who sent you," Shane continues. "You didn't take me to kill me."

The man's smile tightens.

“You took me because someone will come.”

Silence.

Shane knows that it could be anyone who wanted him held. It could be an old rival faction gunning for Yakuza territory, or someone who wanted to stir up tensions between the Bratva and Yakuza, but something in his gut tells him it's for another reason entirely. That despite all the warnings and the distance, and the careful planning, someone serious knows. And that might get them both killed.

Shane tries to sit up, every bone and muscle in his body screaming at him to stop moving. He leans back against the concrete, breathing slow and controlled.

“That’s your mistake.”

“Why is that?” the man asks.

“He doesn’t negotiate,” Shane says evenly. “He burns.”

After a tense conversation with Shane’s second in command, the Yakuza have already started searching for their Wakagashira. Ilya has tasked his members with cleaning up the mess and dead bodies around the warehouse.

He washes blood from his hands that is not Shane’s, stares at the drain until it runs clear, and tries not to think about the way Shane was clearly trying to call out to him, the glazed over look in his eyes as he passed out.

The fury is there, and it’s making his blood boil. Ilya’s hands shake once- then still. He turns abruptly, pushing the door open with way too much force, and stalks toward one of his lieutenants.

“*Lock the city,*” he says quietly.

His men freeze.

“*Every broker contact. Every third-party fixer,*” Ilya continues. “*I want names before sunrise.*”

A lieutenant hesitates. “*Brigadier-*”

Ilya turns.

“*You will obey me,*” he says evenly, “*or you will explain your hesitation to the Pakhan.*”

No one argues.

Ilya slams his fist into the steel wall hard enough to dent it. Pain flares sharp and grounding.

This was deliberate.

This was personal.

And whoever took Shane Hollander just declared war on the wrong man.

Because Ilya Rozanov does not lose what is his, and understands with brutal certainty that this wasn't about war.

It was about leverage.

And Shane was the proof.

Chapter End Notes

shane has been kidnapped oh nooo lol

how do you think ilya will react to this? do you think the two can keep their relationship a secret for much longer? love to hear yalls thoughts!

happy valentines dayyyy nothing screams romance quite like ripping these two mfs away from each other lmaoooo

thanks for reading!

Chapter 7: Blood and Consequence

Chapter Summary

What is Ilya willing to risk to get Shane back?

Chapter Notes

strap in, it's about to go down haha

this chapter really does feel like the culminating arc, it took so many tries to get this draft right i hope it was worth it lolll

BIG WARNING: this definitely has more blood and gore than earlier chapters (graphic depictions of torture)...ive updated the tags to this story, and i'll try to (**) before the scenes, but they're kind of all over so just be forewarned 😊

i just checked... this chapter is over 11k words 🤪

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

In captivity, time doesn't pass normally.

To Shane, it's become a continuous loop of thought and feeling. It stutters and presents itself in ways that he can only comprehend as physical attributes.

The cold that creeps up through the concrete, the zip ties that cut deeper every time he flexes his wrists, the way his lip burns, and the dried blood cracks when he swallows wrong.

He knows they're not trying to kill him, it's the first thing he understands with clarity once he wakes.

Someone wants him alive. He has a purpose.

The overhead light stays low and intentional, enough to keep him oriented but not enough to let him track faces clearly. In a way, it's all performative, giving his captors the illusion of mercy while also stripping him of his senses. They want him to feel grateful to them, compliant. He understands their type well.

Shane listens to the generator hum and measures it against his own breathing. In. Out. In. Out. It's not calming, but rather intentional. Counting means he's still himself.

Footsteps come and go. Sometimes, it's sets, sometimes it's one. They're rotating and disciplined. They never linger in the room longer than they need to.

They keep the temperature uncomfortable, keep him awake, dehydrated, but not delirious. They're professionals.

That, more than the pain, is what unsettles him.

Professionals don't improvise kidnappings. They don't take a Wakagashira unless someone's paying for a very specific kind of outcome. Among the many reasons he could've been taken, among the many options it could be, the one that pains him is the one that makes Yuna's warnings truth. He messed up, and now he and Ilya could be paying the price.

The man with the careful accent returns. He smells faintly of cigarette smoke and expensive soap, like he's trying to convince himself he isn't standing in a concrete cage with a bloodied, beaten man.

"You've been quiet," the man says, conversationally. "Is that discipline or pride?"

Shane lifts his head slowly, trying to ignore the immediate vertigo that engulfs his vision. Blood has been dripping down his temple, warm where it slides, cold where it dried. He blinks once, deliberate and slow.

"It's assessment," Shane states.

The man smiles, thin, twirling a pocket knife in his hand. "Still pretending you're in control."

Shane's shoulders scream when he shifts against his restraints, but he doesn't let his face react. The pain is data. It's unavoidable, but he doesn't give it permission over him.

"You're not Yakuza, your spacing is wrong," Shane ignores his previous statement.

A pause.

The man's eyes narrow in the dim lighting. "You're observant."

"I train men who can kill in silence," Shane continues, voice low. "You...want to seem competent. You want to be seen."

The smile on the man's face disappears, the only indication to Shane that he's on to something.

"What do you want?" Shane continues. "Money, leverage, a war...pick one."

The man doesn't answer immediately. He steps forward, pressing two of his fingers against Shane's jaw, tilting his face up like he's inspecting merchandise.

It's harsh and pressing on a bruise. Shane tries not to let the man see his discomfort, clenching his teeth instead.

“Someone will come,” the man says softly, his thumb brushing the corner of Shane’s mouth where blood has dried. “You know that.”

Shane’s pulse does something untrustworthy in his throat. It’s not entirely fear, maybe more so recognition. Confirmation.

He tries to pull his face back, but the man grips his jaw even stronger.

His breath comes out harsh, but his voice remains flat. “You didn’t take me because I’m valuable. You took me because of my connection.”

The man’s eyes flicker, his mouth tugs on the corners.

The silence is deafening, heavy. Shane feels his stomach go cold.

He’s now addressed what this is, even if he doesn’t want to, and that thought makes him nauseous.

This is a trap designed to pull a very specific animal out of the dark.

And that animal doesn’t take prisoners.

Shane’s mouth lifts at one corner, the closest thing to a smile he can muster at the moment. The thought of Ilya wreaking havoc on the men keeping him hostage ignites something in his chest.

“You’re *so* fucked,” he says, the words sounding crude and raw, and not at all like the poised and calculated Wakagashira people are used to seeing.

The man leans in, eyes squinted at Shane. “What makes you say that?”

Shane huffs, voice steady, something almost gleeful in his tone. “Like I told you earlier, he won’t leave witnesses.” Shane stares the man down, makes him feel every word he’s saying, lets him know it’s the truth. The only truth. “He’s going to burn you to the ground.”

The man goes silent for a moment, studies him as if he’s trying to decide if this is a threat or a confession.

He nods once, almost satisfied, and stands.

“Good,” he says.

And with that single word, the room shifts.

It’s not louder or messier, it’s more brutal. Colder.

Two guards haul him to his feet, a mess of limbs and pain, pushing him into a cold, steel, straight-backed chair. His ankles, still zip-tied together, are pressed up against its feet with tape. His arms are thrown over the back, also still zip-tied together at the wrist.

The first hit is a fist to the ribs- sharp and controlled. There's a rage behind the power, but it remains purposeful, like a test.

Shane exhales through his nose, sharp but silent. He keeps his eyes up, trying to ignore the way they almost moistened at the pain. He knows his ribs were already bruised at the very least, before the present punch, but now the pain he'd allowed to settle into a dull ache over the course of his hours in captivity came back full force, flaring hot and intense.

The second blow is a baton to the thigh that makes his leg spasm involuntarily against his restraints.

He's grateful he's already sitting, aware that if standing, his legs would have given out.

They're watching for cracks, but he refuses to give them one.

The man circles behind him, and Shane feels the shift in the air. Another guard has stepped forward as if warning him to try something. The restraints keeping his hands behind the back of the chair are tugged and lifted, pain blooming across his shoulders as hands grip his arms.

The sound of metal clicks around each wrist, before a snip releases the ties. What little relief Shane has is quickly taken from him as the man with the accent grabs one arm and wrenches it further back.

It's not dislocation, not yet, but a slow twist designed to make his muscles scream. The stretch tears through his left arm and down his side, where his ribs are clearly injured. He grits his teeth, breathing through the pain, glaring at the guard in front of him, who remains without expression.

"Names," the guard says, calmly. "Who coordinates cross-faction operations."

Shane's voice is quiet- any louder and he fears it might catch. "Fuck you. You know you're asking the wrong questions."

The man behind tugs harder. "Am I?"

"We've established why I'm here," Shane says. "If you're as good as you claim, you already have that list."

(**) The guard moves quick, hitting the right side of his ribs. Something shifts wrong this time, a shallow, ugly crack that lights a fire down his side like electricity. His vision tunnels, and it takes everything in him not to cry out. He forces down the scream, settling for glowering at the guard in front of him. (**)

"You're stalling," Shane huffs, trying not to acknowledge how shallow his breath comes out.

The man with the accent releases his arm, letting weight and gravity slam his limbs into the back of the chair, causing more pain than necessary across his upper body. He slowly circles Shane, tutting as he makes his way in front of him. The guard takes a step back.

"You're bleeding," he says with a small laugh.

Shane swallows, tasting iron, feeling the blood drip down his lip where he hadn't realized he'd bit down. "Good. Means my heart is still working."

Their methods start to escalate. Not because they're angry, but because they're trying to break a system.

Accent Man gestures as he turns around to grab something, and one guard comes over to cuff Shane's left wrist to the chair's arm, palm flat on the steel surface. Another guard is grabbing the right wrist and cuffing it behind his back.

When Accent Man turns back around, he's unrolling a canvas pouch along his forearm, fingers flitting almost gleefully over the tools before stopping and pulling out a pair of pliers.

Shane's throat tightens more than it should, and he can feel his arms flinch slightly, pulling at the restraints. He tries not to let it show, tries to control his breathing, as his eyes dart between the man with the pliers and his splayed out left hand.

The man crouches forward, pliers clamping around his index finger, a glint in his eyes that makes Shane sick.

(**) "Let's see how long it takes before you break," he says too calmly, as he starts adding pressure.

It's slow and deliberate, almost patient. Shane's breathing turns shallow, and he tries to regain it, refusing to break eye contact with the man in front of him.

In. Out. In. Out.

His toes are curled in his boots, pressed firmly into the ground, his right hand is balled into a fist, nails digging into his palms enough to draw blood. The pain is immeasurable and everything in Shane's body is telling him to scream, to let it out, to try and pull away, but he doesn't.

The bone doesn't break immediately. It resists, and complains, and when it finally does, it's a shocking wet crack so loud it almost startles Shane.

(**) His body jerks, his vision goes white, and he inhales so sharply, he can practically hear his ribs rattling. His jaw clenches so hard it aches, but he refuses to scream. He will not give them that satisfaction.

The man hums softly, almost sounding disappointed. "Stubborn."

Shane glares, trying to regain control. "*Fuck. You,*" he spits out.

The baton hits his ribs again, and Shane coughs, blood now spattering onto his shirt and the guard's boots in front of him. The man leans down, close enough that Shane can see a faint scar on his chin.

"You think he'll come?" the man whispers. "*Your...Bratva Prince.*"

Shane's stomach turns at the way the words are said, like it's a tease.

"They'll assume it's Yakuza business," Shane points out. "I've seen the way you've been trying to imitate our patterns."

The man smiles.

"That depends," he says, "On who finds you first."

Something in Shane's brain clicks, and he forces his mind to work through it as a way to ignore the pain.

They don't just want Ilya, they want confusion and misidentification. They want a war that looks like it started naturally.

Shane exhales softly, letting the gears turn in his brain. His eyes close for a fraction of a second.

If they're this organized and resourced, they aren't some random broker network from the outside.

They're a faction within reach, one with inside information.

A faction with political motive- one that benefits if Ilya overreacts.

He opens his eyes again, staring the man down.

"You're not a third-party," Shane says quietly. "You're internal."

There's a shift in the man's expression, a quick flash before it's gone. But Shane sees it.

It's the first crack.

He breathes through the pain and continues.

"You want my pain and suffering on Ilya's conscience," he says, voice hoarse but controlled. "Because it makes him reckless and visible. You want to pull him apart."

The baton cracks across his cheek, hard enough to split the skin. His head snaps sideways, his already sore jaw once again blooming in pain, as stars burst behind his eyelids.

When he looks back up, there are now two cuts bleeding on his face.

The man's smile is gone now, his arms are crossed.

"You talk too much," he murmurs.

Shane's own smile- however painful it is to move the muscles- returns, small and bloody.

"Like I said, your plan was lazy," he spits blood at the man's feet. "You're going to have to do better than this."

And so they try.

They don't just hit him after that, they break him down piece by piece. They strip him of any other clothing, leaving him in only his thin white tee and underwear. His tactical boots and socks had been removed, feet and ankles exposed to the elements, the plastic zip ties biting into the skin, rubbing it raw.

First, comes water. It's cold, poured over his face, down his neck, soaking his shirt until it clings heavy and wet. They turn the temperature down and blast the air. They keep him drenched and shivering for what feels like hours.

Then, they tip his chair back and press a cloth over his face. He knows it's irrational, and he's not drowning, but the overload of senses, the icy cold, has him gasping for breath, lungs panicking, semisuffocating on water and air.

They pull him up, gasping, choking, saliva and blood trailing down his chin.

Again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

His body tries to betray him, it begs and begs, but Shane doesn't. Anytime a scream threatens to come forward, he forces his breath into control. He starts to retreat into his mind, cataloguing everything. Counting the seconds they hold him down, the seconds they let him breathe. How many times they repeat the process- the rhythm, because rhythm means predictability, and to Shane, predictability means vulnerability.

At some point, the man leans in again.

"You should give us something," he says. "Maybe we stop."

Shane lifts his head with effort, every muscle in his body is sluggish and trembling. His ribs are a cage of fire.

"No," he rasps out. "You can't stop. Not now."

The man pauses. "Why not?"

Because if they stop, the reason they started this all becomes irrelevant.

Because if they stop, it means they don't need Ilya to come.

Because if they stop, Shane will become expendable.

Shane swallows blood.

“You can’t stop,” he says. “You need him.”

The man stares at him for a long moment, and Shane takes this as a second to collect himself.

With controlled frustration, the man signals to the other guards.

(**) Their next method is to dislocate Shane’s shoulder.

They take the left arm, already with a crooked, broken index finger, and do it with a methodical force. One man bracing, one twisting. The pop is nauseating and wet, and Shane’s vision whites out to the point when he thinks he’s lost consciousness for a few seconds. He makes a sound he can’t swallow in time, something torn and involuntary as he grimaces.

It’s not a scream, but it’s close enough that something in his gut settles and makes him feel like a failure.

He bites down hard, tasting more blood.

(**) The man gives a small smile as he leans in close.

“Better,” he says, almost pleased. “I told you we’d find your weak spots.”

Shane’s breath shakes, and he forces his eyes open. It takes him a moment to speak, everything in his brain is swimming.

“Pain is pain, I’m *human*,” he whispers. “It doesn’t mean I’m weak.”

The man tilts his head. “We’ll see.”

“If you touch him-” The words escape Shane’s mouth before he really has a chance to think it through.

Since they’d started torturing him, his only thoughts had been of calculating their next moves, calculating who these people were, calculating how to compartmentalize his pain. And occasionally, when the pain got too unbearable, when the rationality and calculations left his brain, his mind wandered to the stolen moments he’d shared with Ilya in a dark motel, the snarky text messages he left on his burner, or the way the Russian made it his sole mission in life to push his buttons and skirt around the rules. He would never admit it out loud, but those were the thoughts that grounded him, keeping him from losing what little dignity he had left—not the calculations, not the mantras about his control.

Something shifts in Shane’s chest. It’s not pain or discomfort in the literal sense. It’s a thick, heavy feeling that only ignites when Shane thinks about a certain, gorgeous blue eyed blond haired Russian. It’s a feeling that both terrifies and exhilarates Shane in a way that forces his brain and body to keep fighting.

For Ilya.

“If you touch him, you won’t live long enough to enjoy it,” he rasps out, with a renewed sense of vigor.

Something flashes in the man's eyes. His mouth drawn tight. "You care."

Shane's face remains neutral. "I care about the city not burning."

The man tilts his head, a nasty snarl on his lips. "Liar."

Shane doesn't answer.

Ilya Rozanov has not slept in what feels like weeks.

Truthfully, it's been less than twenty four hours since he last saw Shane, but he paces the length of his compound like a caged animal wearing expensive clothes. His men keep bringing him partial answers, nothing complete or clean, and it is infuriating.

He's gotten updates about the broker contacts going dark hours before the warehouse, the vehicles being registered to shells that no longer exist, a familiar pattern of encrypted comms that are Bratva-adjacent but not the official channel.

That last detail makes his blood run cold.

Because it means someone on the inside, in *his* world, is moving pieces without his permission.

He gets summoned before dawn.

Not by the Pakhan himself, but by the idea of Grigori in the form of a cousin who sits at Ilya's father's table and smiles politely as he measures Ilya's worth.

"*You've been mobilizing, frantically,*" the cousin notes lightly, taking a drag from his cigar. "*You're being...emotional.*"

Ilya's smile is sharp enough to cut. He folds his hands in front of him to hide the quiet rage his body is seething with. "*I'm being necessary.*"

The cousin's eyes flint. "*Many are saying this is a Yakuza matter. That someone tied to the Yakuza took him.*"

Ilya's jaw clenches. He speaks carefully. "*If they did, I will respond appropriately.*"

"*Appropriately,*" the cousin repeats, amused. "*Meaning loudly.*"

Ilya leans forward slightly. "*Meaning permanently,*" he corrects.

The cousin laughs softly, but there is no amusement in his tone. "*You'd better watch yourself, Brigadier. Your father doesn't like mess.*"

Ilya's jaw tightens, his shoulders are practically at his ears. "*My father doesn't like embarrassment.*"

*“Exactly,” the cousin says, his eyes suddenly sharp, the relaxed nature of his body now rigid. “And your **attachment** is embarrassing.”*

The words land like a slap. Not because Ilya isn't aware of what this is, but because someone else has said it out loud.

Ilya's eyes go dark. *“Don't,”* he grits out.

The cousin shows teeth as his lips pull up, *“Or what? You burn the city?”*

Ilya's hands are shaking, he clenches and unclenches them in hopes of releasing some of the tension.

He thinks about Shane. Thinks about his dark, shiny hair and gorgeous brown eyes that almost go black when he stares at Ilya with that heated look before sex. He thinks about how guarded the man's face is when they see each other in public, and the way he lets all of it melt away when they're alone in a hotel room, just the two of them tangled in the sheets. He thinks about the way Shane fought off almost a dozen attackers with a careful, controlled precision, before they'd managed to grab him, face going slack, light leaving his eyes as they threw him in the back of a van like a rag doll and tore out of the warehouse.

Blinding rage and helplessness consume Ilya as he stands abruptly, chair screeching and tipping back with a clang against the cement floor. His fists slam against the heavy wooden table.

He thinks about the way Shane always has a plan. Always returns to control, like it's the only thing that will save them.

It won't. Not this time.

“I'm going to find him,” Ilya seethes, tone even. *“And when I do, whoever touched him is going to learn what embarrassment looks like. I don't care if the whole city has to burn, I will bring him back.”*

The cousin says nothing, only stares at the man as if trying to read his next thoughts. Ilya switches tactics.

“Who is moving without my approval?” he speaks softly. *“And don't lie. If you're as competent as you pretend to be, you'll know exactly what's been going on.”*

The cousin's eyes shift to the cigar in his hand. The playfulness now gone from his features. He shifts forward in his chair.

“There have been whispers of the old guard being unhappy with your promotion since Aleksandr passed. They think you are too young and weak- soft.”

There's a fire blazing behind Ilya's eyes.

A splinter cell of old Bratva loyalists. Men with money and grievance who want to prove Ilya is unworthy of his title. Weak. Soft. And they have Shane.

“Names,” he grunts out, glaring down at the cousin, who just looks tired at this point.

“I don’t have names, Ilya, I only hear whispers from my men,” the cousin sighs.

Ilya is already pulling out his phone to get his lieutenant up to speed.

*“Fine. They think I’m soft? Weak? I guess this city **will** burn tonight.”*

Ilya doesn’t wait to be dismissed, he’s already on his way to Shane.

The Oyabun receives the news like she receives everything- with stillness.

The Yakuza have been searching since Shane’s disappearance, leaving no stone left unturned. The city has been quietly pulled tighter in her hands- ports are more heavily monitored, cameras fed to her systems, informants squeezed tighter without causing chaos. She doesn’t move loudly, because loud movements invite scrutiny.

And scrutiny invites leverage.

Kenji is in her office, as a temporary second-in-command, when Ilya requests an audience.

The Oyabun allows it.

Ilya enters like a barely contained storm, eyes wild, stance tight. He doesn’t bow or sit, merely stands with his hands clenched by his side.

Yuna’s eyes narrow, barely moving from her spot behind her desk. “You’re being reckless.”

Her calmness irritates Ilya, his jaw clenches. “Someone took Sh-” he stops mid-sentence, catches the word before it becomes a confession. “Your Wakagashira. What are you doing?”

The Oyabun’s expression doesn’t change, but something in the air shifts.

“You should watch your words, Brigadier,” she says evenly. “You’re standing in my territory.”

Ilya laughs once, humorless. “And he is bleeding in someone else’s. Your own flesh and blood, and you sit behind desk and do what? Be statue?”

Kenji looks like he is about to step forward, but Yuna raises a hand.

“Need I remind you that attachment is leverage. My sources tell me that his attachment to you is what put him in this position.”

Ilya doesn’t respond. It’s the truth.

“Tell me where he is.”

“I don’t know, and I will not have you burning my city in an attempt to find out.”

Ilya's eyes flash. "I will burn *any* city."

Yuna's fingers tap once against her desk, subtle and precise. It's a habit that Shane shares without realizing, a small indication to Ilya of the familial connection.

"I cannot be seen helping you so frivolously. Neutrality is how we survive."

"You should stop pretending neutrality matters more than outcome," Ilya replies, voice rough. "You survive by controlling leverage. Right now? Leverage is being tortured."

The Oyabun's gaze sharpens. "I hope you're not implying I've lost control when you've come to me for help, Brigadier."

Ilya's nostrils flare. "He is your *son*."

Yuna's expression doesn't change. The silence stretches as she stares into Ilya's eyes like she's searching for something.

"That is precisely why I cannot give them something to leverage." Yuna continues, voice measured, patience weaponized. "Shane is strong, he will not break. He is Yakuza, he is the Wakagashira."

Ilya thinks that maybe in her own weird motherly way, this is how she reassures herself. That by speaking it outloud, she is convincing herself that it is true.

Yuna opens a drawer in her desk, pulling out a folder.

"I cannot be seen helping you--"

Ilya interrupts, "How can y--"

Yuna holds up a hand, gaze hard on Ilya.

"I am not helping you...I am simply protecting what is mine."

Yuna slides the thin folder across the desk. There are no labels or stamps indicating that it's official Yakuza business. Ilya's posture stills as he watches her open the folder and stand. She turns to face the open garden behind her, leaving the information for Ilya to take. Ilya's eyes shift from her back to Kenji, staring straight ahead, refusing to make eye contact.

"We received reports about heightened communication through an abandoned refrigeration facility outside the port district," Yuna says.

"By who?" Ilya says, stepping forward to take the file. He's already heard from his cousin, he merely wants confirmation.

"Intel suggests a Bratva faction acting outside of official sanction."

Ilya's blood goes cold as he picks up the file and reads through the reports. There are pictures, men that he is familiar with, heads low in communication with one another.

“Ебать. (*fuck*)” Ilya murmurs, already taking pictures to send to his lieutenant.

“Someone is hoping you react loudly, publicly...incorrectly.”

Ilya’s mouth tightens as he stares at Yuna’s back. Her posture is stiff, hands clasped behind her in a way that reminds him so much of Shane.

“If they want reaction, I will give.”

“If you move,” she continues, calmly, “You do it clean. You do it fast, and you do not leave survivors who can tell stories.

Ilya nods, even though she can’t see him. He closes the file and tosses it back on her desk.

There’s a tightening in his chest as he stares at the back of the woman who created the one thing Ilya has come to realize he can’t live without. He wants to hate her, the way she refuses to look at him, refuses to acknowledge the emotion that comes with worrying about her son. He wants to hate her, but he can’t, because he understands.

“I will get him,” he says simply, turning to leave. He’s grabbing the silk screen when she speaks again, voice fractionally softer.

“Rozanov,” she says, as she turns her head. For a second, he sees the emotion of a worried mother, before it’s gone and replaced with the steel gaze of the Oyabun. “Bring him back,” she says, not as a plea, but as a statement. “Alive.”

Ilya’s jaw flexes, and he reluctantly bows his head a fraction before spinning on his heels and leaving.

“Живой (*alive*),” he repeats to himself. The underlying promise is brutal.

He will bring Shane back alive. The others...will not be.

The beatings have become less forceful and more about quantity.

Shane continues to lose time, not in big gaps or dramatic blackouts, but a few stolen seconds where his vision tunnels and returns, and where his mouth tastes of copper and he can’t remember when he swallowed blood.

They’ve yanked him into a standing position, arms above his head, cuffs secured to a hook from the ceiling. He wants to scream from the burn in his dislocated shoulder. His ribs are on fire, his head lulls, and his legs shake. They yank him upright, hands twisting into his hair as they force him to keep his eyes open. They’ve stopped asking him questions and started just making comments.

“Does the Oyabun know you enjoy Russian dick?”

“Did Rozanov fuck you or did you fuck him?”

“Do you like to beg for it on your knees?”

For the most part, Shane doesn't speak. He ignores the comments and refuses to make a sound. So, they take it from him.

A blow to the stomach that forces the air out, a baton to the thigh that has his knee buckling, a slap to the cheek that has him blinking stars out of his vision. They've been carving up his skin with light, quick slashes, leaving him constantly bleeding and stinging all over.

He tries to listen, he learns.

They call him *избалованный принц* (*spoiled prince*) and talk about Ilya's softness like it's a disease.

Shane's mind tightens around one thought:

Ilya will come for him.

And Shane worries. Worries that that is exactly what they want. The “Bratva Prince” abandons neutrality, confirming his attachment, giving the Pakhan the excuse he needs to crush Ilya's authority.

Shane swallows blood and keeps his eyes open. He needs to last long enough to put cracks in their objectives. He needs to make the trap fail.

They eventually sit him back in the steel chair, as if they're showing him some sort of grace. His ankles are taped back to the chair legs, his one good arm cuffed to the back of the chair, his left dangling dangerously wrong.

The man with the accent is back, sitting cross-legged in a foldout chair, water bottle tipped to his lips. He takes a long sip, smacking his lips in a taunting manner.

Shane is breathless, but determined.

“You think he'll come?” the man asks, a grin on his face.

Shane's mouth twitches, it might've come out looking like a grimace.

“He already is,” Shane says.

The man's expression changes for half a second.

And Shane knows he's right.

*(**) graphic depictions of violence are sprinkled throughout this segment*

The strike doesn't happen immediately or cleanly, it takes planning and strategy. By the time they've sorted everything out, it's been three whole days since Shane's disappearance.

The refrigeration facility is set up like a trap by people who understand traps. Long corridors, blind corners, echoes that carry, doors designed to funnel movement.

Ilya is one of the first through the doors anyway.

He takes the first guard down with a suppressed shot to the throat.

The man drops without a sound, hands clamped as the blood sprays hot and arterial between his fingers.

Ilya doesn't look down, doesn't flinch when a shot whizzes past his ear, snapping another guard's head back before he crumples.

He chooses to put his trust in the backup the Oyabun provides, chooses to put his trust in Shane, who trained each and every one of them.

Two more appear at the end of the corridor.

One fires, the round grazing Ilya's shoulder and tears fabric.

It burns slightly as he lifts his arms to fire twice. The man goes down on a knee, screaming, before he's silenced by the second shot to the forehead.

Ilya feels the Yakuza fanning out behind him, picking off corridors in a military-like precision, scanning the perimeter, locking down any problems.

The second man had turned to flee, Ilya throws a blade right between his shoulders. The man goes down face first, Ilya firing a round into the back of his head.

Ilya's own men flank behind him, but he stays forward, refusing to let anyone else be the first to see Shane.

He follows the main corridor deeper into the facility, down a set of stairs, and into another hall.

There are voices. Russian, low, controlled. He hears the Bratva lingo, understands that this is a hit from the inside.

His stomach drops with rage. This is his world, and someone in his world dared to touch what is his.

He holds out a hand, gesturing to his men to spread out. He peaks around the corner-

The trap snaps into place.

A floodlight blasts on, blinding, piercing.

Gunfire erupts from a catwalk above, the scene around him descending into chaos as gunfire and shouts fill the air.

Two of Ilya's men go down immediately, blood blooming dark on their chests. Ilya throws himself behind a concrete pillar as bullets spray next to his head. He returns the fire.

In the flicker of the fight, he sees the silhouettes above. Men, in full tactical gear, masked, and moving with military efficiency. These men were professionals, men who were probably paid handsomely for their services. Simply doing a job that some old men who were pissy about power structure needed to send a message for.

Hurt his Shane for.

Ilya snarls something in Russian. It's violent and untranslatable, and he pushes forward.

He takes a bullet to the arm and doesn't stop. A close combat fight has broken out between some of the faction and his men, and he joins, ducking as one of the men in black comes swinging at him with a knife. Another blade slices at his forearm, and Ilya kicks the man aside, surging towards another, breaking the man's nose with the butt of his gun. He drives another man into the wall, watching as the bone cracks and his eyes roll into the back of his head before he crumples.

He keeps moving, opening doors as he goes- the corridor is lined with them.

One of his men shouts from behind him, and he ducks behind another corner as a bullet tears through the wall where he'd once been standing.

He sees a faint trickle of light coming out from behind a door and doesn't think twice before kicking it in, gun trained in his hand.

For half a second, everything inside him goes quiet. He almost lowers his weapon.

Because Shane is there.

Hunched over in a steel chair, half naked, shaking, wet, and covered in blood.

Ilya almost lowers his weapon in shock.

Because Shane doesn't look like Shane.

His clothes are gone, and he's sitting only in his underwear. There's blood, too much blood everywhere. It's in his hair, all over his body, dripping down the corners of his mouth and chin. The skin on his legs and chest is split, shallow, methodical cuts and bruise patterns that make him look like one big purple and red bruise. His left shoulder is hanging wrong, the index finger is clearly swollen and crooked. His head has tilted to the side, and Ilya can't tell if his eyes are closed because he's passed out from the pain or because the sockets are so swollen and bruised from the damage done to his face.

His beautiful face.

It's almost unrecognizable.

A guttural scream, primal and low in Ilya's throat, forces its way out, and he only sees red as he charges the four men standing between him and Shane.

There are gunshots and shouts and screams, and Ilya feels pain but doesn't register where it's coming from. The room is a blur, and he's simply running on adrenaline, limbs flinging out in every direction.

All he can picture in his mind is how small and broken Shane looks, hunched over in the chair. His straightened posture, the controlled movements, the determined glint in his eyes when he tries not to laugh or roll his eyes at one of Ilya's stupid comments...it's not there. And all that's left is the small, shivering body beaten, bloody, and bruised.

A baton punches the air out of Ilya's lungs, and he narrows in on the man in front of him. He's still yelling as he grabs the other end and shoves it back in the guard's face, using the momentum to push him back and straight onto the edge of the steel table with a satisfyingly loud crack. The guard's weight sags, his head stuck in the point for a moment before gravity pulls him to the floor.

Ilya barely has time to process before another guard comes in from behind, wrapping their arms around his neck, trying to crush his windpipe. He tries to flip them, but the other guard is even larger than he is. He claws back and tries to find purchase on the man's face, managing to dig his fingers straight into his eyes. The man screams and loosens his grip enough for Ilya to turn around and sink a blade into his jugular.

He tries to ignore the spray of warm blood as he scans the room, trying to understand where the other two people are. He freezes, knife in hand, as he sees both standing behind Shane's chair.

One is holding a gun to his head, the other is pointing a knife at Ilya.

"Drop it," the man with the gun barks out.

Ilya stills. He's panting hard.

"Go. Take it," the man orders the one with the knife.

Ilya's eyes dart to Shane. It feels like nothing else matters. He notices now that Shane's eyes are open and watching, that he's still fighting. Ilya wants to cry out when he sees the look of determination in his eyes.

My beautiful, brave boy.

The man pointing the knife slowly makes his way toward Ilya, and in that moment, Shane gives him a signal. Even with pain coursing through him, Shane's gaze locks on Ilya with a kind of steady instruction.

Do it. Trust me.

And that is the most terrifying thing Shane has ever given him. Complete and utter faith.

Ilya doesn't waste a second and charges the man with the knife. A gunshot goes off, and Ilya hears Shane shout, the steel chair scraping and moving like a blurring flash of light.

Ilya manages to overpower the other knife wielder, slashing his face over and over with his own blade, making sure he doesn't get back up before turning to deal with the last man. Shane, with his broken fingers, dislocated shoulder, and limited strength, had managed to slam his body up and backward, pulling the chair and his weight into the other man and tipping them back.

Ilya lunges for the gun, just as the man pushes Shane, still tied to the chair, off him hard, Ilya's heart breaking at the noise that tears out of Shane's throat as his body hits the concrete, bad arm under him. Ilya doesn't give the man a chance, immediately emptying the clip into his chest, watching in satisfaction as bullets pierce through his body like it's jello.

The silence crashes down, the rest of the facility is still a war zone, but all Ilya can see or hear is Shane.

He immediately drops to his knees, trying to figure out the best way to remove Shane from the chair without causing more pain.

“моя любовь (*my love*), моя любовь- fuck! моя любовь I'm here. I'm sorry, this will hurt, I'm sorry,” Ilya mutters, hands moving frantically, scanning the room for a knife he can use to cut away at Shane's restraints.

Shane is breathing hard, taking deep breaths, like he's trying to control himself. His face is scrunched up as Ilya reaches out for the chair and tries to upright it. He grunts as the shift releases his dislocated arm from under him, and Ilya tries not to look at it as he reaches down to sever the tape and zip ties at his ankles.

“I know, I'm sorry, моя любовь, I'm sorry,” Ilya says over and over as the restraints on Shane's legs are now gone. He tries not to run his hands over the raw skin as he moves his gaze up to his torso and face.

His chest tightens at the sight of the abuse done to Shane's body. He looks around to see if there is anything to cover him with.

“M' clo,” Shane mutters through gritted teeth. Ilya barely understands, but sees where Shane's gaze is trained.

The men had tossed his clothes into the corner, his boots and socks scattered. Ilya nods, rushing to grab them, sees the handcuff key on the table, and grabs that too.

“Okay, okay. We get out now,” he says, as he moves to unlock Shane's right arm from behind the chair. “Can you stand?”

The cuffs unclick, and Ilya can see the tension in Shane's shoulder release as the man slowly brings his arm around with a hiss.

“I...I can try,” Shane gasps, breath labored. “M' shoulder...dislocated.”

Ilya's eyes sting, but he tries to focus his attention on Shane. He doesn't want to look away, scared he might lose him again.

"Okay," Ilya breathes out, still not touching Shane, but inspecting him from head to toe.
"Okay, we figure it out."

There are footsteps. Shouts. Gunfire echoing above. Ilya can hear his men pushing into rooms, clearing corners. He tries to dress Shane as delicately as possible, slipping his pants and shoes back on so that it will be easier for him to walk across the dirtied floor.

They're standing so close, Ilya can feel the feverish heat radiating off of Shane, the steady tremor coming from his body. He tries to ignore the way his skin and hair brush against Ilya, the way his good arm digs into his shoulder as he helps him pull up his pants. It all just reminds him of the horrible actions taken against him over the past few days. He stops at the shirt- there's no way Shane's left arm is going to be able to move into it.

"We need to stabilize your shoulder. Wrap your shirt around like sling. Is going to hurt." Ilya says, watching as Shane holds his breath, trying to force the thought of pain out of his mind. He nods once and slowly starts to tuck his left arm closer to his side, bending it at the elbow.

Ilya watches with shaky hands as Shane groans, eyes squeezed shut, waiting for Ilya to wrap the makeshift sling around him, hissing as Ilya ties the shirt around him as tight and unmoving as he can without being forceful.

"I know, I'm sorry, моя любовь," Ilya says softly. He can't help himself, he leans forward and presses a soft kiss on Shane's hairline, the only place that looks like it wouldn't be painful.

He likes to think that the way Shane squeezes his shoulder is reassurance, that he's understood. That he's reciprocating.

"Okay, let's leave now," Ilya says, with a huff, grabbing a gun and pulling out the small communication device Kenji had handed to him before the raid.

"Kenji, I have the Wakagashira. We need extraction," Ilya says, shifting so he is on Shane's right side. "Lean on me, моя любовь," he mutters as the device beeps. Shane's weight shifts as he tries to sling his good arm around Ilya's shoulders. He shakes his head. Ilya's height is making him stretch too far, so he settles on gripping the shoulder closest to his right arm.

"Copy. We've started clearing a path from the outside. It might take us a minute to get to you."

"My men are closer, I just need back up. And medical. The Wakagashira looks ugly," Ilya tries at a joke, feeling Shane's breath come out in what he thinks is an attempt at a laugh. He grips his shoulder even tighter.

"Asshole," he rasps out. Ilya smiles faintly as he tries to wrap his arm low around Shane's back.

“Okay, let's move.”

Shane tries. His legs tremble and his vision tilts. He swallows, forcing his feet to stay under him. He can feel the way Ilya's arm tenses across his lower back, a light, warm grip on his left hip.

“I'm okay. Just don't let go,” he mutters, breathing harshly as he tries another step.

“Never. I got you, I kill anyone who looks at you wrong,” Ilya says gruffly, adjusting the gun in his hand.

Shane gives a cracked, miserable sound.

They move.

And the facility fights them for every step.

Ilya is greeted in the corridor by most of his men, who had taken cover around the corner like Ilya had. They explained that the other team had fallen back into layered defenses and had set up traps that were making it hard to advance.

Ilya knew that the Yakuza were making their way down and would eventually meet them in the middle, but with the way the other faction was boxing them in, he didn't think they could wait it out. He sent his men forward, warning them to be careful as they slowly pushed their way through.

He loses a man in the corridor when a wire-triggered explosive tears through the concrete and shrapnel pierces through flesh. Blood sprays the wall, but Ilya doesn't stop. He covers Shane best he can, gun out, scanning their surroundings.

As they turn the corner, Shane stumbles and catches himself on a wall, leaving a smear of red where his hand drags.

A man appears at the end of the hallway, rifle in hand. Ilya notices it too slow. Shane reacts first. It's not fast or graceful, it's desperate.

He throws himself sideways, slamming into Ilya and knocking them both down behind the opposite wall as bullets chew through the spot where Ilya's head once was.

Shane hits the ground hard, pain tearing through him. He makes a sound, low and involuntary, almost animal, his eyes scrunched tight, hands clenched into his side.

Ilya freezes.

For a second, he sees Shane not as the unbreakable blade of the Yakuza, but as a human body that can be shattered.

And the rage that rises in him is so enormous it feels holy.

He steps out and fires, two shots- one to the chest and head. The rifleman drops.

Ilya grabs Shane as delicately as he can, hauling him up.

“Idiot,” he snarls, voice breaking.

Shane swallows and meets his gaze.

“Could say the same. Stepping out like that. He could’ve killed you.”

“Not unless you kill me first,” Ilya grumbles, his throat tightening. He settles next to Shane again as they continue down the corridor.

They finally break out of the faction's defense, meeting Kenji in the middle with a row of Yakuza flanking each of his sides.

When his eyes land on Shane, they widen for a fraction, “ひどい, (*terrible/omg*)” he mutters before he’s shouting orders at some of the men to his left. They’re rushing off in a matter of seconds, most likely to get medical help.

Kenji approaches, taking in Shane’s appearance, before looking at Ilya holding him close to his side.

“I can take it from here, Brigadier,” he says with clipped professionalism. Ilya’s body tenses. He doesn’t want to let Shane go. He turns to look at the injured man in his grasp, sees the way Shane’s looking back at him, and swallows hard.

He glances at the line of Yakuza still standing there, watching their leader and the Bratva Prince interact, and back at the hall they just came from, hearing the sounds of a gunfight still going on below.

He lets go, Kenji quickly taking his place. Shane’s eyes widen faintly. “What are you doing?”

Ilya’s smile is not kind.

“I’m making sure they don’t do this again.”

And he walks back in.

He doesn’t leave survivors who can talk, doesn’t leave leadership breathing. He doesn’t leave the faction intact. He decimates it down to the bone- making sure names are extracted, phones are seized, hard drives removed, bodies disposed in ways that will not be found.

And by the end, the facility is quiet. Not peaceful- dead.

Ilya returns, soaked in blood that isn’t his, covered in cuts and bruises that look like they should hurt, but he's grinning. He looks satisfied, and Shane looks up at him with glazed eyes, finally understanding the sheer force that is Ilya Rozanov.

He watches as one of the Bratva men hands Ilya a cigarette, lighter already outstretched, watches as the Russian takes a long drag, and exhales deeply. He watches as he flicks the cigarette into the entrance of the facility, and watches as the surface ignites in a fiery inferno.

Ilya turns, a glint in his eyes, and stares straight at Shane, his lips curving into a smile.

“Drama queen,” Shane mutters, hearing Kenji exhale sharply, in what might be considered a laugh. “I tol you he bur-” Shane’s words slur as he speaks to no one in particular.

His eyes close, and the world goes dark.

Shane doesn’t remember much about the transport. His body gives up when it’s safe enough to.

He’s loaded into a vehicle, maybe an ambulance, no sirens, public routes, or visible panic.

He remembers the feel of hands touching his body, an oxygen mask, lights, and Kenji. A medical facility- Yakuza-owned- that’s quiet and secure.

He hears voices. Japanese, Russian, English. Maybe he’s hallucinating.

When Shane wakes again, it’s to low lights and sterile air. His whole body is flaring in pain, throat sore, ribs feeling like they’ve been rearranged. He can barely open his eyes because of how swollen his face feels. He knows he’s probably bandaged from head to toe, his arm is in a sling, and his index finger is splinted in a finger cast.

He blinks at the ceiling. Someone is shifting.

It’s Kenji.

Relief flickers across Kenji’s face and is immediately buried. “You’re awake,” he states. “You were in bad shape.”

Shane’s voice is rough. He’s parched. “I know.”

Kenji’s eyes flick to the door, and Shane follows the glance. Something tightens in his chest.

“The Oyabun is here to call a meeting.”

Shane’s brow furrows. “Now?”

Kenji nods, almost pained. Shane exhales, closes his eyes briefly.

“Help me sit up,” he murmurs. Kenji does.

Every movement hurts, but he doesn’t let the pain show. Not here. Not when weakness can become leverage.

The Oyabun enters, silently, immaculate as always.

Her gaze lands on Shane and holds.

For a moment, Shane sees the old Yuna in her eyes. The one who had gently kissed his scraped knees when he fell as a child, the one who cooked him warm, comforting meals when he was sick. The one who had spent hours teaching him the poise and elegance of a traditional sword dance with a carefree smile on her face and laughed when he would pout, frustrated after dropping the practice blade.

The one who was around before his father was murdered, and she had been forced to carry the weight of a hardened organization on her shoulders.

For a moment, Shane saw the flicker of the old Yuna across her face, before it disappeared.

The stone-cold gaze was back. She looked at him and nodded.

“You’re alive,” she said. Her mouth tightened faintly, her eyes glancing around the room. “The faction is completely gone. The broker network, decimated. The issue has been resolved.”

Shane nods slowly, the tension in his neck almost unbearable.

Yuna’s gaze sharpens. “The intel suggested you were taken because someone believed you could be used as leverage.” She doesn’t ask it as a question, merely states what she knows.

Shane’s throat tightens. He doesn’t say anything as he meets her eyes.

It’s silent in the room- tense, as Shane feels Yuna stare into him. Feels like she is staring into his core. He knows she already understands what transpired. Already knows how he feels.

I warned you. Her gaze and posture seem to suggest.

She stares and stares, the air seeming to have been sucked out of the room. The only indication that Shane wasn’t frozen in time was the faint beeps and whirs of the medical equipment monitoring him.

After what felt like ages, Yuna exhales, almost silently, and turns to Kenji, who is now by the door.

“Let him in,” she says.

Shane’s pulse spikes.

No.

Not here, not while he looks like-

The door opens.

And Ilya Rozanov steps into the room.

He looks like he hasn’t slept in days.

He's cleaned up, hair still damp from a shower. His curls are tighter, pushed back from his face. He's no longer bloody, but his hands and face show signs of wear. Both hands are wrapped in stark white bandages. Shane's sure they must also cover his arms, but he can't see them from under his brown leather jacket. A bruise blooms along his jawline, and a cut has been sealed above his left eyebrow. His eyes- those pale, sharp eyes- are too honest. They hold too much emotion. His posture is defensive, his hands clenched at his sides.

The Oyabun keeps her tone neutral as she stares at him.

"Brigadier," she starts. "Thank you for returning my Wakagashira."

Ilya's jaw flexes, Shane notices the way his shoulders tense.

He bows his head the barest fraction. It's all a performance.

"Of course," he says, voice controlled.

Yuna's gaze flicks between them once, sharp as a knife.

"This meet regards consequences."

She looks at Shane.

"When you recover, I expect you to resume your position fully."

There's a heavy lump in Shane's throat. "Yes, Oyabun," he croaks out, wincing at how shaky his voice sounds.

Yuna's eyes linger on him a second longer before she gives an almost imperceptible nod and turns on her heels to leave. Kenji follows, the door closes with a click behind him.

Once again, the air is too quiet.

Shane and Ilya are alone.

For a second, neither of them moves.

Shane is suddenly aware of everything around him. The pull of the IV taped to his arm, the way the sling is biting into the back of his neck, the ache that has taken up residence behind his ribs like a second pulse. He's aware of the antiseptic in the air, the hum of the machines, the faint buzz of the lights.

He's aware- too sharply- of Ilya standing in front of him like he doesn't trust the room not to swallow Shane whole the moment he blinks.

Ilya's face is controlled, his posture stiff, like he's putting on a performance for a room of people- that he's the Brigadier.

His eyes tell a different story.

They're too bright, too raw, like he's been holding a scream in his throat for days and has decided violence is the only language that fits.

And for a moment, just a moment, Shane sees it.

The fear.

It's not loud or dramatic. Just buried deep in Ilya's eyes like something he had to claw down with both hands.

"You look," Ilya says slowly, voice raw, "Like shit."

Shane's mouth twitches. Even that hurts.

"Thanks, I try."

Ilya exhales something that might be a laugh, the tension in his shoulders releases for a moment, relief edged with something dangerously close to grief.

His gaze moves over him clinically at first. The stitches, bandages, bruising. Then, it softens fractionally.

"Fuck," he murmurs, "ты жив...you are alive."

Shane swallows, really wishing he could have some water.

Ilya seems to notice, his posture shifts as he sighs. The pressed look on his face still holds as he walks to the right side of Shane's bed and reaches for the pitcher on the table. He pours some water into a small cup for Shane to sip from.

"You shouldn't be here," Shane rasps, because of course he can't just sit there and be grateful that Ilya wants to see him.

The Russian lets out a short breath through his nose.

"Yes, well...the Oyabun requested my presence." Ilya holds up the cup of water to Shane's lips, plastic straw tilted towards him. He murmurs something in Russian that Shane can't quite hear or understand, but sounds like he's cracking a joke or being sarcastic. "Бапе Королевское Высочество" (*your royal highness*).

Shane doesn't say anything as he leans forward to accept the water, sipping diligently from the straw. The relief feels instant, and his eyes flutter shut for a moment as he drinks.

"Thank you," he says, once he's finished. Ilya merely nods before setting the empty cup on the side table and turning back to look at Shane.

Before he can stop himself, he's slowly reaching up, brushing his thumb, light as he can, across the only space on Shane's face that isn't bruised or swollen.

Shane tries not to let it show how much Ilya's touch affects him, how much he melts into the feeling of his warm, calloused fingers against his skin.

"You look terrible," Ilya says softly.

"You look worse," Shane replies.

There's a cut on Ilya's brow. Bruising on his knuckles. A faint stiffness in the way he holds his left arm.

Ilya sucks in a breath, his brows pulling like he's thinking. "Mm, no. You are worse. You look basically ugly."

Shane lets out a breath that could be a laugh, wincing immediately at the pain. Ilya notices, but doesn't say anything.

"Fuck you."

The smile on Ilya's face looks conflicted.

They sit there in silence for a moment, staring, memorizing each other's faces. Shane knows the moment can't last, but cherishes how normal everything feels.

Ilya's fingers move, light as they thumb over Shane's cheek again. He looks pained as he sees the flicker in Shane's eyes, the way he flinches a fraction.

"моя любовь (*my love*)," Ilya whispers. "You lost weight."

"I was *unconscious*, you asshole."

Ilya's mouth curves faintly.

They're staring at one another again, and Shane isn't really sure what he should say. He has so many thoughts, and yet, nothing comes forth. He takes a moment to just study Ilya, looking more casual in a black tee, brown leather jacket, and dark denim than the regular business attire of loud printed silk button-downs and blazers he usually wears.

In some ways, Shane could picture how young and normal he looked. Like the weight of a whole organization didn't belong on his shoulders. Who would Ilya be if he were just a normal guy? Who would Shane be? Would they have been allowed to lov-

Shane breaks eye contact first- he always does- and clears his throat.

"They're going to talk," Shane says.

"I don't care," Ilya answers immediately. His English cracking on the edge of emotion. Then he catches himself, shoulders squaring as if remembering that caring is a weapon other people can use. "I care...about you. I just...I won't let anyone hurt you again."

Shane's gaze drops to Ilya's bandaged hands, the bruising along his jaw, and the cut above his brow.

"Maybe you should care about yourself first," Shane says, only half joking.

Ilya's mouth twitches, "Ты. (*you*)" He's shaking his head slightly, eyes turned away from Shane to hide what he's feeling.

But Shane still notices the glassy look and the nervous bob of Ilya's Adam's apple.

Shane's breath shudders, shallow and sharp. A lot of it is pain, but some of it is emotion. His eyes are burning, and his throat and chest feel tight.

He hates that it does that, that his body still betrays him even now, after everything.

He forces his voice flat. "I'm alive."

And that brings Ilya back to him.

The Russian presses up against the bed. He's slow, careful, like he's approaching something skittish. His hand lifts- pauses- as if he's waiting for permission.

Shane's uninjured hand is trembling slightly against the sheet. Not from fear or weakness, but after days of pain, his nerves are just...loud.

Still, he lets Ilya take it.

Ilya's fingers wrap around his with a firmness that feels like he's anchoring himself to something real, something that didn't disappear. For a moment, Ilya just holds him.

Then, his voice comes out low and dangerous, trembling at the edges.

"When I saw you-" Ilya stops, jaw clenched hard. He swallows once. "I thought..."

Shane's throat tightens, he tries not to feel the heaviness in his chest. He doesn't need Ilya to finish his sentence, he knows what he thought.

Instead, he slowly brings their hands up to his lips, pressing a light kiss to Ilya's bandaged knuckles. "You came for me."

Ilya's eyes snap up, they're burning bright.

"Of course I came," he says, and there's no teasing in it. He's not being arrogant, just telling the blunt truth. "You think I would leave you there?"

Shane looks away because the intensity is too much and because he's tired and can't afford to let his face do what his chest is doing.

"I warned them," Shane whispers. "I told them you burn."

Ilya's grip tightens, careful not to hurt Shane, but tight enough that he feels the tremor in Ilya's hand.

"I did," Ilya says softly.

The words are simple, but they mean everything to Shane. He swallows.

"And that," Shane says, voice rough, "Is exactly why this can't work. Why we can't."

Ilya cuts in. Immediate. Sharp. "Don't."

The single syllable lands like a hand over Shane's mouth. He blinks, startled.

Ilya's gaze is hard, not cruel, but protective.

"Not now," Ilya says, voice low and controlled by force. "You don't get to make plans while you are broken."

Shane's jaw flexes. Pain flares, but he ignores it. He almost pulls his hands out of Ilya's, but the other's grip is strong.

"I'm not broken," Shane bites out automatically.

Ilya's expression flickers- anger, pain, something too tender to name- then softens.

"Sorry. Bad English word. You are injured," he corrects, rubbing his free hand over his face. "And exhausted. You are going to rest."

Shane stares at their intertwined hands.

"You don't get to order me around," Shane murmurs.

Ilya's mouth curves up, "Mmm, I think you like it."

Shane's gaze snaps back up. He presses his lips closed, debating between retorting or letting Ilya see the heat flush his face. He watches as Ilya leans in slightly, voice turning rougher, more honest.

"I just watch you disappear," he says, the words are quiet, but they shake anyway. "You think I'm going to stand here and listen to you talk about staying away? Because what? Is less risk? Is more logical?"

Shane's chest tightens. The monitor beside him blips a little faster, betraying him. Ilya's eyes flick to it, then back to Shane.

"See? Even your machine is telling on you," he murmurs, half teasing, half...wrecked.

Shane's throat tightens painfully, it feels like someone is crushing his ribs all over again.

He tries again, softer, more careful. "Ilya, I-"

Ilya flinches.

And it's then that Shane realizes he's never said the man's name outloud.

His mouth clamps shut, as all the words he knows he should say fizzle out. The look Ilya gives him, the way the words struck him somewhere tender and raw, Shane can't continue.

Ilya leans closer, resting his forehead against Shane's, careful of his injuries as his free hand slides up to the back of Shane's neck, cupping the base of his skull. He's careful like this is the most fragile thing he's ever held. Shane's eyes flutter closed.

"Don't," Ilya whispers.

Shane's breath catches. "Don't what?"

"Don't say it like is problem you can solve by pushing me away," Ilya murmurs, voice breaking around the edges. "Don't say it like is something you can just cut out of your body and survive."

Shane's eyes sting, he keeps them shut.

He hates the burn. Hates that the feeling of Ilya this close makes him want to cave.

He keeps his voice steady by force. "It *is* a problem."

Ilya's laugh is small and bitter. "Yes."

Shane swallows. "It's going to get us killed."

Ilya stills. And Shane finally opens his eyes to see those piercing blue ones sharpen bright with something dangerous.

"Maybe," he admits. "But not tonight."

Shane's jaw tightens. He tries to ignore the way Ilya's thumb is lightly caressing the back of his head. "That's not-"

"Not tonight," Ilya repeats, firmer, more insistent, almost pleading. "We can argue when you can stand without shaking."

Shane's breath shudders. Ilya's hand in Shane's strokes his knuckles. The warmth of his palm on the back of Shane's head has him practically swimming.

"You are alive," Ilya says, like he's forcing the words into both of them. "I have you."

Shane tries to speak but finds the words too difficult.

Ilya's voice drops into Russian again, softer, like he can't stop it when he's scared.

"Я думала, ты умрешь, Shane, моя любовь, но ты не можешь умереть." (*I thought you would die, Shane, my love, you cannot die*)

Shane's eyes close for half a second. When he opens them, his lashes are wet. This is the first time he's heard Ilya say his name like that, and while he doesn't understand much of the phrasing, the few words he can pick out tell him how much he needs Ilya to know.

"I didn't die," he whispers, gripping Ilya's hand tighter.

"I know," the Russian replies. His voice breaks anyway.

A silence stretches between them, thick, intimate, full of everything they don't dare to say outloud. Then Ilya bends and presses a careful kiss to Shane's lips. It's barely any pressure, but Shane feels it everywhere.

"You can hate me later," Ilya says, pulling back just enough to look at him. His eyes are fierce. "You can threaten me. Call me reckless. Call me asshole."

Shane exhales shakily. "You *are* a reckless asshole."

Ilya's mouth twitches. "Да." then softer, "But you will live first."

Shane swallows. The logic in him wants to fight, but the part of him that has been bleeding for days is too tired.

He gives a single, small nod.

Ilya's shoulders loosen by a fraction, like he's been holding his breath the entire time.

He leans in and kisses Shane's forehead, quick and careful, before his face suddenly resets. He releases Shane's hand, slowly, as if letting go physically hurts.

The Brigadier is sliding back into place like armor.

At the door, Ilya pauses. He doesn't look back at first, but when he finally does, his eyes are still too honest.

"Take care of yourself, моя любовь (*my love*)," he says quietly.

Shane's eyes burn, and the lump in his throat has grown bigger.

He nods once.

And Ilya leaves.

Shane lies still in the sterile quiet, pain humming under his skin, Ilya's warmth already fading from his knuckles.

He stares at the ceiling.

He tells himself he won't make decisions while he's weak and doped up on pain medication, that he won't plan while he's still shaking.

He tells himself a hundred things.

But beneath all of it, the truth still sits cold and unyielding.

Ilya Rozanov didn't just come and get him.

Ilya Rozanov burned part of his organization *down* for him.

And Shane can't unlearn what that means.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhhhhhhhhhh

how are we feeling after that intense chapter haha this actually took so long to write im dedddd

i hope the graphic nature of the torture scenes wasn't too off putting, but i really wanted to show Shane's resilience even through pain

thanks for reading!

Chapter 8: Ultimatum

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya struggle with agency. Loyalties are tested, ultimatums are given.

Chapter Notes

hiiii im back with another lengthy chapter, the angst just keeps getting angstier lol

warning: mentions/depictions of ptsd

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

Recovery is a slow process that doesn't yield linear results.

To Shane, it feels like learning how to inhabit a body that betrayed you, and then asking it to carry you anyway.

Shane has lived most of his life inside control. Inside routine, inside the quiet conviction that if he plans enough, trains enough, anticipates enough, he can keep the world from touching him in ways that matter.

Now, the world has its grip on him.

It's not visible to other people, he doesn't show it in places where anyone can look, but he feels it under his skin all the time like static. Like a hum he can't turn off.

The compound smells the same as it always has. Gun oil, disinfectant, the sweet aroma of the Oyabun's garden, tatami, and old wood. It's all familiar, safe in theory.

He keeps waiting for the comfort to land.

It doesn't.

The first time he steps into the training hall after discharge, the floorboards creak under his weight, and his body flinches like the sound is a threat.

He hates himself for it immediately.

So, he does what he always does when he doesn't feel like himself. He works, he pushes, he endures.

Physio feels like humiliation to Shane.

The therapist is a quiet man who never asks questions outside of being professional. He knows who he works for and how dangerous Shane can be.

He tightens a strap around Shane's chest and tells him to breathe into resistance. Shane inhales.

Halfway through, his ribs catch, the pain is hard, a sharp refusal that makes his chest seize as if the air has decided it doesn't belong to him. The sensation is wrong in a way his brain recognizes before his body can pretend it's fine.

For a fraction of a second, he's back in that chair, already shaking and shivering, exhausted to the bone, pain radiating everywhere, waiting for the next blow to come.

He forces the inhale the rest of the way, jaw clenched, breath trembling at the peak.

"Don't force the last part," the therapist says, watching him without judgment.

Shane holds his breath until his vision flickers at the edges. "That's where the weakness is."

The therapist blinks once. "Or where your ribs break again."

Shane exhales sharper than he intends, then swallows down the flare of rage that follows it. Rage at the therapist for being right, rage at his body for making "right" feel like betrayal.

Grip work comes next. Squeezing rubber, rollers, and finger flexions. His broken index finger is still splinted most days, but he feels it still- the dull ache that pulses whenever he tries to make a full fist. The bone healed crooked enough that it changed the geometry of his hand.

He hates that he can see the crookedness- it's proof. He hates it because every time he notices it, he thinks about pliers and a calm voice and the wet, impossible sound of the bone giving in.

He tightens his grip until his forearm shakes.

He sees Kenji watching from the edge of the hall, arms crossed, expression deliberately neutral. Kenji never stares, never asks 'How are you?' like he expects an honest answer.

Kenji waits until Shane's hand trembles too hard to hide, then steps closer and says quietly. "If you push too hard and hurt yourself again, I'll have to explain it."

Shande doesn't look up. "To whom?"

Kenji's gaze flicks to the doorway, then back to Shane's shaking hand. "To her."

Yuna. The Oyabun. His mother, in every way that matters and every way that doesn't.

Shane's jaw tightens. The tendon in his neck aches where dark purple bruising had once bloomed- the skin there still remembers fingers, pressure, control. He swallows and resets his posture the way he was taught as a child.

Shoulders down, spine straight, face blank.

"I won't break," he says.

Kenji's eyes soften, barely. "You already have," he responds, not unkindly. "You've just survived it."

Shane's mouth twitches. It's not a smile, more like a flinch disguised as one.

He returns to breathing drills and upper arm stretches until the last inch of air stops feeling like an obstacle in the road.

It happens on a day that should be easy.

A day where his ribs only ache instead of scream, and where his shoulder doesn't click when he lifts his arm to wash his hair. It's a day where his body feels like it belongs to him again- for at least a few hours.

He locks the bathroom door anyway, not because anyone will come in, but because his body believes locked doors are the difference between safety and helplessness.

He quickly undresses, avoiding the mirrors, not wanting to see the multitude of cuts starting to scar over his chest and legs. The ugly yellow-green tinge his skin has taken on, left over from the dark bruising his body is still healing from.

He turns on the water, letting it warm up and steam the room before stepping under the spray. The heat hits his skin, and tension in his shoulders loosens by a fraction. He closes his eyes.

For a moment, it's just water.

Just steam.

Just the sound of it.

Then the stream runs over his face.

Not even fully, just a sheet of water across his mouth and nose as he tips his head back.

His lungs revolt.

The reaction is instant. His ribs seize, and the old terror kicks through him like electricity. The memory of a wet cloth pressed down, water forcing itself past his lips, lungs panicking on air that won't come- the thin line between drowning and not.

His hands slam against the tile, balance thrown. His throat works, dragging in air too fast and coughs hard enough that pain shoots through his ribs and blooms behind his eyes.

He stands there shaking under hot water like it's cold. His brain screams at him to get out.

Get out. Get out. Get out.

Shane stays planted. He stares at the grout lines on the wall because counting patterns is better than counting panic. He forces his breathing into increments.

In for four, hold for two. Out for six. He repeats this over and over until the blood rushing to his ears doesn't sound so loud anymore.

The panic doesn't vanish, but it retreats, sulking like an animal that didn't get what it wanted.

He turns his face away from the spray and lets the water run down his back instead. Pressing his forehead to the tile, he stands there until his hands stop trembling.

He hates it.

When he finally turns the water off, he realizes that his shoulder has crept upward again, as if bracing for impact. His ribs are sore. He dries off slowly, methodically, like he's handling someone else's body. Like he's learning where he's allowed to touch himself without flinching.

He unintentionally catches his reflection in the mirror. The bruises are an ugly yellow and green, his cuts are mostly healed- some still red, some already presented as pale lines. His face looks almost like Shane again.

Almost.

But his eyes look different. Not haunted, but wary.

Like he's always listening for footsteps.

They don't text anymore. They don't call. Anything that creates a digital footprint is treated like a liability.

Because if the city is watching (and it is), then their love isn't private. It's a pattern. It's a weakness.

The contact comes folded inside the lining of a suit Shane had dry-cleaned the week before. It's hand-delivered by a cleaner who never makes eye contact.

Shane memorizes the time, location, and the message Ilya leaves about staggering their arrivals.

He reads it and burns it in the sink.

He tells himself that if he follows protocol, he's not being reckless.

They've been rotating locations more frequently now. The apartment above the tailor shop is long gone. Too exposed, too known. They rotate through neutral properties- places that don't belong to either side and therefore belong to no one. A condo under corporate filings, a studio that looks abandoned, a storage space that smells like dust and old insulation.

Tonight, it's a corporate condo owned through three shell companies and a real estate firm that technically doesn't exist. It's the kind of place where no one expects blood.

Or devotion.

Shane arrives first, because of course he does.

He sweeps the stairwell camera, checks the balcony sightlines, makes sure the hallway feed has been hacked and looped. He checks all the vents because paranoia now sounds like logic.

He tells himself the tightness in his ribs is healing pain, not anticipation.

When the lock turns, his hand still moves toward the weapon under the counter before he recognizes the knock pattern they'd made and agreed on months ago.

The door opens.

Ilya steps inside.

For a second, it's silent- tense. Ilya is staring at him. Not clinically or hungrily.

Confirming.

They've been at this for a few weeks, keeping their meet-ups brief. It's never sex, mainly just talking and some kissing, once Shane's jaw was no longer in pain anytime he moved it.

He's tried to initiate something many times before, but Ilya always pulls back, always gives him a small smile 'later, when you're better' he says, gently caressing his face.

Shane can't tell if the tight feeling in his chest is from frustration or complete adoration for Ilya, being more concerned about Shane's recovery than bending him over the couch and taking him.

But tonight, Shane feels stronger, and the air feels heavier. Thicker, with anticipation.

"You're staring," Shane says, because if he doesn't break the silence, it might just swallow him alive.

Ilya exhales, almost unsteady. "You are standing."

Shane almost rolls his eyes. Almost. "I've been standing for weeks."

"Да," Ilya says softly. "But not in front of me."

The pang in Shane's chest grows.

"You look...more alive," Ilya adds, a faint attempt at teasing.

"I'm flattered."

"You should be, ugly is gone."

There's a hint of playfulness in the air, Shane's lips turned up in what can be characterized as a smile, before it starts to fade. Something heavier replacing it.

Ilya steps forward slowly, deliberately, like he's waiting for Shane to run.

Shane's body betrays him. A flash of dread, the instinct that expects hands to seize him from behind.

Ilya sees it, because of course he does.

He doesn't comment. He just closes the distance, cupping Shane's jaw gently, thumb brushing along the scar at his cheek like he's checking it's still there.

"You're here," Ilya murmurs.

Shane's throat tightens, he's practically melting into the touch. "I'm here."

Ilya exhales, it's shaky. Then, because he always tries to reach for humor to cut through the tension, "You still smell like hospital." He lifts his eyebrows slightly. "Very sexy."

Shane doesn't try to stop the snort from escaping, a small smile gracing his lips, as his shoulders sag from the release of tension. He notices the slight triumphant look on Ilya's face. It ignites something warm in his chest.

Ilya's eyes flick over him, taking note. The stiffness in his shoulder, the careful breathing, the way posture tries to masquerade as strength. He tries to hold Shane's attention, but the other keeps flicking his eyes around the room, as if looking back at Ilya is too much.

Ilya's hands, still cupping Shane's cheeks, pull him closer. He's gentle but firm. "Сладкий (*sweetheart*), look at me."

Shane exhales. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. His hands come up to rest on Ilya's waist. He squeezes as he stares into Ilya's impossibly piercing blue eyes.

"You're *here*," Ilya repeats, rougher now.

Shane tries to swallow the heavy feeling in his throat and chest.

"I'm here," he murmurs as he grips Ilya's hips tighter.

Ilya responds by pulling him in, pressing their foreheads together, thumb tracing light patterns into Shane's cheeks. The silence stretches, not empty, but full of words left unsaid as

they stand there being present with one another.

“I hate them,” Ilya finally speaks.

“They’re dead.”

“Mmm, I can still hate them.”

Something heavier than fear settles in Shane’s chest. “You can’t keep doing that,” he mutters.

“Doing what?”

“Burning. For me.”

Ilya’s gaze sharpens. “I will never stop burning for you, Shane, моя любовь.” (*my love*)

Shane inhales sharply. His ribs ache, his lungs feel sore. It’s grounding. A reminder.

“That,” he whispers, “Is the problem.”

Ilya exhales through his nose, “Yes. I am problem.”

Then, he kisses him.

It’s slow at first, careful, like he’s checking for fractures under the skin. Like he’s trying to apologize for everything without saying sorry. Shane kisses back harder than he means to, his hands shaking slightly as they grasp at Ilya’s waist. He’s missed this. Missed the feeling of Ilya, missed the taste of him, missed his scent. A small moan escapes his lips, and Ilya tenses against him.

Ilya makes a low sound in Russian, not translatable, but intimate enough to settle under Shane’s skin. He starts to guide them backward, gently tugging Shane along as they slowly make their way to the bed. Shane is practically having to chase after Ilya’s lips, letting out a small huff of exasperation.

“You’re acting like I’m-” Shane starts.

“Alive,” Ilya interrupts, voice fierce. “You are alive. Let me feel it.”

That breaks something open.

“Come,” Ilya says more softly, motioning to the bed. “Sit.”

Shane almost refuses on reflex.

He remembers the chair, the straps, the forced helplessness. Choosing to sit now because Ilya asks feels different.

He sits.

Ilya kneels in front of him without ceremony. It isn’t submission, but confirmation.

Shane's breath catches.

"I need to touch you where they didn't," Ilya says quietly, as he slides his hands up Shane's thighs, almost reverently.

Shane's stomach twists, his heart feels like it's beating out of his chest. He should say something sharp.

"You don't have to make it sound so poetic."

Ilya's mouth twitches. "I'm Russian. Is illness."

Shane rolls his eyes, and the motion tugs at healing bruises, reminding him of what all this means.

Ilya notices immediately. He becomes careful after that, not timid- never timid- but attentive.

He takes Shane's hands first, turns them over, and presses his mouth to the center of his palms. Then each knuckle, and the back of each hand. His gaze lingers on the sight of the crooked left index finger.

"You're warm," he murmurs, almost disbelieving.

His hands slide up Shane's thighs slowly. He maps the line of Shane's hips, his waist, his torso, and his ribs. He slowly removes Shane's shirt in the process, taking in the sight of the faintly scared and tinged skin in front of him. After the shirt is gone, he travels his hands back down the same way, avoiding too much pressure on spots that look especially tender.

When he presses his mouth to the curve of Shane's side, Shane's breath stutters, head thrown back, eyes closed, his hands gripping the bedsheets on either side of him.

Ilya is immediately looking up at him. "Too much?"

Shane's jaw flexes as he shakes his head once. "Keep going."

Ilya's gaze darkens into heat, devotion, and restraint.

He continues to undress Shane, like he's unwrapping something delicate, hands and lips finding purchase on any surface of his skin that he can. Every scar, every faint bruise shadow, every place Shane's skin still remembers.

When Shane flinches, Ilya stops immediately. Not offended or impatient, just still.

"Does it hurt?" Ilya asks quietly, thumbs gently tracing circles into his hips.

Shane exhales. "Everything hurts."

Ilya's expression softens. "I will go slowly. Gentle."

Shane lets out a rough breath. "You? Gentle? Slow?"

“I can be disciplined.”

“I think you’re actually physically incapable.”

“Liar,” Ilya murmurs, kissing the curve of Shane’s hip. “I’m doing it right now.”

Shane's jaw is clenched. He swallows, doesn't say anything, because it's true.

It isn't just sex. It's proof.

Proof that his body isn't a tool someone can break. Proof that he can be touched without bracing for punishment.

Ilya kisses him until Shane stops waiting for impact. Until the tension in his shoulder eases, until the shallow, guarded breathing deepens.

When Shane tries to swallow a sound, Ilya presses his mouth to Shane's throat and says softly. “You don't have to hide from me.”

It's devout, but also starving. Shane understands it in the way Ilya grips with restraint that feels like it will cost him. How the Russian slips from his mouth when the emotion gets too sharp to translate.

When Ilya presses him back onto the bed, it's with steadiness, not force. Their bodies tangle and align carefully.

The heat builds gradually, breath thickening, hands growing less cautious but never careless. It isn't frantic, but grounding. Ilya takes his time, making sure Shane knows and feels how much he cares.

When Shane arches into him, pulls him close, it's instinct.

When Ilya murmurs something low and possessive, it vibrates against Shane's skin.

Shane shudders.

Not from pain. From relief.

They move slowly, in unison, testing what heals instead of harms. When Shane's breath catches too sharply, the emotion too raw, Ilya pauses immediately.

“Look at me,” he whispers.

Shane does.

“You're safe. I have you.”

Shane hates how much he needs to hear it. Hates that his body believes it.

And for the first time since the chair and the water and the restraints, he lets himself lean into someone instead of bracing against the world.

Afterward, Ilya curls carefully against him, arm draped over Shane's waist like it belongs there. He rests his head over Shane's heart.

He listens, as if confirming it still beats.

Shane stares at the ceiling, feeling warmth at his back, breath at his neck. For a few minutes, he can almost believe that they're the only two who matter.

Then, the thoughts return, quiet and sharp.

Someone took you because of him, because of this. Someone will do it again.

Shane closes his eyes.

If this is leverage, they're already dead.

And yet.

He pulls Ilya closer.

Sleep doesn't arrive neatly. It hasn't for weeks.

Shane drifts for what might be an hour- long enough for his body to relax- and then he jerks awake like someone has yanked him back by the spine. He sits up abruptly, pulling the sheets down with him, cold air hitting his naked chest.

He's gasping for air that isn't there, ribs clamp down like a cage. His hands jerk, pushing instinctively, violently. For a second, he's in the chair again, wet and cold and helpless.

"Shane," Ilya says immediately, voice thick with sleep, but awake the moment he feels Shane move.

Shane's voice is raw as he tries to catch his breath. "Don't touch me-"

The words escape before he can stop them.

Ilya freezes, hands midair. He's not offended or angry. Just still.

Shane's chest heaves. He hates himself instantly for the reaction, for the way fear makes him cruel.

Ilya's voice stays low as his hand slowly comes down. "Okay."

No argument, no ego. He's just there.

Shane forces his breath down, slow and brutal. He draws in deep, ragged breaths and swallows hard.

"I'm fine," he says automatically, because it's the only script he has. "I'm fine."

Ilya's laugh is small, humorless. "No."

Shane turns his head. "I'm sorry... I-i didn't mean-"

"I know what you mean," Ilya interrupts softly. "It's okay, take your time."

The words crack something inside Shane. And although he thought that what they've been doing for weeks since the incident was proof enough, something in that moment, in the way Ilya allows him his space but reassures him he's there, breaks his walls down even further.

Ilya shifts slightly on the bed, not closer, but angled so Shane can see him if he wants.

"You don't have to be strong right now," Ilya says quietly.

Shane's throat tightens, his hands are fisted in the sheets. There's a burning feeling behind his eyes. "I always have to be strong."

Ilya studies him for a long moment before slowly and gently swiping at the dampness that has fallen down one of Shane's cheeks. His voice is barely above a whisper. "Not with me. Never with me."

Shane stares at him.

He hates how much he wants to believe that. He hates more that he does.

Eventually, he exhales, long and shaky, and nods once.

Ilya reaches for him slowly, deliberately, wrapping him up in his arms and pressing him close. Shane doesn't flinch this time. He lets Ilya's hands settle around his waist and back, completely engulfing him. It feels warm and steady. Grounding. He buries his face in the crook of Ilya's neck, inhaling him deeply, feeling the larger man pressing a kiss into his hair.

They fall asleep like that- not safe, but anchored.

The Oyabun doesn't speak to Shane about Singapore while he's still fragile enough for it to be mistaken as mercy. She waits and watches him return to training. Watches as he pushes too hard, watches as he pretends the tremor in his hand is muscle fatigue and not memory.

Then, on a night when Shane can stand without swaying, and his breathing doesn't hitch on stairs, she calls him into her office.

The room is quiet, almost pristine. Shane stands straight, hands behind his back, face neutral.

Yuna studies him for a long time before speaking.

"You're recovering," she says finally.

"Yes, Oyanbu."

“You’re also becoming predictable.”

Shane’s eyes dart to her for a moment before staring at the space next to her head. “I don’t understand.”

Yuna’s gaze sharpens. “You’ve trained yourself to respond to pain with discipline. It’s admirable.” A pause. “But you’ve also become emotional.”

Shane swallows. He hates how accurately she sees him. Hates it even more that he can’t tell if her gaze is strategic or something softer in disguise.

“Why did you call for me?” he asks quietly.

Yuna leans back slightly. “Singapore.”

The word lands like a weight. Shane keeps his face still.

“Why?”

“It’s a controlled environment,” Yuna replies. “Distance from the chaos. We’re looking to expand our infrastructure, and I want you on oversight.” Her eyes flick, subtle. “It’s also a chance to heal without every faction in the city watching to see if you stutter.”

Shane’s chest tightens.

He realizes something then. She’s not sending him away as punishment. She’s moving him like a chess piece before someone else can.

And she’s doing it without ever saying Ilya’s name.

“I can heal here,” Shane says, voice steady.

Yuna’s mouth tightens faintly. “Can you truly heal while being used?”

Shane goes still. The question doesn’t feel rhetorical, it feels like she’s asking him whether he understands what his body has become.

Leverage.

He wants to say *I won’t be used again*. He wants to say *I can control it*, but he remembers the surveillance. The circles, the anxiety, and almost being caught.

He remembers the way his body still panics at water.

Shane’s thumb presses into his palm. It used to be a habit that ground him, but now does nothing but remind him of a time when things were less complicated.

Yuna watches the motion. For a brief second, her expression shifts- a crack of something human. Not softness, but maybe restraint over concern.

“*You still do that,*” she says quietly, slipping into Japanese.

Shane's throat tightens. *"Do what?"*

"That." Her gaze drops to his hand. *"When you're cornered."*

The words sound softer in her native tongue, but they land harder than they should.

Shane forces his face to remain blank, he subconsciously unclenches his fists. *"I'm not cornered."*

Yuna's eyes lift, sharp. She doesn't have to say anything for Shane to know what she's thinking. *You're lying*, her face says.

Silence stretches.

Shane hates that he wants to ask her. *Were you scared?* He hates that he already knows the answer.

Yuna's voice shifts again. Calm, precise. "I'm not making the choice for you," she says. "I'll simply remind you that there is a cost to your visibility here."

"You want me to stop seeing him."

Yuna doesn't blink, but tears her gaze away. She doesn't deny it or mention that Shane has finally acknowledged what this is.

"This is about visibility. Leverage," she says evenly. "And the fact that someone already proved you could be taken."

Shane's breath catches, his ribs flaring. The anger in his chest spikes because he knows it's true.

Yuna's gaze works its way back to him. It's softer, dangerous as she asks, "You came back alive. Do you understand how rare that is?"

Shane swallows, but elects not to say anything.

"And do you understand," Yuna continues, "that the next time they will not need you alive. They will only need to make an example out of you."

Shane's stomach twists.

He thinks about Ilya burning the facility down, decimating the faction like it was nothing but kindling. He thinks about how satisfying that must've felt, how necessary, how it probably saved them.

He thinks about how it will also get them killed.

Yuna sets a folder on the desk. She doesn't slide it to him, just lets it sit there like an invitation- a treat.

“Singapore isn’t exile,” she says. “It’s strategy. Recovery. Expansion.” A pause.

“And,” she adds quietly, eyes flicking to him with something else under the steel gaze, “space.”

Shane’s throat tightens. He keeps his gaze on the folder because if he looks at her, he might see too much.

“Do you want me gone?” he asks, and hates how small it sounds.

Yuna’s expression tightens, not anger, but control.

“I want you alive,” she says.

Shane inhales carefully. The breath catches, he forces it anyway.

“Yes, Oyabun,” he says, bowing slightly, because that’s what he’s been trained to say.

Yuna watches him for another long moment, then looks away first.

“You need to stop being so obvious.”

Shane bows again, leaving her office with the folder's weight in his mind, and something heavier in his chest.

Their next meeting is scheduled through a coded message inside a locker in the gym Shane uses as a drop-off location. He doesn’t question how Ilya has gotten access, he simply memorizes the information and then shreds the paper in the toilet before watching it flush down the drain.

Shane arrives first, because he always does.

He goes through his routine of checking the stairwell camera feed, the vents, the hallway angles. He times elevator cycles and stands in the dark for a full minute, listening for breathing that isn’t his own.

Nothing.

But somehow the quiet feels staged. Something feels off.

He doesn’t try to reassure himself, doesn’t tell himself it’s safe. He knows better than to argue with his nervous system right now. He simply waits.

Ten minutes into monitoring the window, a black sedan glides past the building slowly. It’s not circling for parking or hesitating. It’s just observing.

Shane stills.

He doesn't move toward the window immediately. He shifts position first, adjusting the angles so he can peek from behind the curtain.

The sedan makes another pass.

His pulse quickens. It's not panic, not yet, but it's alertness. The kind that sharpens instead of blurs.

He kills the lamp, moves away from the glass, checks the peephole, checks the hallway and vents again.

Footsteps approach.

His hand goes to the gun he isn't supposed to have during "controlled recovery", because controlled recovery assumes the world pauses while you heal in the comfort of your own territory.

It doesn't.

A knock, two taps. A pause and then another tap. Their code.

Shane doesn't move to open the door. Instead, he counts his breathing.

In. Out.

In.

Out.

Then he opens it.

Ilya steps inside.

His expression shifts the moment he sees Shane's face. He registers the tension, the dark room, the hand resting on his weapon.

Ilya closes the door behind him carefully, quietly, and doesn't speak for a moment.

He sighs. "Someone followed you."

"Maybe," Shane answers, voice flat, as his eyes dart toward the window.

Ilya's mouth twitches as he follows his line of sight. "Not maybe," he says, as he crosses the room to do his own examination. He peeks out from behind the curtain in an almost identical manner to Shane earlier.

Shane hates the confirmation.

He hates more that his body relaxes a fraction now that Ilya is here. Like the danger is more survivable when it's shared.

Ilya turns back after a sigh, coming to stand in front of Shane. He gently reaches out to grasp his wrists, pressing his forehead briefly to Shane's, before pulling back to look into his eyes.

"Talk to me," Ilya says, voice low. "What did you see? Give me assessment."

Shane forces himself to analyze it clinically. The sedan, the pacing, the circles, his initial sweep. Ilya listens without interrupting, eyes sharp, jaw tight.

When Shane finishes, Ilya nods once, like he's filing it away.

Then he says, almost gently. "We leave."

Shane blinks. "We just got here..." He almost grimaces, thinking about how much he sounds like a whining child.

"I know, моя любовь (*my love*)," Ilya's gaze holds, as he swipes a thumb against Shane's wrist. "But what can we do."

Shane's jaw tightens. Discipline bristles at retreat, at having to give in. He can feel it in his bones, that stubborn part of him that would rather bleed than back down.

But he also remembers being tied to that chair, beaten closer to death than he'd like to admit, knowing that someone's plan had gotten a leg up on him.

Shane swallows.

"Okay," he says, and the word tastes like surrender.

Ilya's hands slide up his wrist and around his waist, pulling him in for a long, deep kiss. Shane responds immediately, pulling himself flush against the blonde, tangling his hands through his hair.

At least they can have that.

They leave separately, just as they normally would, but this time it's more coordinated. Shane exits first and loops through the service stairwell, taking the back exit and rushing down the side of the street where he's parked his car a few blocks away.

He catches sight of the sedan again, parked, lights off. He can feel the attention like a blade on the back of his neck.

He knows Ilya is watching him from the window, waiting for the sedan, will be taking a different exit, walking out the building in the opposite direction, and driving away from Shane and whoever decided he needed monitoring.

Shane exhales. They've disappeared into separate routes, the message clear.

This is what their lives look like now. The constant surveillance, the need for others to control.

Love isn't in the room- it can't be.

Love is fleeting as long as he stays.

Moscow feels colder than Boston ever will.

The compound is quiet in the way places become quiet when no one laughs inside them anymore. When no one is around to breathe life into its walls. It's all heavy wood, low lighting, cigarette smoke ground into the thick rugs, and generational authority layered into its infrastructure.

Grigori doesn't sit behind his desk when Ilya enters his office. He's by the window, hands clasped loosely behind his back.

"You've decimated many in Boston. You were tested," he says.

There's no greeting, no warmth. Ilya had landed maybe thirty minutes ago upon request from the Pakhan, and now he was here, after months away, and Grigori couldn't even be bothered to glance at him.

Ilya stops three paces from his large wooden desk. Perfect posture, neutral expression. The Brigadier, not the son.

"I did what I had to do," Ilya answers.

Grigori exhales once through his nose. *"You responded like an animal."*

The word is mild, but the judgment is not.

"They kidnapped a Yakuza executive inside our territory," Ilya replies evenly.

"And they succeeded," Grigori says. *"Inside your territory."*

That lands harder. Ilya's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly.

"They are dead," he says.

"Yes," Grigori agrees. *"They are."*

The silence stretches. Grigori still hasn't looked at Ilya.

"The problem," he continues. *"Is not that you retaliated."*

He turns slowly now.

"The problem is how."

Ilya says nothing as his father steps forward, coming to stand behind his desk.

"You burned too publicly. Too visibly, too emotionally...they wanted an escalation," Grigori says, *"the faction was restless. They wanted you volatile and unstable, and you gave it to them."*

"I was controlled," Ilya replies, folding his arms behind him to mask the way his fists are clenched.

Grigori studies him. *"Were you?"*

It isn't a question.

Ilya holds his gaze as Grigori steps closer.

"You burned a faction," he says. *"For a man."*

There it is. The slight downturn of his father's lips as he says the words. Ilya knows it's not outright disgust, but maybe disappointment he hears in the tone. Ilya's throat tightens.

"He was leverage," Ilya says carefully.

"For you."

"For us."

Grigori's eyes narrow, and he shakes his head once.

"You think they do not see the difference?" The air sharpens. *"They see your weakness,"* Grigori continues. *"They see your attachment. They see something that can be aimed for."*

"I am not weak."

"No," Grigori agrees calmly. *"You are not."* There's a pause. *"But you have become predictable."*

Ilya's fingers curl, he can feel his nails digging into his skin.

"They wanted a story," Grigori says. *"And you gave them one."*

Ilya doesn't flinch, but he also keeps his mouth closed. Nothing his father has said is untrue.

The air is thick, neither of them says anything as they stare at one another. His father is the first to break, letting out a sharp exhale as he pushes the chair behind his desk out and sits.

"Your travel will be reduced, your meetings supervised," Grigori states, pulling out a cigar from one of the drawers. *"Your visibility will be controlled."*

It's a leash. The walls of his cage are closing in.

"You will not give them another narrative. You will remain unleveraged."

"And if I refuse?"

The light in Grigori's hand stills, halfway to his lips. His gaze goes flat.

"You will be proving them correct."

His voice isn't raised. It's not a threat.

"And what narrative is that?" Ilya asks quietly.

"That you are distracted." Another pause, as Grigori inhales. *"That you can be guided by appetite."*

His words cut. Ilya feels the old instinct in him rise- the one that wants to argue, to assert dominance, to push back.

He swallows it.

"I'm loyal," Ilya says instead. Grigori hums.

"Yes," he replies.

"Then trust my judgement."

"I trust your usefulness, Ilya," Grigori says.

Ilya knows the way his name leaves his father's lips is not affection- it never has been- but control. Reminding him of who he belonged to.

"I will not have this family embarrassed," Grigori continues.

The words are clipped and precise. Cold.

"I'm not ashamed," Ilya says carefully.

Grigori's expression shifts to one of faint irritation. *"The shame is irrelevant. Your perception is not."*

The silence settles again.

"Your presence will be seen less, at least until this narrative dies," Grigori says.

Ilya gives a small nod before he turns to leave the room with his spine straight, face calm.

But something has shifted.

Grigori doesn't see it. The leash has tightened.

But so has his commitment.

As Ilya walks down the hall, he understands something with startling clarity.

They aren't afraid of his violence, they're afraid of his attachment to Shane.

Fine.

He will make them forget it exists. He'll learn to lie better, and when the time comes-

He will not ask for permission.

The conversation with Yuna and almost getting caught sticks in Shane's brain for a week.

He tries to outrun it anyway.

He pushes training harder, not because he thinks his strength will fix whatever this is, but because the pain is easier to deal with than the emotions.

Because sore ribs are honest in a way fear isn't.

Kenji catches him in the hall one evening, sweat still on his throat, hair damp, ribs aching from breath drills. He's standing next to a punching bag in the corner of the room, back turned to the main fight training happening in the center.

"You're fighting like you want someone to hit you," Kenji says.

Shane wipes blood from a reopened knuckle. It's small, superficial, and irritating. "I want to be ready."

"For what?"

Shane's eyes flick up. They're dark. "For the next time someone wants to leave a message."

Kenji's expression tightens. He doesn't argue, just says quieter, "Then stop giving them a reason."

Shane's laugh is sharp, more of an exhale, as he glares at the floor in front of him. "How."

Kenji pauses. His gaze shifts slightly to a corner camera, to the corridor's shadowed end, to the subtle fact that they are being watched.

"By not being here," he says.

And then something happens that shouldn't matter, but does.

One of the men training behind them is tripped, pushing him into Shane and Kenji's conversation. His body brushes Shane's back. It's not violent or rude. It's accidental.

Shane's body reacts like it's a threat.

His posture goes stiff, ribs seizing. His stomach drops, his hands come up instinctively-sharp, defensive- and he nearly shoves the other man hard enough to make him fall.

The man stumbles, eyes wide as he apologizes, but Shane moves to a quieter, darker part of the corner, ignoring the man and Kenji's urging him back to training.

Shane freezes, horrified with himself.

Kenji's voice is low, almost pained. "That's why."

Shane swallows hard.

He thinks about the shower. The panic. The way he can't control his own reactions anymore.

And he thinks about Ilya. Brilliant, reckless, fierce. How he responds to threats with fire.

If Shane stays, he becomes the fuse. And Ilya is the kind of man who lights matches.

That night, Shane opens the Singapore file again.

He reads it slowly, not like a plan, but a sentence. He doesn't sign, not just yet, but inevitability settles into him like cold metal.

The decision isn't automatic or dramatic, it's been an idea that has been accumulating for days. It builds in Shane's bones like pressure.

It's the near-caught sedan, Yuna telling him about how visibility will cost, it's Kenji's quiet plea.

It's the way Shane flinches when others graze him, or the way he can still remember the look on Ilya's face when he burned while Shane bled.

It's the fact that someone already proved they can turn Shane's body into a message.

Shane signs the Singapore confirmation at 2:15 a.m. his flight is already booked, and travel arrangements are already being made.

He doesn't sleep afterward. He showers without letting the water touch his face, and packs a small bag like it's an overnight trip and not a retreat disguised as strategy.

Then, he goes to see Ilya one last time before the distance becomes real.

The location is different, once again. Not the condo or anywhere they've used before.

It's a hotel on the edge of the business district, booked under a name that doesn't belong to either of them. The kind of place that suits those who've come in from out of town flying first class, and where the staff's silence is key. The cameras have been hacked, hallways checked, and service corridors analyzed. Shane triple checks every inch of the place, knowing that security had to be absolutely airtight if he splurged on comfort.

His shoulder aches from lifting his arm too long, his ribs sting faintly on a deeper inhale. He tells himself he's checking because he's careful. He doesn't admit the other truth. This all

feels too sacred and doomed.

When Ilya arrives, he uses the agreed pattern, and Shane swings the door open.

For half a second, Ilya looks brighter, like relief hits before caution can suppress it.

“This place is nice.”

The tiny hint of hope guts Shane.

They don’t speak.

Shane grabs him by the jacket and pulls him in for a kiss hard enough to steal breath.

It’s not worship or reverence, it’s hunger and need.

Ilya’s surprise lasts half a second before he’s kissing back. Hands grip Shane’s waist, pulling him in like he’s starving, as he kicks the door closed with his shoe.

“Someone is impatient,” Ilya murmurs into his mouth, massaging his hands into Shane’s sides.

“Shut up,” Shane replies, voice rough.

“Mmm, bossy,” Ilya grins.

Shane shoves him back toward the bed, not reckless or careless, but deliberate.

Ilya’s eyes darken for a moment, worry flashing across his face. “You’re trying to prove something.”

Shane leans down, mouth at Ilya’s throat. “No.”

Ilya’s hands slide into Shane’s hair, tugging just enough to sting. “Yes.”

For a second, Shane’s face is unguarded. Not controlled or masked, but just too much emotion pressing against bone.

Ilya sees it. His grip softens. The teasing fades.

He cups Shane’s jaw, thumb brushing against the scar.

“You’re shaking,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane is doing everything he can to swallow the thick feeling in his throat.

“I’m fine.”

“Is lie. You are liar.”

Shane huffs something that could be a laugh and kisses him again- deeper, harder- like if he stops, everything he wants to say will just come tumbling out.

Tonight is rougher.

It's not cruel or careless, but edged and sharp.

They move with intensity that borders on reckless, but Ilya still adjusts instinctively when Shane's ribs flare. Still shifts weight off the healing shoulder without having to be asked. Even when they're so caught up in the moment, so heated and heavy, Ilya is still protecting.

That undoes Shane more than anything.

"You're burning tonight," Ilya murmurs against his mouth, pressed impossibly close. Skin against skin.

Shane doesn't answer.

He kisses him again instead. Harder.

He wants to feel wanted, wants to feel claimed.

He wants to carve something into memory that torture can't touch.

Ilya lets Shane lead for a moment, lets him push and press, lets him bite at his throat like he's marking territory.

Then, with practiced ease, Ilya flips the dynamic.

He rolls Shane carefully beneath him, pinning his wrists lightly to the mattress- not trapping, just holding.

"You like when I'm in control," Ilya murmurs, voice rough and honest, nuzzling at Shane's throat.

Shane's eyes flash. "You like everything."

Ilya grins, wicked and bright, and leans down to kiss him slowly, like a promise instead of a tease.

At one point, Shane gasps and winces, ribs flaring sharply. Ilya stills immediately, eyes fierce and earnest.

"Too much?"

Shane shakes his head, breath uneven. "Not enough. Don't stop."

Ilya's gaze burns before he huffs. "Stubborn."

Shane's mouth twitches as he leans in again. Ilya meets him halfway, kissing him slower now- deeper- like he's memorizing him.

Like he's trying to press himself into Shane's bones so distance doesn't erase him.

Shane's hands clutch at Ilya's back, his shoulder twinges, ribs complain. Pain flickers at the edges, but it's background noise compared to the ache in his chest.

He wants to tell him, wants to say *I have to go. If I stay, you'll burn again, and if you burn again, they'll have proof.*

Instead, Ilya presses his mouth to Shane's throat and whispers in Russian, low and possessive.

“Мой.” (*mine*)

Shane's throat tightens painfully.

“You're going to kill me,” he mutters hoarsely.

Ilya pulls back just enough to grin against his skin. “Yes. With love.”

Shane gives a broken laugh before it turns into more of a strangled moan. He pulls Ilya down, like gravity demands it, digging his nails into the other man's back.

They're clinging to one another like their life depends on it.

Maybe it does.

Heat builds until it breaks, not gentle, but all-consuming. Rough in need, rough in the way that they move like this will leave a lasting imprint, even when they are apart.

And when it finally breaks, it leaves them breathless and shaking, too aware of how quiet the room becomes afterward, the only sound coming from their heavy, sated panting.

Later, under tangled sheets and freshly showered bodies, Ilya traces Shane's knuckles idly.

His fingers pause at the crooked index finger. His expression shifts- anger flashing sharp.

Shane catches it immediately. “Don't.”

Ilya looks up. “Don't want.”

“Don't look like you're about to commit a crime.”

Ilya's mouth curves. “Too late. I did many.”

Shane huffs a laugh, then sobers. He stares at the ceiling.

“People are still watching,” he murmurs.

“Always,” Ilya replies, tightening his grip on Shane's hand.

“It's worse now.”

Ilya hears the subtext. 'It's worse because I'm weaker.' 'It's worse because you care.' 'It's worse because they learned what to aim for.'

He doesn't say anything. Neither does Shane.

Instead, Ilya rolls onto his side, face close, voice low. He reaches out to brush a thumb against Shane's face before lightly grabbing his jaw and pulling him into a gentle kiss. "Then we change rules."

Shane's chest tightens painfully, as keeps his eyes closed for a second longer. Hoping the stinging behind his eyes doesn't give him away.

He almost tells him.

But Ilya presses another soft kiss to his mouth, grounding, steady, and pulls him into his side.

"Later," Ilya murmurs. "Not tonight."

And Shane closes his eyes, buries his face into Ilya's neck, inhales his scent. He nods once.

Because it's easier to agree than to split the room open with the truth.

And when Ilya falls asleep, hand still wrapped around his, Shane stays awake.

Memorizing the weight.

Because the decision no longer feels automatic or dramatic.

It just feels inevitable.

Shane wakes before dawn.

The room is still dark, the city outside a quiet smear of lights behind curtains.

Ilya is still asleep beside him. Hair messy, mouth parted slightly, one arm draped over Shane's waist like an unconscious claim.

Shane lies still.

He memorizes the weight, the warmth, the quiet sound of Ilya breathing.

The unguarded expression on his face is soft, as if he had no care in the world.

His ribs ache faintly, finger throbs. His shoulder is stiff.

His heart feels worse.

He slowly eases out from under Ilya's arm with meticulous care. He dresses silently, every button feeling like betrayal.

At the door, he pauses, hand on the knob.

He squeezes his eyes shut, forehead pressed to the door as he tries to fight back the moistening in his eyes and the lump forming in his throat. With a shake of his head, he opens the door.

He doesn't look back.

If he looks back, he will stay.

And if he stays, the next kidnapping won't end with rescue.

He leaves without a note, because notes can be traced. He leaves without a message, because messages become patterns.

Outside, the morning air is cold. By the time the city wakes, Shane has already started his way to Singapore.

And somewhere behind him, in a hotel room that now smells faintly of heat and regret, Ilya wakes to an empty bed.

He doesn't need proof, he doesn't need a message.

He just lies there for a long time, staring at the ceiling, jaw tight.

Then he smiles once, a snarl leaving his lips- sharp, bitter, proud.

Because Shane Hollander made a decision.

He strategized.

And that makes Ilya Rozanov furious.

And terrified.

And so in love in a way that will get them both killed if they don't learn how to be better.

Chapter End Notes

boooo shane what are u doing bby u silly silly boy 🙄

we're getting close to the end already rippp but im really happy with how this story has turned out. at the beginning ik i said it was going to be quick and limited world building/character growth but towards the end i really just started getting into it hahaha

i hope u guys are enjoying this as much as i have had writing it, id love to hear ur thoughts:)

thanks for reading, only 2 more chapters to go!

Chapter 9: Singapore

Chapter Summary

Shane is focusing on controlled expansion in Singapore. Ilya has some choice words about it.

Chapter Notes

shane is about to get the wakeup call of a lifetime lol

ik i said i was getting this out on friday im sorryyy my friends and i ended up at a HR rave and things got outta hand 🙄

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

Singapore feels wrong, and yet, oddly familiar.

There's something in the air that reminds Shane of old habits and home, but without the knowledge or customs attached to familiarity.

The airport is bright and sterile and polite in a way that old Shane would've appreciated, but now just makes his skin itch.

No one looks at him twice, no one knows the exact weight of his name. He walks through security with ease, just another man in a business suit, on his way to do business things.

He should feel relief.

He feels hollow.

By the time he reaches the car waiting outside- it's black with windows dark enough to reflect- the sun is already starting to rise.

The heat hits him like a hand on the back of his neck. His shoulder aches from the flight, stiff from being held in one position too long. His ribs protest on the first deep breath of humid air.

His body never lets him forget.

I did it. I made the right choice. I moved the piece. I controlled the board.

And then, without his permission, his mind gives him the image of Ilya asleep in that hotel room. Hair messy, mouth parted, arm thrown over Shane like he owned him in the only way that mattered.

Shane grips the handle of his bag until his crooked finger throbs.

He tells himself that the pain is grounding.

He tells himself a lot of things.

The driver doesn't speak. The driver doesn't ask, 'How was your flight?' or 'Are you okay?' He just drives through clean streets lined with greenery and glass buildings, through a city that looks like it was designed by someone who hates chaos.

A controlled environment.

Old Shane would've soaked it all in. He would've felt right where he belonged. Now, everything just felt wrong.

The safehouse is a glass-windowed condo in a high-rise with security that could've passed for military grade. There's voice and facial recognition, keypads, cameras, and a locked drawer already stocked with burner phones and a passport with his face and a name he doesn't recognize.

There's a gym, an open floor layout of the living and dining area, and bedrooms as big as Shane's apartment back home. It's a place meant for a large family, and all of it is Shane's.

On the kitchen counter, a sealed folder is waiting for him.

He doesn't open it right away.

He stands in the living room and looks out over the city until his chest tightens with something that almost feels like grief. He exhales slowly and reminds himself. *Grief is inefficient. Grief makes you visible.*

He thinks about Ilya's voice from the night before.

Later. Not tonight.

Shane swallows.

It's always later with you, he thinks, bitter and fond and sick all at once. *Later was how you kept me next to you.*

He puts his bag down and walks to the bathroom. He turns on the shower, hoping the steam will loosen the tension in his shoulders and make him feel less grimy from the flight.

He keeps his face out of the spray.

He stays there as long as he possibly can.

When his lungs tighten with phantom panic, he forces them to loosen through discipline and controlled breathing.

In. Hold. Out.

Again.

He survives himself.

Because that's what he thinks recovery is.

Not healing, just learning to survive.

Back in the city Shane left behind, the hotel room is still warm from bodies that aren't there anymore.

Ilya wakes to the silence.

Not the kind of silence that happens when someone gets up to use the bathroom. Not the kind that comes with a mumbled "be right back" and the rustle of sheets.

The wrong kind.

His palm stretches out, sliding across the mattress, and finds cold.

His eyes open.

For half a second, his brain tries to come up with a reasonable excuse, tries to offer an explanation that doesn't hurt. He holds his breath like a man waiting for a punch.

Then he sees it.

The closet door cracked just enough to see the naked hanger.

The way the bathroom towel is folded too neat, untouched.

The absence of Shane's shoes by the door, his overnight bag, missing.

No note.

No message.

No proof.

Just an empty space shaped exactly like betrayal.

Ilya sits up slowly, as if moving too fast might make the room change its mind. His jaw locks tight enough to make his teeth ache. He drags a hand through his hair and stares at the bed like it might explain itself.

His chest feels too big for his ribs.

He hates that the first thing he feels is fear.

The second thing is relief.

Shane left the way Shane leaves: efficiently.

Which means Shane is alive.

Which means Shane chose this.

Ilya stands and crosses the room in two strides. He checks the door lock first, automatically, and looks through the peephole.

Nothing.

He pulls his phone out, fingers moving faster than his brain, but the number he wants isn't in it.

It never was.

He laughs once, it's sharp and humorless. The sound dies immediately in the too-clean air.

“ты, ебанный идиот (*you fucking idiot*),” he mutters under his breath, looking to the ceiling as his eyes start to sting. His hands are clenched by his sides, and he tries to swallow down the heaviness in his throat.

Then, quieter, like the room is listening. “Shane.”

He says it the way you say a name you're trying to summon back to you by force of will alone.

It doesn't work.

Ilya turns, shoulders tense, and sees the slight imprint of Shane in the sheets like a ghost that kept warm.

He closes his eyes.

Anger hits him so hard it's almost soothing. Anger is clean. Anger is familiar. Anger makes the world simple.

He scoffs, thinking. *He probably didn't even look back.*

And then, the sharp pang in his chest as another thought follows.

If he looked back, he would have stayed.

Ilya opens his eyes.

He understands, in a way that makes his throat burn, that Shane didn't leave because he stopped wanting Ilya.

He left because wanting him is dangerous.

Because loving Ilya makes Shane a target.

Because loving Shane makes Ilya burn.

And the city has already learned what they mean to each other

The rage comes back hot and quick, as he hurls his phone forward, watching it bounce across the mattress with enough force to launch itself off and into the nearby wall. It doesn't crack, but leaves a noticeable dent in the structure.

He breathes hard, body tense, and presses a fist against his mouth, as if he can keep sound inside his body by force.

His eyes sting with something he refuses to name.

He lets himself feel it anyway.

For ten seconds.

For ten seconds, he stands there, panting, forcing the wetness back into his eyes, trying to calm the voices in his head.

Then, he stands straighter.

He slips his clothes back on, the mask returning across his face.

He becomes the Brigadier again.

Because if Shane has chosen strategy, then strategy is what Ilya will give him.

Even if it tastes like ash.

Yuna reads the report once, then twice, then sets it down and closes it swiftly. Shane has arrived in Singapore and is already planning his next steps.

Kenji stands in the doorway of her office, expression neutral in the way that years of training have carved into him

"He went willingly?" Kenji asks.

Yuna's gaze lifts slowly.

"He went," she says, finally.

Kenji doesn't flinch. He has learned how not to argue with inevitability. Instead, he says, carefully, "He didn't tell anyone. I assumed he would try to steel his way out of it."

Yuna's mouth tightens.

"That," she says softly, "is his flaw."

Kenji's eyes flicker, the smallest crack of something human crossing his face. "Or his strength."

Yuna does not smile.

She looks out across the compound at trainees running drills, at men who still believe in the simplicity of loyalty. She thinks about what it costs to keep a child alive in a world that uses them as currency.

"Visibility is a cost," she says.

Kenji nods once, following her gaze.

"And what is love?" he asks, almost delicately.

Yuna's eyes sharpened as she looked back at Kenji.

The man had been around long before Shane was born. A lieutenant to the previous Oyabun, Yuna's father, he was one of the closest things to family that she had left. The only one who could talk to her in this manner, and not find themselves on the other end of a punishment.

Yuna's voice remains calm.

"Liability," she says.

Then, after a beat that is almost too small to count, *"Also motivation."*

Kenji's expression doesn't change, but his posture softens by a hair.

Yuna picks up another folder.

"The city must think Shane is recovering quietly. We will let them wonder why he is not at my side- let them guess."

Kenji watches her. "And him?" he asks.

Yuna's gaze hardens, Oyabun again.

"He will expand our reach," she says. "He will heal and learn how to be unseen."

Her fingers press against the edge of the folder.

"If he fails," she adds quietly, voice low enough that the walls have to lean closer to hear it, *"then at least he fails far from the people who would burn everything to bring him back."*

Grigori hears about Shane's disappearance before Ilya can fully recover himself.

Grigori doesn't believe the situation is of enough importance. He hasn't called Ilya back to speak in person, and Ilya takes this as a personal offense.

The Brigadier sits behind his desk with the computer monitor open on the Pakhan's face.

Grigori studies him with mild curiosity.

"You look," Grigori says, "less stable."

Ilya's smile is sharp enough to cut.

"I am perfectly stable."

Grigori hums, unimpressed, before leaning back.

"Your weakness removed itself," he says. "At least he has some common sense."

Ilya's eyes go colder.

"He isn't a weakness."

Grigori's gaze remains flat.

"Then what is he?" he asks. "Weapon? Shield? Incentive?"

Ilya's jaw tightens as he keeps his hands clasped firmly in front of him on the table.

Grigori leans forward slightly, not threatening. Just inevitable.

"You executed the faction," Grigori says. "But others will follow. They will not stay quiet forever. They will find new leverage."

Ilya's nails dig into his palms. He snarls, lips lifting at the corners.

"Let them try," he says.

Grigori's mouth twitches. Ilya can't tell if it's meant as a smile.

Ilya's breath is controlled. His face is calm. His body is a cage holding something that wants to tear through the world.

Grigori watches him for a long moment, then says, almost conversationally.

"You will not chase after him."

Ilya's eyes flash.

Grigori doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't need to.

“You will not make yourself so visible again,” Grigori continues. “You will not prove you can be guided by...infatuation.”

Ilya’s chest tightens.

He wants to laugh. He wants to kill something.

He says instead, perfectly even. *“I do not care what others think.”*

Grigori’s gaze is unreadable.

“You should,” he says, “You need to learn what kind of man you truly are.”

Ilya holds his stare.

I already know, he thinks, I am the kind of man who will burn everything down for him.

But he also thinks, and this is the part that hurts, that Shane left to stop him from becoming that man in public.

Shane left to keep Ilya from giving the city proof.

Ilya exhales slowly through his nose.

“I know what kind of man I am,” he says, voice flat.

Grigori studies him another moment, then adds. *“Control yourself,” he says. “Or someone else will.”*

After the call is ended, Ilya slumps back in his chair. His mind cannot stop thinking about an idea that he suddenly sees with dangerous clarity.

Shane is not safe with him.

And Shane is not safe without him.

And the world will gladly test which one is worse.

In Singapore, Shane is starting over from the bottom. New networks, new clients, he is the first line of contact.

The morning after he arrives, he gets up precisely at six and heads to the indoor gym.

He runs.

It’s not a particularly aggressive pace, but it’s enough to remind his lungs that air is a luxury.

His ribs ache on the incline, his shoulder complains on the arm swing. His crooked finger throbs as his hand flexes unconsciously. Opening and closing, searching for a fist it can’t quite make anymore.

He hates it.

He keeps doing it anyway.

He eats breakfast he doesn't really taste, reads reports, memorizes names. He learns which ports move what, which corporations hide which networks, which officials are paid to forget.

A week in, he sits across from a man who introduces himself as a consultant with no past and polite eyes.

"So, your family is looking to invest," the man says.

Shane nods once, hands clasped in front of him on the table.

"And you are the point of contact," the man continues.

Shane's expression stays neutral.

"I am the piece that arrived first, to survey and gather data," he says.

The man smiles faintly.

"Then you understand," he says. "This city likes control."

Shane's mouth twitches.

"So do I," he replies.

The man slides a file across the table. Shane opens it and finds photographs of shipments, routes, faces.

And, tucked in the middle, a single image that doesn't belong.

A still frame from security footage in what Shane knows is immediately Boston.

A black sedan.

The hotel room.

Shane's stomach goes cold.

His pulse doesn't race. It sharpens.

The consultant watches him carefully.

"We like to know who we're doing business with. It seems others have taken an interest in your movements," he says, too casually.

Shane sets the file down slowly.

“I don’t think it’s my movements they’re interested in,” he mutters, more to himself than the other.

He notices the polite smile on the consultant's face falter slightly.

Shane closes the folder.

He feels the old static under his skin.

He thinks of Ilya’s hands, careful even when he’s hungry.

He thinks of Yuna’s voice. *Next time, they will not need you alive. They will only need to make an example out of you.*

He thinks, with an almost sickening irony. Distance didn’t erase any pattern or vulnerability. It just changed the location.

Shane stands, pushing the folder away.

“Find out who is watching. I want to know every single vulnerability,” he says, tapping the top of the table.

The consultant hesitates. “That will be...expensive.”

Shane’s eyes lift.

“Everything is expensive,” he says. “That’s why we plan.”

He leaves the room and walks back to the condo with his back straight, mind loud.

In the elevator, alone, he lets his hand tremble once.

Just once.

Then he stills it, because someone is still watching.

And because Shane Hollander didn’t come here to hide.

He came here to set a trap.

That night, Shane sits in the dark, turning the burner phone over and over in his hand.

He hasn’t turned it on. He doesn’t need to.

It’s merely a reminder. A promise of a connection that would ruin them if they both gave in.

He tells himself he won’t. Tells himself he can endure this. Tells himself that planning and strategy are what's important right now.

His ribs ache faintly as he breathes.

He thinks of Ilya's voice, low and rough.

мой.

Mine.

Shane closes his eyes. The heavy feeling hasn't left his chest since he left that hotel room.

He hates how much he wants to reach out. Hates more that he doesn't know what he would say if he did. How Ilya would react.

I left.

But I did it for you.

I did it because I couldn't survive being the reason you burned everything and hurt yourself in the process.

He opens his eyes.

The city outside is bright and distant and indifferent.

He turns the phone over in his palm once, then sets it down.

Not tonight, he thinks, bitterly amused.

He stands and goes to the bathroom, turning the shower on and stepping in. He keeps his face out of the spray, ignoring the low hum of anxiety starting to creep into his chest.

He stays, because he is learning, slowly, brutally, that control isn't the absence of fear.

It's choosing what you do while the fear tries to steer.

And somewhere across an ocean, Shane knows with certainty that Ilya is awake in a room full of smoke, old money, and threats, holding himself together out of sheer spite.

Shane presses his forehead to the tile.

Hold on, please wait for me. Don't burn, don't be vulnerable for them.

The water runs.

The city watches.

The board rearranges itself around the distance. It's not a solution, but it's definitely the next move.

Ilya lasts nine whole days.

Not even two weeks.

Nine days of discipline.

Nine days of supervised meetings and heightened tension between him and his men.

Nine days of the Pakhan's quiet reminders about his vulnerability, leveragability, capability...

Nine days of the question. *Where is he.*

On the tenth, he hears whispers about a location. He's already boarding the private jet for a regional meeting. He tells the pilot minutes before they're supposed to take off, of a quick pit stop he has to make.

Grigori doesn't get word of it.

Shane knows something is wrong before he knows exactly what.

It's the feeling first. Unsettling in his stomach, static under his skin. There's a shift in the air, a silence that feels monitored.

The consultant he's been working with stops mid-sentence to check a notification on his phone.

"There's an unregistered arrival," the man says carefully. "Private. They're requesting your time."

Shane's stomach drops.

He doesn't need to ask who.

He closes the file in front of him with slow precision.

"Leave," he says quietly.

The consultant hesitates, hand still holding his phone to his face.

"Now."

The man leaves, and the room suddenly feels too small.

Shane doesn't pace. He doesn't fidget. He stands perfectly still and waits.

When the door opens, it isn't dramatic.

It isn't violent.

It's worse.

Ilya walks in with purpose, like he belongs there.

Like the distance was an inconvenience, like the warnings were suggestions.

The door closes behind him, echoing in a way that makes the space between them painfully clear.

For a long moment, neither of them speaks.

The air is electric.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Shane says first, voice quieter than he anticipates.

It’s still controlled, almost too controlled.

Ilya’s expression is carved from something harder than anger.

“Then you shouldn’t have left.”

There are no weapons in the room, no witnesses, no politics, and yet the tension is comparable to someone holding a gun to their head.

The uninhibited look in Ilya’s eyes has Shane almost taking a step back. His posture is rigid, his hands are clenched at his sides.

The eye contact is aggressive. Ilya blinks, taking a single step forward.

“You think I am weak,” Ilya says.

Shane doesn’t move back.

“I think you’re visible,” he replies calmly.

“Is not the same.”

“It is in our world.”

Ilya laughs. It’s sharp, almost disbelieving. His gaze turns toward the floor-length windows to their left, as he rakes a hand through his already wrecked hair.

“You made a decision for me.”

“I was trying to think strategically.”

“No, you made decision without me because you thought I rather keep power than keep you.”

It feels like someone punched Shane in the chest. His composure fractures for a split second.

“That’s not-”

“Is exactly what you did,” Ilya cuts in, voice rising. “You looked at me and thought, hmm yes, he will choose power and legacy.”

He takes a step closer.

“And you thought you were doing right thing by leaving first? By running away?”

Shane’s jaw tightens, angler flaring in his chest.

“I wasn’t running. They used me to test you,” he says, voice finally cracking with something real. “I left because they wanted you emotional, and because if you burned again, even if it was warranted, they’d have reason to remove you.”

“And you think I cannot survive that?” Ilya fires back.

“I think you would destroy half the city and probably yourself trying.”

The silence that follows feels too loud. Shane’s ears are ringing, and he can see how heavily Ilya’s chest is heaving. There’s an unnatural glistening to his eyes.

“You don’t get to make decision for me. What I would sacrifice,” he says, lower now. More dangerous.

Shane’s voice is rougher than he wants.

“I wasn’t sacrificing you.”

“You were sacrificing *us*.”

The pang in Shane’s chest grows. He swallows, looking away, trying to keep the stinging in his own eyes at bay.

“I was *protecting* you.”

It comes out so softly, Shane thinks that maybe Ilya didn’t even hear him, but the man steps into him fully now.

Chest to chest.

Breath shared.

“I do not need protection,” he says.

Shane’s eyes flash.

“You need your position intact. You need your factions stable, and Moscow satisfied. You don’t need to be the one who burned it all down for a m-”

Ilya grabs Shane’s collar, his eyes flashing. He’s not hurting him, just holding.

“You think I care about what they call me? About factions, about Moscow, about my position?” he grits out. “Shane, none of it matters if you are not there with me.”

Shane’s breath shudders. His hands are gripping Ilya’s wrists.

“You *should* care. You need to survive.”

Ilya's hands tighten. "What makes you think I cannot survive with just you? You left without letting me make that choice."

Shane holds his breath, tries to hold it in, as if that will stop the emotion from pouring out.

"I couldn't," his voice cracking as he admits.

"Why?"

Because if you chose me, you'd ruin yourself.

Because if you didn't choose me, I'd never recover.

Because I'm in love with you, and that's the most dangerous part of it all.

Instead, he says something that just sounds like an excuse. It's clearly not what he's feeling.

"Because I needed you to stay where you're strongest. I needed you to stop thinking about me."

Ilya's grip slackens slightly. He scoffs.

"And where is that? Where am I strongest? You think I could ever stop thinking about you?" he demands.

"You need to be the Pakhan's Brigadier."

Ilya's laugh this time is soft. Broken. The pain in his eyes flares dangerously.

"You idiot," he breathes out.

Shane shoves him.

Not violently.

Just enough to create space.

"You shouldn't have come," he snaps.

"And you shouldn't have left!"

The words echo off the walls.

For a split second, they both look startled by how loud it was.

Ilya pushes back.

Harder.

Shane stumbles a step.

They're breathing too fast now.

Too close.

Too charged.

"You don't get to martyr yourself," Ilya says through gritted teeth. "You don't get to make the decision whether I can rule or not. Whether I am capable."

Shane grabs Ilya's jacket this time.

"And you don't get to burn the world every time I bleed!"

Their foreheads nearly collide.

Their hands fist in fabric.

The fight isn't violent.

It's simply proximity. Heat.

It's two people who have been pretending distance is discipline.

Ilya's voice drops, rough.

"Have I not proven myself enough? I came because I *chose you*."

The words aren't shouted.

They're worse.

They're steady. They burn into Shane's brain.

His throat tightens.

"You came because you don't like losing control."

"I came because I do not want a position that costs me you."

That breaks something open in Shane's chest.

The anger doesn't disappear.

It mutates.

Ilya's hands are still gripping Shane's collar.

Shane's fists are still twisted in Ilya's jacket.

Their breathing is uneven.

“You’re reckless,” Shane says, but it sounds weaker now.

“You are impossible,” Ilya replies, something that sounds like a breathless laugh leaves his lips.

The whole situation suddenly just feels silly. Emotions are raw. They’re almost laughing. Almost crying. Shane can't keep it in anymore. Staring into Ilya's eyes, the emotional vulnerability shatters every last wall and barrier Shane has put up.

The first kiss isn’t careful.

It’s a collision.

Teeth, breath stolen, tongues clashing. They’re grabbing at each other and holding on for dear life.

It's not an apology.

It’s claiming.

Shane pushes Ilya back against the desk, files scattering to the floor.

Ilya doesn’t resist.

He drags Shane back into him just as hard.

It’s messy.

Desperate.

Furious in the way only love can be when it’s cornered.

“You think I cannot choose you,” Ilya murmurs against his mouth.

“I think you shouldn’t have to,” Shane fires back, pushing his body into the space between Ilya’s legs.

His hands cup the back of Ilya’s neck, pulling him in. Ilya’s hands are gripping Shane’s ass with a strength that’s almost bruising. Their chests are practically touching as he nuzzles into the crook of Shane’s neck. Shane’s breath shudders as Ilya’s nose drags up against the side of his throat, all the way up to his ear. He attempts to swallow a moan, twisting his hands in the blond’s hair and tugging as Ilya sucks on his earlobe.

“I want to,” Ilya rasps out.

The admission is raw.

Simple.

No strategy.

No politics.

Just want.

Need.

Shane's control fractures.

He kisses him again, deeper.

Hands sliding, gripping, pulling him even closer, if that's possible.

Like distance might swallow him again if he loosens his hold.

It isn't gentle.

It isn't slow.

It's two people who have already lost too much pretending they can survive one more absence.

Ilya switches their positions, Shane's back now pressed against the wall next to the desk.

"I am not choosing power over you," he says. "I am choosing both."

Shane laughs bitterly.

"That's not how this works."

"Then we change how it works."

They end up on the floor.

Shirts opened, breathing uneven. Hands still tangled in fabric, like letting go is a risk.

The city hums outside the glass.

For once, neither of them speaks first.

Shane stares up at the ceiling.

"We're in too deep," he says quietly.

Ilya doesn't respond, but hums in response.

"This isn't temporary. And I couldn't fix it with distance."

Silence stretches. Ilya's hand reaches out to grab Shane's. He brings it up to his lips, kissing the knuckles, the crooked pointer finger.

Shane turns on his right side, facing Ilya, head propped up in his hand. Then, Shane says the thing he has been circling for weeks.

“We can’t keep doing this inside their world.”

Ilya stares for a long moment before giving a small nod.

“Then we leave it.”

Not hiding or relocating.

Leaving.

Shane’s heart kicks hard in his chest.

“That would start a war.”

“Maybe.”

“And you would lose succession.”

“да.”

“And Yuna would never forgive me.”

Ilya doesn’t respond to this. The Oyabun is hard to read. He just kisses the back of Shane’s hand again. His mouth curves faintly.

“And yet,” he says. “You want to.”

Shane looks at him, sees the truth there.

For the first time in a long time, it’s the only thing he understands with such clarity.

He wants to be with Ilya. He wants to *leave* with Ilya. *For* Ilya.

For the first time since the chair and the water and the fear, Shane feels something that isn’t dread.

It’s terrifying.

But it isn’t dread.

“If we do it,” Shane says slowly, “there’s no coming back.”

Ilya’s hand squeezes his. Interlaces his fingers with the crooked one like it’s not broken.

“I am not interested in coming back,” he says, quietly.

Outside, Singapore continues to be orderly.

Inside, the pieces have moved.

And for the first time, the move they are considering isn't strategy.

It's an escape.

Chapter End Notes

so excited to see the light at the end of this beautiful tunnel haha

grad school has been so stressful, i really just threw myself into this. i'm so grateful to have found a fun outlet :)

also! just uploaded 2 new works if your interested in reading more of my stuff. the writing style is a little different from this one, and im really excited about the plots!

i hope you guys enjoyed this, and as always, i'd love to hear your feedback. we only have one chapter left. thanks for reading!

Chapter 10: Choosing You

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya have choices to make.

Chapter Notes

hiiii its the final chapter😭 this one was a beast to write, i hope i did it justice lol

i can't believe this story started with me brainstorming bored in the back of an undergrad class i was forced to take bc my grad program sucks and i had no other options 😊 thank you for that 2 and a half hours of uninterrupted creative time i guess lmao

plz read the end note for some new story news...NEways, i hope u guys enjoy this last chapter:)

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

Waking up in Singapore shouldn't feel any different than Boston, with its quiet precision, or Moscow, where morning feels like it's bracing for impact, and yet it does.

Never mind the warm, almost humid air arriving before the day has fully started, slipping through the narrow seam in the curtains as it carries salt from the harbor and the faint mechanical hum of the city moving beneath the glass.

That's not what changes the morning for Shane.

He sits in the silence for a minute, perfectly still, waiting for the rest of his body to join his senses. He listens. Traffic far below, the low hum of the air conditioning unit, the soft electrical pulse of the apartment.

Breathing.

The breathing beside him is what makes his chest tighten. The warm arm curled around his waist like a protective barrier.

He turns his head. He's up before the sun has even risen. A habit he can't break.

Ilya is asleep on his stomach, chest bare, one arm draped across Shane's waist. His face is turned toward Shane's shoulder, hair a sleepy, curly mess over his forehead, mouth just barely parted. His golden cross necklace lies in a pool on the mattress next to his jaw.

He looks younger in his sleep, less carved out of sharpness and instinct. Less like the Brigadier and more like the man Shane only ever gets in pieces- half-hidden smiles, rough hands that know how to be careful, the look in his eyes before he says something dangerous and sincere.

Shane studies him for a long moment.

The last time he'd woken up next to Ilya, he'd left.

It feels like yesterday. The cold sheets, the darkness, his own pulse loud in his ears as he gathered his clothes and forced himself not to look back.

And then Ilya had come for him, landed in Singapore, and walked into Shane's with a fury in his eyes that made the devotion hiding under it seem almost impossible.

They'd argued. Harsh voices, harsher honesty, and then, they ended up pressed against each other. On the table, on the wall, on the floor, and then in Shane's apartment, in his bed. Sometime in the middle of the night, all that anger had burned into something quieter. Not less intense, but just true.

Shane reaches out and curls his fingers lightly around Ilya's wrist.

The man stirs immediately, because even asleep, some part of him will always be built to anticipate threat. His brow furrows before his eyes open as he lifts his head. He sniffs, mouth pressed tight before he exhales, flopping into the space between Shane's throat and the pillow.

"You are staring again, Моё солнышко (*my sunshine*)," Ilya murmurs, voice rough with sleep.

The vibrations from his voice and the warmth from his breath against Shane's neck have him smiling fondly, tracing circles into Ilya's wrist with his thumb.

"You drool in your sleep."

A blue eye cracks open, head whipping to look at Shane.

"I do not."

"You absolutely do."

"No, this is untrue. You are big fat liar."

"I'm not. You were also snoring."

Ilya shifts in Shane's hold, the black haired man almost frowning at the loss of contact around his waist. It's quickly replaced with a surprised yelp as Ilya starts attacking Shane's sides with his hands.

"Take it back. I am perfect sleeper!"

Shane can't help himself as he squirms, laughter escaping his lips as he starts to playfully swat at Ilya's hands.

"Never! You were loud. Probably woke the whole building."

Ilya is grinning widely as he throws a leg over Shane's waist, keeping him in place as he continues to attack the other man's ribs. It's endearing that he's being just gentle enough not to aggravate any of Shane's injuries. The other man is still laughing as Ilya towers over him on the mattress, pretending to drop down with his elbow raised, landing next to his shoulder as he lets out a shout.

Shane can hardly catch his breath as they tussle around for a little while, grinning and throwing jabs at each other as the sheets tangle around their legs.

It's too much and not enough. It all feels like a dream, leaving Shane warm all over.

When they both start to tire, they resettle on the bed, tangled in each other's arms, breathing heavy while holding one another. Shane is pressed to Ilya's chest. He can hear the frantic rhythm of his heart, feel the gold metal cross pressed against his cheek.

Ilya's warmth is so distracting- more than distracting.

It grounds Shane in a way that makes him feel uneasy. It's the kind of grounding that makes a person believe impossible things.

Like, maybe this can last. Maybe love doesn't always have to be some sort of leverage others can use. Maybe, for once, they got ahead of the fire instead of barely surviving it.

Shane closes his eyes for a moment.

When he opens them again, Ilya is still looking at him.

Not playful now.

Just there.

"You left," Ilya says quietly.

Not accusing.

Somehow, that makes it worse.

"I know."

"You didn't leave a message."

"Ilya-"

"No." Ilya shakes his head once against the pillow. "I understand why."

Shane studies his face, skeptical in the way he always is when confronted with emotional grace.

“You do?”

Ilya gives him a look that is almost offended. “You think I am only dramatic and pretty?”

“I think you are mostly dramatic.”

“Rude.”

Shane’s hand drifts unconsciously over Ilya’s ribs, his chest, settling flat over his sternum as if checking that he is really here.

Ilya’s expression softens.

“You left because you thought the distance would keep them from touching you. Touching us,” he says, carding a hand through Shane’s hair, tucking a few strands behind the man’s ear. “You left because you thought if you took yourself off board, I would be less vulnerable. So would you.”

Shane doesn’t answer immediately, because then it would be a confession, and after what they’d just been through, after experiencing a night and morning where he still woke up in the same bed as Ilya, he didn’t want to have to admit how ridiculous it all sounded now. That he’d almost let this all go.

Instead, he buried himself closer to Ilya, refusing to look at the man. The low rumble in Ilya’s chest as he chuckled, before pressing a kiss to the top of Shane’s head, and pulling him in tighter, had Shane’s heart practically bursting out of his chest.

“It was very noble of you, моя любовь (*my love*). Very stupid. But very you.”

Shane groaned, the faintest hint of a smile ghosting his lips. “You crossed continents just to tell me that?”

“I crossed continents because you are impossible to argue with from that far away.”

“That’s not true.”

“You are right,” Ilya says gravely. “I can threaten you by text, but emotional effect is not the same.”

Shane laughs, watching as Ilya’s eyes crinkle a little at the sides. Then, the noise catches in his throat, quiet and helpless, like he shouldn’t be allowed to do that. His mouth goes straight, something feels pinched in his throat.

Ilya’s face changes at the sound. Not surprise exactly. At first, it was relief, now it just feels like confirmation. As if he needed proof that Shane is really here, too. Not just alive. Not just breathing.

Here.

Ilya lifts a hand and runs his thumb slowly along Shane's cheekbone. "I did not come all this way so you could wake up and become cold."

"I'm not cold."

"You are making...how you say- logistical face."

"That is not a thing."

"Да, it should not be a thing. It is a terrible thing," Ilya informs him. "One of your worst qualities. Right after leaving me in hotels."

Shane winces. "You're never shutting up about that."

"Never."

He says it with such smug certainty that Shane can't help the fond exasperation that tugs at his mouth. It softens him more than he means it to. More than he's used to permitting.

Ilya notices. Of course, he notices.

He always notices.

Shane looks at him for another long moment, taking in the disheveled hair, the sleep-heavy gaze, the way this terrifying man is lying in Shane's bed with all the careless entitlement of someone who has already decided he belongs there.

And maybe he does.

"Are you staying?" Shane asks quietly. He can feel Ilya's arms tense around him immediately.

His expression changes. The flirty edge remains, but beneath it is something deeper. Something chosen.

"For as long as you need me to," he says. Then, more honest than Shane expects, "For as long as we need to decide how to do this without being stupid."

"What if we can't do this?"

There's a flash of something in Ilya's eyes, Shane thinks it's determination.

"We will. I will stay here as long as it takes."

Shane's eyes burn unexpectedly for half a second, and he looks away before Ilya can make that unbearable soft face he gets when he sees too much.

Unfortunately, Ilya just slides his hands down until he's ghosting the waistband of Shane's boxer briefs, tugging him forward until he has to brace himself with one arm against the

mattress.

“What are you doing.”

“Keeping you here.”

“We need to talk.”

“We are talking.”

“We need to be talking seriously.”

Ilya groans like Shane has personally offended him. “You are incredibly unsexy at sunrise.”

“You’re the one who brought up the hotel!”

“And you are still obsessed with me. Very embarrassing for you.”

Shane shoves at his shoulder. Ilya barely moves, letting out a small snort.

“You’re insufferable.”

“Yes.” Ilya smiles, all lazy Russian confidence and morning wreckage. “But I am your insufferable problem.”

Shane’s face gives him away for just a second, because Ilya’s eyes soften immediately.

He reaches up and cups the back of Shane’s neck.

“No- wait,” he says quietly. “That came out wrong.”

Shane blinks at him.

“I am not your problem,” Ilya says, still looking directly at him. “I am your choice.”

That almost undoes him.

Ilya says it with the kind of calm certainty Shane has spent his whole life pretending he doesn’t want from anyone. He lowers himself fully, pressing his forehead against Ilya’s. Their noses brush.

Outside, the city keeps waking. Inside, the room is all warm skin and quiet breath and the ache of something too big to say out loud.

“I hate that you’re so good at this,” Shane murmurs.

“At what?”

“At saying things that sound stupid until they don’t.”

Ilya grins. “This is why you love me.”

Shane closes his eyes. "You're a lot."

"And yet."

"And yet," Shane echoes, because there is nothing else to say.

They lie there for another few minutes, tangled up in the kind of softness neither of them was built for. It doesn't feel fragile. That's the strange thing. It feels earned.

Eventually, Shane shifts, and Ilya tightens his arm once in protest.

"We actually do need to talk."

"Ughh, Hollanderrrrr-"

"Do you want to leave this world with me or not?"

Ilya opens one eye. "You know, when you say it like that-"

Shane leans down and kisses him, mostly to shut him up.

It works for all of three seconds.

When they part, Ilya is smiling against his mouth.

"Again," he murmurs.

Shane kisses him again, slower this time, not desperate, and when he finally pulls away, he rests his forehead against Ilya's, brushing over his cheekbones with his thumb.

"We do this clean."

Ilya nods, the humor fading into clarity. "Yes."

"No gaps. No panic. No one gets to look at what we are and call it weakness."

"Agreed."

Shane sits up fully this time, dragging a hand through his hair. "You were already supposed to be on your way to that regional meeting."

"I was."

"And now?"

"I was going few days early, anyway."

Shane stares at him. "That bought you how long?"

"Not enough."

Shane throws him a flat look. "That's not helpful."

Ilya only smiles wider.

Then he reaches for Shane's wrist before he can stand completely, thumb brushing over the pulse there.

His voice, when he speaks again, is lower. More serious.

"We separate once," he says. "Only once. To close the doors behind us properly."

Shane stills.

Ilya isn't asking him to run again. He isn't talking about another vanishing act, another sacrifice dressed up as strategy. He's saying: we do this together, even when we're apart, and then we never separate again.

Shane turns his hand and links their fingers.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

Ilya watches their hands for a second before answering.

"You stay in Singapore for a few days," he says. "Long enough for people to know you are here and working. You set things up properly. Then, you go back to Boston."

Shane's gaze lifts. "To see Yuna."

"Yes."

The name presses old loyalty into the room like a third presence.

Shane swallows.

"You're going back to Moscow."

Ilya's mouth thins. "Briefly."

"You don't think your father will accept a quiet disappearance? Your silence?"

"He will accept profit. He may not like it, but he will accept it."

Shane studies him. "And if he doesn't?"

Ilya looks almost bored at the idea. "Then I stop being polite."

That does not reassure Shane nearly as much as Ilya seems to think it should.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

They hold each other's gaze for a beat too long.

There it is again. That awful, tender thing under Shane's ribs. He knows exactly what kind of man Ilya is when cornered. He knows exactly what kind of son Grigori has tried to shape out of punishment and power. He also knows, with a sharpness that makes him almost angry, that Ilya does not belong to that man nearly as much as Grigori likes to imagine.

Shane squeezes his hand.

"We can't have any unnecessary fires."

Ilya raises an eyebrow. "You say this to me after I flew here?"

"Well, no more unnecessary fires."

"It was a romantic one."

"It was an unstable one."

"Same thing, sometimes."

Shane exhales, equal parts fond and exasperated. "You're impossible."

"Yes," Ilya says. Then, very softly: "And I am still here."

Shane looks at him.

Really looks.

This man, impossible and sharp and infuriating, who crossed an ocean because Shane leaving had hurt too much. This man, who could have turned the pain into violence, could have made it into punishment, and instead came here to tell Shane the truth face-to-face.

No more pretending.

No more waiting.

No more loving each other only in the spaces between blood and strategy.

Shane bends and kisses him one more time, brief and warm.

"Coffee first," he mutters against Ilya's mouth. "We can plan our escape after."

Ilya smiles lazily. "Okay."

They move around the kitchen with the odd, intimate awkwardness of two men who are very good at sex and violence and not quite used to anything this quiet.

Shane makes coffee.

Ilya leans against the counter, barefoot, watching like he's been assigned the role of "supervisor" and is taking it extremely seriously despite contributing nothing.

"You are doing it wrong," he says.

"I'm making coffee."

"Yes. Wrong."

Shane doesn't look at him. "Fuck off, you usually drink instant."

"Is because I am being efficient."

"It's because you have no standards."

Ilya hums like he's considering that, eyes still fixed on Shane's hands as he moves around the kitchen.

The toast burns.

Shane swears under his breath, flicking it into the sink.

Ilya straightens immediately, offended. "This is what you give me? Burnt offering?"

"You're distracting me."

"I did nothing."

"You're goading me."

"What is this word? I do not know it."

Ilya pushes off the counter and moves in, pressing his chest to Shane's back. He can feel how Shane relaxes, just slightly leaning into his hold as Ilya wraps his arms around his waist and places a light kiss on the top of his left shoulder.

"You are supposed to be impressive," Ilya murmurs, peering into the pan like he expects better results from it. "This is very disappointing."

"You cannot judge me," Shane says. "I saw you catch that napkin on fire with your lighter when you were trying to make tea in that motel room."

"I was being inventive."

"It was almost arson."

Ilya waves that away, already bored with the argument, his attention slipping back to Shane instead. His gaze lingers on Shane's shoulders, on the apron he insisted on wearing over his bare chest, on the way his hair is still a mess from sleep, on the careful, focused way he cracks another egg.

Something about it catches in his chest.

“You look...” he starts.

Shane glances over his shoulder with a warning look. “Careful.”

Ilya squints slightly. “You look...”

He frowns, like he’s trying to translate a thought that doesn’t quite exist in his vocabulary.

Shane huffs, pausing mid-motion. “I look what?”

Ilya frowns, searching. “I don’t know the word.”

“That’s reassuring-”

“You look boring.”

Shane’s eyebrows fly up. “Excuse me?”

Ilya tilts his head, dissatisfied. “No, no, not boring like *blah*, boring like...what is word when couple does stuff together. In home? Uh, одомашненный... is like boring together.”

It takes Shane a very confused moment to process before he lets out a short laugh.

“Are you trying to say *domestic*?”

Ilya’s eyes light up. He snaps his fingers and pats Shane’s chest. “Ah! Yes! This word. Domestic.”

Shane smiles at him, shaking his head. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I am correct. Да? Like married couple.”

Shane nearly drops the spatula.

“What.”

“You heard me.”

“That is the most insane thing you’ve ever said.”

“Not even close,” Ilya says easily, a sly smirk on his face as he leans in close to Shane’s ear.

“I have said far worse things while you were begging under me naked.”

Shane shoots him a look over his shoulder, but there’s heat in his face now, creeping up his neck, and Ilya catches it immediately.

This time, something in his expression shifts.

It’s not teasing, but something quieter. Softer. Almost startled.

He hugs Shane a little tighter, resting his chin on his shoulder.

“I mean it,” he says, voice lower now, stripped of humor. “This-” a small gesture between them, the kitchen, the morning, “-this feels like something I was not supposed to have.”

The pan sizzles softly in front of them, filling the silence.

Shane’s throat tightens. He doesn’t know what to do with the sincerity.

“Me too.”

Ilya looks at him for a long second, like he’s memorizing something, then leans in and presses a brief, careful kiss to Shane’s temple, and then, because he can’t not, presses another soft kiss to Shane’s shoulder before pulling back just enough to breathe again.

It’s so gentle it almost feels like a mistake.

And because Shane can’t let anything stay that soft for too long without pretending to fight it, he mutters, “If you make me ruin breakfast because you’re being emotional, I’m blaming you forever.”

Ilya laughs, low and bright, the tension breaking just enough.

“Yes, мой дорогой, (*my dear*),” he says. “Blame me forever.”

Shane stares at the eggs like they’ve personally betrayed him. “You’re enjoying this too much.”

“I am enjoying you too much.”

Shane closes his eyes briefly, like that might help.

It doesn’t.

By the time the city has fully woken, the plan is set.

Shane will stay in Singapore just long enough to reinforce the story already forming around him. That he’s been relocated, that he’s quietly expanding overseas operations while recovering, that his absence from Yuna’s side is strategic, not personal.

Singapore will continue without him once he establishes someone to run it, but with the right planning, it will still look like his operation. As long as people believe he’s managing things there, no one will look too closely at where he actually is.

In the background, he’s already built something separate- legitimate on paper, profitable in practice, and far enough removed from the main network that it can’t be easily tied back to the Yakuza. It still benefits them, but it requires his approval and oversight, which keeps him protected and gives him an exit.

Before he disappears, he'll fly to Boston and speak to Yuna in person. She deserves that much. And he needs her to understand that this isn't abandonment- he simply can't live this life anymore.

Ilya leaves for the scheduled regional meeting that afternoon. From there, he'll return to Moscow to close out what remains of his role. On his terms. His father won't expect it, not fully. He's put too much effort into making Ilya the perfect son- the perfect successor- to believe he would walk away. But Ilya isn't asking for permission. He has enough leverage to make sure walking away isn't mistaken for weakness or punished like treason.

Then they disappear.

Not together. Not immediately. That would be too easy to follow. Too obvious.

Shane will move first.

From Boston, using one of the financial identities he was trained to build. He'll move through Montreal, then further east under false paperwork and quiet transportation.

Ilya will follow days later, on a separate route. Private air to Europe, commercial under a dead identity, then a final leg no one in his father's circle would think to track.

They choose Nova Scotia in the end. Not permanent, but intentional. Shane wants to go back to the country he barely remembers calling home. There's a house held under trusted ownership in a small coastal town, with enough ocean and trees for them to breathe.

It's not forever, but it's the first place they can be honest.

Three days later

The compound in Boston looks exactly the same.

That is the cruel thing about institutions built on loyalty and discipline. They remain standing even when something inside you has already shifted beyond repair.

Shane walks through the gates with the familiar sensation of every camera registering his face and every member bowing slightly as he passes. The air is cooler here than in Singapore, sharper against his skin. He had spent years finding comfort in this place's order- its rituals, the certainty of its rules.

Now every step feels like walking through a former life. Stiff. Suffocating.

He can't wait to leave.

Yuna's office is unchanged.

Minimal. Immaculate. Polished wood, clean lines, no wasted movement in the room- or in the woman who sits at its center. She looks up when Shane enters, and for one brief instant, something in her face flickers before composure seals back over it.

He toes off his shoes before stepping inside, lowering himself onto the cushion in front of her desk.

He bows and holds it.

Not shallow, but head to floor, hands flat against the mats. Deep. Sincere.

When he straightens, her gaze lingers on him for a beat too long.

“You look rested,” she says.

He shouldn’t be moved, but something in him shifts anyway.

“I am,” he replies.

A faint pause.

“Singapore has been agreeing with you.”

“It clarified things.”

That earns him the smallest narrowing of her eyes. She motions for him to continue, but Shane hesitates, jaw tightening, worried that if he opens his mouth, everything will fall out at once.

Of course, she notices.

“I’m promoting Kenji,” he says. “Effective immediately.”

Her expression does not change. “To Wakagashira.”

“Yes.”

“And you?”

Shane pulls out a binder- notes, structures, everything he’s been building- and places it on her desk, sliding it toward her.

“I created an offshore network. Trusts, channels, shipping, infrastructure- it’s all clean. It functions separately from the organization. Legitimately. Under my supervision.”

She studies him for a long moment before pulling the binder closer and opening it.

“You’ve made something profitable for us, but difficult for you to be removed from.”

“I wanted to make myself useful from farther away.”

“Useful,” she repeats, as though tasting the word. “From farther away.”

Shane’s shoulders remain squared. “The organization will be stronger for it.”

“Will it?”

There is no point avoiding it.

“I’m leaving.”

Silence settles through the office like smoke.

He expected anger. Disappointment. Something colder.

Expected her to raise her voice. To tell him how stupid he was being.

Instead, Yuna only looks at him, and in that gaze, there is such old, complicated knowledge that Shane suddenly feels far younger than he is. As if maybe, he’s misunderstood her all this time.

“For him,” she says at last.

Not accusing. Just soft. True.

Shane swallows.

“For myself too,” he says, which is harder to admit. “But yes. For him.”

Yuna sighs, closing the binder, then rises and walks toward the wall overlooking the garden.

For a long time, she says nothing.

Shane stays where he is, hands in his lap, chest tight with loyalty and guilt and something that feels dangerously close to grief.

The garden is peaceful. A faint breeze rustles the trees. A bird calls somewhere nearby. Water streams steadily over stones.

When she finally speaks, her voice is quieter.

“He used to come into my office without knocking.”

Shane blinks, thrown by the shift.

“He said it was one of the rules of this place that should’ve been a suggestion if you were already family.” A breath that almost becomes a laugh. “He was wrong about many things. But he was very charming while being wrong.”

Something warm and painful blooms in Shane’s chest.

Yuna keeps her eyes on the garden.

“He was opinionated. Stubborn. Impossible when he thought he was right.” A pause. “He believed too easily in the goodness of structures. In rules. In systems. He thought if something was built carefully enough, it would hold.”

Her gaze lowers slightly, focusing somewhere far beyond the compound.

“He believed I could be more than what I inherited.”

Shane’s throat tightens.

“Sounds like he was right.”

At that, Yuna turns back to him. There is something unguarded in her face now- a glassy brightness in her eyes, a quiet exhaustion.

“You remind me a lot of him,” she says softly.

The breath leaves Shane all at once.

Not because he’s never wondered, he has, quietly. In the parts of himself he doesn’t like to examine for too long.

But hearing it from her...

He has no defense for that.

Yuna’s mouth softens, just slightly.

“The way you think,” she says. “The way you hold yourself together when you’re hurt. Your blind determination. Your loyalty.”

Shane can’t breathe properly. He swallows hard against the pressure in his throat.

His eyes burn. He keeps his expression still by force of training, but some part of him knows she can see straight through it anyway.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t have more time with him,” she says.

The ache in his chest becomes unbearable.

Instead of answering, he asks the question that has lived under his ribs for years.

“Are you angry?”

Yuna holds his gaze.

“Yes,” she says.

His heart sinks.

Then she sighs.

“I am angry that this life requires you to harden as a child. That loyalty and survival are the only things that feel necessary here.” Her voice softens. “I am angry that when you are finally

given a choice to leave, you hesitate, because you think it might look like betrayal. That I might be disappointed in you for choosing it.”

Shane’s composure slips. Not entirely. Just enough for her to see the truth.

He looks away. He can’t hold her gaze.

“I’m sorry.”

Yuna watches him for a long moment.

Then she shakes her head.

“No,” she says. “It is not your fault.”

The sound that leaves him is something between a laugh and grief.

She walks towards him with a look of determination in her eyes.

Not Oyabun now, not entirely.

She settles her hand on his right shoulder, gripping it tightly.

It’s something maternal, something he has missed so badly he taught himself it didn’t exist.

“When your father was killed, I wasn’t the only one who learned to wear a mask,” she says quietly. “You learned to survive by becoming necessary. And you were very good at it.”

Shane’s eyes sting.

“But necessity is not the same as living.”

For a moment, the room goes still, and then the pressure from her hand is gone. Shane almost wants to reach back out and grab her hand, hold on to the warmth.

Yuna’s expression settles back into composure, not cold, but controlled. She makes her way back behind the desk, gesturing at the binder.

“Your withdrawal is accepted,” she says. “You did not run from responsibility. You organized properly and handed control over efficiently.”

“I tried.”

“You did well, Shane.”

He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

Doesn’t know what else he should do.

She’s just told him he can leave, and he doesn’t know how to respond to that.

He watches her for a moment longer, noticing the way she taps her finger against the binder in the same absent rhythm he uses himself.

He sits there a moment longer, just staring, as he tries to memorize the woman in front of him exactly as she is.

Without another word, he nods once. Final. Then bows his head again and stands.

He turns to leave, because if he stays any longer, he might say something humiliatingly earnest.

He's three steps from the door when Yuna speaks.

"Shō-chan."

He stops.

The name pierces like a bullet through his chest- warmth cracking something old and frozen open.

She hasn't called him that in years. Not since he was young enough that his worries were about imaginary monsters and if his father was coming home late from work. Not since before David died or since softness became something you had to earn in silence.

He turns back, something younger in his expression before he can stop it.

Yuna's face softens, almost unbearably gentle.

In her mother tongue, quietly, she says, *"Take care of yourself."*

It's not an order. Not a warning.

A blessing.

Something thick and painful rises in Shane's throat. He bows deeply, more than protocol, more than respect. Something that reaches back through the years.

When he speaks, his voice is unsteady.

"Goodbye, Mama."

He straightens just enough to look at her one last time.

"Thank you," he whispers, voice almost cracking.

Then he turns and leaves before she can see the tears rolling down his face.

Moscow

When Ilya arrives, the sky has already started to turn the color of rust. He had already alerted his most trusted advisors to the change in command and drives to his childhood home alone, so he can make a clean getaway after the meeting with his father.

The house doesn't feel like a home. It's cold and quiet, even when there are a dozen staff living there.

Ilya enters Grigori's office at once. He has no interest in waiting.

The room smells exactly the way it always has. Smoke, polished wood, gunpowder, expensive liquor, and the metallic undercurrent of power.

Grigori doesn't stand. Of course, he doesn't.

He sits behind the desk like he was carved there- an iron monument to control. A weight of oppression on Ilya's shoulders- all expectation and discipline and the constant implication that love, if it existed at all, had to be earned.

Ilya stops in front of the desk, watching as his father sits lazily in his chair, one hand wrapped around a glass, the other reading over some papers in his hands.

"I see you've been diverting assets," Grigori says, not bothering to look up.

"Yes."

"And you reassigned management positions."

"Yes."

"You diverted the plane before the meeting."

"Yes."

Grigori's gaze snaps up to stare at Ilya, eyes sharp. *"Without authorization."*

Ilya shrugs. *"We weren't in a hurry."*

It's silent for a moment, Grigori glaring up at his son.

"Did you forget your position?"

Ilya lets out a harsh laugh. *"How could I when you feel the need to remind me so often?"* He shrugs again. *"Maybe I've outgrown it."*

Grigori throws the papers down, leaning forward in his chair now. *"You are not Pakhan."*

"Didn't say I was," Ilya replies. *"Nor do I want to be."*

Grigori's mouth tightens as he processes Ilya's words. The younger man can see Grigori's knuckles turning white as he clenches the glass. His other hand points accusingly at Ilya, eyes squinted. *"This is because of him."*

Ilya lets out a short, disbelieving breath- half laugh, half scoff.

"This is about me. And my position here."

Grigori's eyes flash. *"You think this is amusing?"*

"I think it's convenient," Ilya snaps. *"That every decision I've ever made has been reduced to the one instance where I chose for myself rather than listened or obeyed you."*

"For a man," Grigori spits out.

Ilya's smile turns sharp. *"No. For myself."*

Grigori stands. Slow. Controlled. Dangerous. At one point, Ilya would've cowered away in fear, the presence that wrapped itself around his father felt incomprehensible. Now, it just feels irritating.

"You've been embarrassing this family."

"I protected it."

"You exposed your weakness."

"I exposed a faction that thought they could test me and survive it. They're all dead."

Grigori steps closer. *"You burned them because you lost control."*

Ilya's eyes go cold. His hands are clenched at his sides. *"I burned them because they touched something that was mine."*

The room is still, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

Grigori feels it. The shift.

There's something in the way his eye twitches that has Ilya wondering if he's accepting what's being said to him or just sitting with the rage he feels at Ilya for turning his back.

"You would dismantle everything I built for you," he clips. *"For a man."*

Ilya lets out a quiet laugh. *"You didn't build anything for me. You conditioned me to fit into your expectations."*

Grigori's jaw tightens. *"I made you capable."*

"You made me useful," Ilya shoots back. *"There's a difference."*

"You were corrected because you needed discipline."

"I was corrected because you couldn't tolerate anything you didn't control."

The words crack between them.

Grigori's voice drops, the rage still present. *"I gave you everything. You are my son."*

Ilya steps closer now, matching him. No hesitation.

"Biologically, maybe. But you never treated me with the love and care deserved for the title of father."

Silence. Sharp enough to cut. Ilya can see the old man practically seething in his anger.

"You would walk away," Grigori grounds out, *"from power. From succession. From legacy. From everything I gave you."*

Ilya tilts his head, almost bored.

"I already have."

It's explosive. Grigori moves quick for a man his age, slams the glass against the desk, shattering it into a million pieces. Ilya doesn't even flinch as he stares the Pakhan down.

"You think you can just leave?" Grigori shouts.

"I know I can," Ilya replies, matching his tone.

Grigori scoffs, jabbing a finger into Ilya's chest. His voice is sharp, clipped. *"No one leaves this family."*

Ilya smiles then. Slow, deliberate, and completely without warmth. He takes a step back, arms crossed over his chest.

"I do."

There's a pause as Grigori studies him, his jaw tightening. Something darker creeping in.

"You think I would allow that?"

There it is. The real threat.

Ilya doesn't flinch as he looks around the room.

"I think," he says quietly, *"you're going to choose not to stop me."*

Grigori's eyes narrow. *"And why would I do that?"*

Ilya leans in just slightly. Just enough to feel intimidating.

"Because I've already made it very expensive not to."

The silence that drops is heavy. Grigori doesn't move.

"Explain."

Ilya's smile sharpens.

"No." He pauses before continuing. "You don't need details. You just need to understand that if I don't walk out of this room clean, neither do you. And if you ever decide to burn me in the future, I've made arrangements."

It's not a threat. It's a fact, and Ilya already knows how his father will react.

Grigori's jaw tightens.

"You would turn your back on your own family."

Ilya's expression goes flat.

"No," he says. "I would protect it at all costs. You are not my family."

Grigori steps closer. *"You are weak."*

Ilya laughs. Actually laughs.

"No," he says, shaking his head. "I'm just done pretending that I care about you. That I care about this."

Grigori's face closes. Hard. Controlled.

"If you walk away," Grigori says, voice flat, "Do not come back."

Ilya nods once.

"Wasn't planning on it."

Grigori spits at him, baring his teeth. *"You are not my son. You are weak and cowardly."*

Ilya's smile returns- sharp, cruel.

"And what about you? You don't know what to do with someone you can't control."

Grigori doesn't respond.

He doesn't have anything left to throw at Ilya's face.

Ilya adjusts his cuffs, slow, deliberate. Composed. He turns, not waiting for Grigori to respond.

At the door, he pauses.

"You taught me how to survive this place," he says, a satisfied grin settling on his face. "You should have considered what would happen when I decided I didn't need it anymore."

Then he leaves.

He doesn't feel the kind of grief Shane felt in Boston.

There is no soft ache of family here. No almost-mother at the window. No dead father lingering warmly in memory.

What he feels instead is a sharp, clean relief.

Like stepping out of a room that has smelled wrong your whole life and realizing fresh air existed the whole time.

He exhales as he closes the door to the house behind him, the tension in his shoulders leaving for what feels like the first time in years. Starting the car, a smile appears on his face.

Now it's time to really start living.

Shane leaves Boston under one of the identities he built years ago. Everything about it fits. The paperwork, the accounts, the movement patterns. He's done this before.

That's what makes it unsettling.

The steps come easily. Too easily.

Border crossings. Transfers. Quiet handoffs arranged through people who don't ask questions. He moves through Montreal without incident, shifts east under a different name, another set of documents, another version of himself.

At no point does anything go wrong. It doesn't feel like anyone is watching him. He doesn't feel monitored.

Maybe that's why things don't totally feel real.

By the time he reaches the coast, there is nothing left to trace but the idea of him.

No one calls. No one follows.

No one stops him.

The house is waiting when he arrives.

It hasn't been checked or secured. It's just... there.

Wooden siding worn pale by salt. A gravel drive that crunches too loudly under tires. Windows that let in too much sky.

It doesn't feel like a safe house.

It feels like somewhere a person might actually live.

That is the strangest part.

There are no checkpoints. No guards. No contingency plans or wires under the floorboards. Just a narrow kitchen, a bedroom facing the water, and a living room with too much space, which feels like an odd thing to say when the entire cottage could probably fit in the bedroom he was just using in Singapore.

But, it makes sense to someone like him. Someone used to moving with purpose but now, suddenly, has time on his hands.

He drives half an hour into town to pick up groceries from the local farmers' market, moves around in a quiet daze amongst the families and couples, trying to convince himself that this is real life.

That this is *his* life.

Once he returns, he immediately does a perimeter check, scans the exits, and makes sure everything is in working order.

Some habits will never die.

The first night passes without incident.

The second feels like it stretches.

He doesn't sleep deeply, not out of fear, but out of habit. Being in such a quiet place feels wrong.

He keeps expecting something to interrupt it. A call. A message. A correction.

Nothing comes.

By the third night, the silence has started to feel like something fragile.

Like if he acknowledges it too directly, it might collapse.

At three in the morning, the sound of tires on gravel cuts through it.

Shane is awake, gun in hand, before he fully registers why. His body is already shifting into something cold and precise, as he presses his frame against the wall by the doorframe.

Headlights move across the windows.

The engine cuts.

A door opens.

Footsteps.

Not careful enough to be a threat.

Familiar.

Shane moves into the hallway, barefoot, gun low but ready, and watches the front door unlock.

It opens.

Ilya steps inside with two duffles, looking like seventy-two hours of movement compressed into a single expression. Tired, wired, and just barely contained.

For a second, neither of them moves.

Then Shane sets the gun down- too hard- and closes the distance in a few fast steps.

Ilya barely has time to drop his bags before Shane is launching himself into his space, gripping the back of his neck and kissing him with all the restraint of the past three days snapping at once.

Ilya catches him immediately, both hands gripping at his waist.

Solid.

Here.

When they break apart, both of them are breathing harder. Shane rests his forehead on Ilya's, closing his eyes as he tries to calm his racing heart.

"You took too long," Shane says, voice rough and shaking.

Ilya brushes his nose against Shane's temple, a faint smile pulling at his mouth.

"I have been traveling nonstop between countries for three days, and this is the first thing you have to say to me?" He says with a small pout, "I might need to rethink this whole arrangement again..."

Shane lets out a short, uneven laugh and presses his forehead into Ilya's shoulder.

"I...I missed you."

The way Shane's voice goes so soft and fragile tugs at something deep in Ilya's chest. All he wants to do is hold him close and never let go.

His arms tighten around Shane, steady and grounding, as the other man's hands travel around Ilya's back, bunching his fist in the fabric of the Russian's leather jacket.

"I told you," Ilya murmurs into Shane's hair. "I would come back."

Shane closes his eyes.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "You did."

Later, after the bags have been put away and the locks and sills have been double checked out of habit, they end up in the bedroom with the lights low and the ocean sounding distant and

constant outside the windows.

The room is warmer than the rest of the cottage.

Their cottage, Shane thinks, and then immediately tries not to think too closely about it because it might unravel him in a way he is not currently equipped to survive yet.

Ilya stands at the foot of the bed, sleeves rolled to his forearms, hair still wind-tossed from travel, looking at Shane like he is trying to relearn him.

Shane knows he's doing the same.

There is no frantic edge to the air tonight. No fear that a phone will ring, no knowledge that dawn means separation, no rush to take what they can before the rest of the world notices.

Just this.

The quiet after choosing.

Shane steps closer first.

He reaches for Ilya's hands, threads their fingers together, and for a second they only stand there in the dim light, foreheads touching.

"You're really here," Shane murmurs in a tone that sounds like disbelief.

Ilya exhales, a small smile on his lips as he squeezes their hands. "I am beginning to suspect you think I am ghost."

Shane's thumb shifts slightly against the back of his hand as he lets out a small laugh, shaking his head.

"No, I just..." he says. Then, quieter, more honest than he means to be, "I just... didn't know what it would feel like when you were actually here."

Ilya goes still for half a second, like he's recalibrating something. The look on his face and the way his eyes soften as he stares at Shane makes something in the other man's chest tighten with emotion. Ilya brings their hands to his chest, right over his heart, kissing their knuckles as his eyes never leave contact with Shane's.

"Like this, моя любовь (*my love*), yes?" he asks, not teasing.

Shane nods once.

"Yeah."

Ilya leans in and kisses him slowly. It's not hungry at first, just careful.

The kind of kiss that settles gradually, like something learning the shape of him again.

Shane melts into it in phases, not because he's uncertain, but because he doesn't have to rush.

Because the absence of urgency feels like a weight lifting in his bones.

When they pull back just enough to breathe, Ilya's voice is lower.

"You feel different."

Shane huffs softly, but there's no edge to it. "So do you."

"How?"

Shane considers it, eyes still half-lidded, fingers tightening slightly where they're still linked.

"Quieter," he says. "In a good way."

Ilya's mouth curves faintly.

"You just say something about me is good."

"Don't get used to it."

"I would not dream of it."

Shane lets out a small laugh as hands move, clothes loosen, a shirt slides to the floor, then another.

Ilya's mouth trails from Shane's lips to his jaw, his throat, pausing every so often like he can't quite stop himself from checking whether Shane is still real under his hands.

His hand slides from the back of Shane's head to his waist, steady, grounding.

"Softer, less like you are about to disappear," he murmurs.

Shane's breath catches just slightly.

"Yeah," he says. "That too."

A moment passes between them, quieter than anything they've ever shared before.

Then Shane tilts his head, brushing his mouth back against Ilya's.

"I could still take you out, though," he murmurs.

That draws a low laugh out of Ilya, and the sound goes warm and deep through Shane's chest.

When they finally fall back onto the bed, it's with a graceless tangle of limbs and blankets that makes Shane swear softly and Ilya grin like an idiot.

“Very elegant,” Ilya observes.

“Shut up.”

“You are blushing.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No,” Shane says, with a clarity in his eyes that makes Ilya’s stomach drop. “I really don’t.”

The heat between them is now threaded with something gentler. Hands that linger. Mouths that return not out of need but because they want to. The long, slow intimacy of being able to take time with each other instead of stealing it.

When Ilya presses Shane into the mattress, it doesn’t feel like dominance.

It feels like being held.

And when Shane pulls him closer, brings him into a mouth-bruising kiss, it doesn’t feel like clutching at something already vanishing.

It feels like a choice.

Later, they lie tangled together under heavy blankets, Shane half on his side with one hand splayed over Ilya’s chest, Ilya flat on his back with his fingers lazily following the lines of Shane’s scars.

The darkness is soft around them. The wind moves somewhere beyond the glass. For a while, neither of them speaks.

Then Ilya says, so quietly Shane almost misses it, “I keep thinking I will wake up and find that I imagined this.”

Shane lifts his head slightly. “The cottage?”

“You.” Ilya glances at him, mouth curving faintly. “Though the cottage is also suspicious.”

Shane huffs a laugh.

Ilya’s hand slides up, cupping the back of his neck.

“I have had you in hotel rooms,” he says. “In apartments that were not mine. In cities that were watching. I do not think I knew what it would feel like to have you somewhere quiet, where we did not have to be on guard.”

The rawness of it almost hurts.

Shane looks at him, at this man who has always known how to be intense and terrible and teasing, and who is now saying something so simple it cuts deeper than any grand

declarations ever could.

He leans down and kisses him once, brief and warm.

“You have me,” he says softly.

Ilya’s eyes close for half a second.

“Yes,” he whispers. “I do.”

Epilogue (Months later)

Nova Scotia feels colder than Boston, because it envelops. It’s the kind of cold that sits in the air like mist in the barely rising sun and settles in your bones, chilling you through to your core.

It’s also louder in some ways. The wind against the cottage, seagulls overhead, the ocean forever moving and crashing against the rocks like it’s never once cared about organizations or succession or blood-soaked family names. The cold here is not the weaponized kind Shane remembers from Boston winters. It’s cleaner than that. More blunt. Honest.

The first weeks are strange.

Peace doesn’t arrive as such. It feels like withdrawal.

Shane wakes at every unfamiliar sound. Maps exits automatically. Reaches for weapons that are not there, then lies back down, tense, staring at the ceiling until his heart slows. Ilya pretends not to notice the first few times. Then, one night, he simply reaches across the sheets, takes Shane’s hand, and holds it until the tension ebbs.

Ilya has his own habits.

He watches the tree line too long. Keeps standing with his back to walls. Once, when a delivery truck comes earlier than expected, Shane finds him in the kitchen holding a knife with the expression of a man halfway between embarrassment and murder.

They don’t become unguarded. They just become quieter, gentler.

They grocery shop together and argue over brands of coffee. They walk the rocky shoreline in heavy coats, shoulders brushing, sometimes hands swinging. Shane learns that Ilya hates folding laundry but will do it anyway if Shane is in a bad mood. Ilya learns that Shane cleans when anxious or furious, which makes domestic conflict weirdly efficient at times.

The world, annoyingly, does not collapse without them.

Boston remains steady under Kenji. Shane keeps just enough contact to monitor operations, without being drawn back in. The restructuring he built proves difficult to unravel and too profitable to challenge without causing problems no one wants. Moscow stabilizes exactly

the way Ilya said it would. A few ambitious men test the edges of succession and are handled quickly enough that no one tries again.

No one comes for them.

Maybe because the exits were clean enough.

Maybe because both organizations are too proud to admit how much they know,

Maybe because sometimes the world simply moves on.

A few months later, they start going into town more willingly, less cautiously.

At first, it had been deliberate. Timed. Early mornings, quieter hours, exits mapped out of habit. Shane tracked reflections in glass storefronts, noted who lingered too long, where sightlines broke. They'd moved quickly, got what they needed, and left just as fast.

Now-

Shane walks beside Ilya down the main street with a paper bag tucked under his arm and doesn't automatically catalog every face they pass. Their arms are pressed against one another, and Shane doesn't even tense at the touch.

It's not that the instinct is gone, it's just... more subdued. Less urgent.

The town is small. A handful of shops, a café that always smells like bread and coffee, and a hardware store that seems to sell everything. People nod with faint smiles as they pass. Not because they recognize them, just because that's what people do here.

Normal.

Shane is still getting used to that.

They stop outside the café window while Ilya finishes his coffee, leaning against the railing, bodies close, comfortable in each other's space. Ilya looks like he belongs there.

Which, he does.

Shane watches him for a second. The way he stands without tension, the way his shoulders are relaxed, not set for impact. The way he isn't checking the street every few seconds like something might come for them.

"You're staring," Ilya says without looking at him.

"You gonna charge me for it?" Shane shoots back with an uncharacteristically confident response.

Ilya turns his head, eyebrows lifting.

“Who are you and what have you done with Shane Hollander, most boring Canadian?” Ilya asks.

Shane grins, rolling his eyes lightly.

“What? I’m not allowed to admit you’re nice to look at?”

“Oh, you can admit this all you want, мой дорогой (*my dear*),” Ilya says, taking another sip of his coffee. “I am just afraid you might explode from effort. Your system is not used to it. You might go boom.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh, shaking his head, but something in his chest feels... off.

Not wrong. Just unfamiliar.

Ilya seems to notice this, shifting his weight to bump their shoulders in a way that feels like a nudge to speak his mind.

Shane looks out at the street instead of him, hands loosely clasped in front of him.

“I keep thinking someone’s going to recognize us,” he says after a moment.

“No one here knows who we are.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Ilya studies him properly then.

Shane exhales slowly.

“I mean-” he gestures vaguely, frustrated, “-I don’t feel like I have to hide it.”

“Hide what?”

Shane gives him a look.

Ilya’s mouth curves slightly. “Ah.”

There’s no tension in it. No warning. Just acknowledgment.

“That is because you don’t,” Ilya says.

Shane nods, but it’s slow. Thoughtful.

“Yeah.”

A couple walks past them, talking quietly. Someone across the street laughs. A car door shuts somewhere behind them.

Nothing happens, no one looks twice.

Shane lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"I think that's the part I didn't expect," he says. "Not having to think about it all the time."

Ilya sets his empty cup down beside him and steps a little closer, his hand settling on the small of Shane's back. It's warm and grounding. Shane leans into it.

"You are thinking about it now."

"Yeah."

"Is it a problem?"

Shane glances at him.

There's something open in his expression. Not guarded. Not bracing.

Just... present. He feels calm.

"No," Shane says. Then, quieter, more certain, "It's not."

A pause.

Then, because apparently this is what his life is now, he leans forward, planting a quick peck to Ilya's cheek with a smile.

"I love you."

There's no buildup or hesitation. Just dropped into the middle of a normal, boring day, like it belongs there.

Ilya's thumb caresses his back, gently. A lazy smile on his face.

He steps closer, close enough that they're sharing body heat.

"Я тоже тебя люблю, моё солнышко (*I love you too, my sunshine*)," he says quietly.

"Always."

The Russian settles differently in Shane's chest. Warmer. Heavier.

Shane's mouth twitches.

Then Ilya turns, hooking his fingers into the pocket of Shane's jeans- just enough to pull him half a step closer.

No one reacts, no one cares, as Ilya pulls him into a proper kiss, and everything about it makes sense. It's unhurried, easy, like it belongs there just as much as anything else. It just feels... different.

"I love you," Ilya says again as they break apart.

Shane exhales, something in his chest loosening all at once.

“Yeah,” he says, softly, “I got that.”

Ilya smiles, faint and unguarded.

“Good.”

They stand there for a moment longer, not doing anything remarkable.

Just-

Existing.

Together.

In public.

With nothing to hide.

Eventually, Shane nudges him lightly with his shoulder. “We should go before we’re late for the real estate agent.”

“Ah, yes, back to business,” Ilya sighs dramatically. “More boring talk about boring Canadian places, and boring Canadian homes.”

“I bet you’ve already done a ton of research.”

“Да. I already have several notes.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“First of all-” Ilya starts, pushing off the railing.

Shane rolls his eyes and falls into step beside him.

The conversation drifts.

Easy. Unimportant.

Exactly the kind of thing they never used to have time for.

Behind them, the café door opens and closes.

Ahead of them, the street stretches out, quiet and ordinary.

And for once-

That’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

the end!!

i hope the ending wasn't too lackluster, i felt like with how high intensity their lives have been, i wanted to give them a little bit of calm, a little bit of boring haha

but dw! it's not the end for these two. since the conception of this, i've always had plans for a companion fic centered around their lives after the fact (u can see this is pt 1 of a series). the format is going to be a little different, with a collection of oneshots rather than one continuous storyline

in the meantime, ive uploaded some new works (mafia x undercover detective and one inspired by ember & ice)...i highly recommend u check them out heehee

thank u to everyone who has read and engaged with this story, ive really appreciated the comments and kudos this has been so fun to write

i hope to see u guys soon or in my other works, thanks for reading!!

-weiwei 

Chapter 11: And What Comes After

Chapter Summary

After deciding to walk away from their lives in the Yakuza and Bratva, respectively, Shane and Ilya think they've left the worst behind them.

But who's going to tell them that fatherhood is no easy feat?

A companion fic to "Love in a Time of Organized Crime", documenting what happens after they leave their old lives. A collection of oneshots about domesticity and life with their two kids. Basically, a whole lot of fluff, romance, and crackhead energy.

Chapter Notes

part 2 of this series is out now! enjoy a bit of the preview below:)

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

Five years ago, if someone were to ask Shane how he was able to function on less than five hours of sleep a night, he would've said it was easy.

Business deals would often happen long after the rest of the city was asleep. Shane would meet with the Yakuza's associates to close out on agreements and transactions, check warehouse inventory, and catch up on paperwork he hadn't gotten to during the day. He'd often fall into bed just as the sun was starting to creep back up, and wake for an early morning workout just as the rest of the city was starting its day.

Rinse and repeat.

It had been easy to dismiss the sleep, his body quickly conforming to discipline, control, and routine.

But that was over five years ago.

Presently, he's internally cussing himself out for all those years and all those *hours* of taking sleep for granted.

It's almost four in the morning, and he's currently pacing the length of the twins' nursery with one of the terrors cradled in his arms. He blinks rapidly, trying to fend off exhaustion as he rocks Mila back and forth to no avail, her wails pitching higher in his ear, causing him to wince in discomfort. He can hear a similar cry from down the hall in the kitchen.

Mila is loud. Impossibly loud, Shane thinks, for something so small.

Her tiny fist is curled into his shirt, face red, scrunched, and tear-stricken. Her dark curly hair is sticking out in all directions- Shane thinks his probably doesn't look much better.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Mila," Shane murmurs, as he switches Mila in his hold, placing her on his chest, hand cradling the back of her head and neck for support. "Why don't we go check on Papa and Niko? He's supposed to be preparing your bottles."

Shane pads quietly down the hall, past the living room, and to the kitchen, where he stops and almost laughs at the sight.

Ilya is rocking back and forth with their son, Niko, in his arms, eyes closed, head almost hanging at an angle like he'd fallen asleep while standing up. He looks so impossibly sleep-deprived, Shane can't help but grin. His hair is sticking up on one side, flattened on the other from his pillow, most likely. His shirt is on backwards and inside out, the tiny infant yanking at the collar, exposing the skin and golden cross at Ilya's throat.

The bottles and formula are laid out on the counter like he'd been mid-preparation before he'd accidentally closed his eyes for a moment.

"Babe. Babe- Ilya!" Shane calls out, watching as his husband startles, eyes flying open, blinking rapidly.

"Wha-" he starts, before Shane lets out a small laugh. "I'm awake," he says with a yawn.

Niko isn't wailing as aggressively as his sister, and even seems to be quieting down a bit to both parents' relief, so Ilya offers to take Mila.

"Give her to me," he says, already shifting Niko slightly higher on his shoulder.

Shane hesitates for half a second, but carefully transfers her, making sure her head is supported the entire time. He sighs, moving to the counter as he rolls out his left shoulder. Even after years of training and physical therapy, it still feels tight after prolonged use.

He doesn't hesitate because he distrusts Ilya, he just knows that while technically completely recovered, his husband still worries about the injuries he sustained when he was kidnapped. He hates feeling like a burden, and even though he knows Ilya never sees it like that, Shane can't help but feel like sometimes the man walks on eggshells around him.

The moment Mila's in Ilya's arms, she lets out a sharp, offended cry- louder, somehow.

"Oh, okay," Ilya mutters, wincing. "I see how it is." His eyes quickly dart to the other infant in his arms, judging for a reaction.

His panic is immediate, as Niko's eyes shoot open, and he looks like he's starting to wind up.

"No, no, no. Shane, *moya lyubov* (my love), they are plotting!" he hisses out, as Niko's face starts to turn increasingly red. The newborn is starting to become fidgety.

Shane tries not to laugh at the panicked look on Ilya's face as he swiftly starts on the bottles.

"Just- keep them distracted," Shane mutters, focused, scooping formula with a practiced precision.

"With what?" Ilya demands, already bouncing slightly, trying to adjust both babies without jostling either of them too much. "They are infants- *Mladentsy*- Shane. They do not respond to reason-"

"Talk to them."

"I am talking to them!"

"You're panicking at them."

"There is difference?"

Mila lets out another sharp cry, her tiny hands fisting against Ilya's shirt, while Niko's face scrunches further, the warning signs all there.

"Ok ok, I'm sorry, *moy малыsh (my baby)*," Ilya breathes out. "I talk quiet now, yes? Very not panicking. Oh wow, so quiet, yes. Shhhh."

Shane snorts.

Clearly, when the Russian is sleep deprived and panicked, the English language making sense is not particularly at the top of his priority list.

Shane sighs, listening to Ilya babble nonsense sentences a little longer, capping one bottle, shaking it, then reaching for the second with practiced efficiency that feels eerily similar to a life he no longer lives. Different stakes. Same precision.

The wailing doesn't get louder, but it doesn't stop.

"Shane," Ilya says, voice tightening, "they are unionizing."

"They're babies."

"They are *coordinating*, listen!"

Niko lets out a full, outraged scream.

"Okay, that one might've been coordination," Shane admits under his breath, thrusting one of the bottles toward Ilya, scooping Niko from his arms. "Here."

Ilya fumbles slightly before managing to angle it toward Mila. "Ladies first," he mutters, though his tone is more desperate than chivalrous.

Mila latches immediately. Niko, in Shane's arms, following close behind.

Their cries cut off so abruptly, it almost feels suspicious.

Ilya freezes, eyes wide, then slumps just slightly. “Oh, thank God,” he whispers. “War is over.”

The quiet that follows is *instant*.

Not complete, but close enough that it feels like stepping out of a storm. Both men go still, neither of them breathes for a second.

Chapter End Notes

this is only part of the first chapter, but i just wanted to advertise some of what you can expect in part 2.

hope u guys enjoy, and maybe see you over there:)

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