

The Cost of Keeping You

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The Cost of Keeping You

by Anonymous

Summary

Five years ago, Ilya and Shane were building something fragile, pieced together from long days, small comforts, and a future they believed they still had time for. Until it ended.

Now Ilya has climbed the ranks of the mafia, commands a region of his own, and knows better than to show weakness in rooms full of dangerous men.

Then someone else walks in, with Shane at his side. He is polished, untouchable, and no longer Ilya's.

Shane says he left because it didn't work out.

Ilya knows he's lying.

Or: A mafia reunion fic about old debts, quiet sacrifices, dangerous men, and a love that endures, even when there is nowhere left for it to be safe.

Notes

Hello lovely people! I'm starting this new work, because how can I not write a Mafia AU after writing an escort AU? If you haven't read my previous work on escort Shane x rich Ilya, here is the link. Enjoy reading! xx

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/82268126>

Chapter 1: Not his anymore

The room is arranged to suggest ease as it hosts dangerous, powerful men gathered in one place. Except the tension in the air makes it clear that the attempt has failed.

Crystal and low light hang from the ceiling, a long table dressed in dark linen with impeccable settings and demure flowers. Everything calibrated to soften the edges of men who do not soften.

Ilya sits near the end of the table, one shoulder angled toward the windows, posture relaxed in a way that is more deliberate than natural. He has already spoken when required, listened when it mattered, and said very little otherwise.

He is good at this. Not always, but the years it took him to climb the chain of command have made him so, because he had no other choice. Those are the years that pulled him from a low-ranking collector of dues in filthy backstreets to someone who now controls a region. The years when he learned when to spill blood and when to hold it back. The years when something precious vanished from his life, leaving behind little more than absence and the shape of it.

The doors open again, late enough to draw attention without apology.

A subtle shift moves through the room. Heads turn, conversations thin gradually, leaving only a few whispers to be heard.

Viktor Orlov enters without hurry, his stride long, shoulders squared, looking relaxed in the way when a man knows he controls the room. There is nothing ostentatious about him, and yet the space adjusts around him as if by instinct.

And then,

There is a second presence at Viktor's side.

Ilya's gaze moves there without any visible change in his expression, but his pulse quickens.

The young man stands half a step behind Viktor. His posture is impeccable, shoulders back, chin level, hands relaxed at his sides. His figure long and elegant like a cat. There is a stillness to him that feels curated, making it clear that he is part of a display, not the one directing it.

For a moment, Ilya does not recognize him. Or rather, his eyes do not, even as his mind is already moving too quickly, trying to reconcile what he sees with what he remembers.

The delicate line of the jaw sharpened, the brightness of his eyes dimmed but still catching light sharper than the crystal in this room, the scatter of freckles across his cheekbone is still stubbornly there -

Shane.

Ilya does not let the name reach his face. He has learned a long time ago a recognition like this, a flash of memory, a moment of hesitation is what destroys a man in this line of work.

Shane's hair is shorter than he remembers. Styled, rather than left to fall where it pleases. The softness is gone from it. His clothes fit too well; Ilya cannot recall him ever wearing something expensive and tailored like this. His face is neutral, almost indifferent, but beneath it lingers a restrained, practiced allure that gives away his role beside Viktor - not security, not a left hand, but someone more intimate, meant for needs that are never spoken aloud.

Viktor has reached the table now. Hands are shaken as he moves down the table, greeting some of the older acquaintances while registering the new ones.

Ilya inclines his head at the appropriate moment, voice even as he greets him. "Ilya Rozanov, Mr. Orlov."

Viktor studies him for a second, "Region three."

Ilya nods, "Yes. It was Ivan." Rest in peace, a deal went wrong.

Viktor hums approvingly, "Good to have you, Ilya. The region has been doing well, from what I've heard."

Ilya smiles, faint and indifferent, his gaze fixed steadily on Viktor, resisting the pull just beyond his shoulder.

Shane, that well-dressed, well-kept Shane, is not performing as well. His eyes are wide, lips parting slightly as he looks at Ilya, and Ilya thinks he sees his fingers twist faintly at his side.

Shane has never been good at hiding what he feels. So, all things considered, he is doing remarkably well now.

A few years ago, he might have done something else entirely - turned and run, determined to disappear from Ilya's life as he once did. Or worse, he might have crossed the distance without thinking, wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, buried himself there, whispering that he only ever wanted to be his.

But none of that matters now. Shane stands across from him, distant in a way Ilya has never known, his posture perfect, his manners impeccable, and he is definitely no longer his anymore.

Ilya lets the dinner conversations drift around him as he participates half-heartedly. He should be listening, should be catching what goes unsaid, mapping implications for his territory, but the distraction at the far end of the table refuses to be ignored.

Shane stands at Viktor's side, attentive in an effortless way. He refills Viktor's glass before it empties, leans in at the most precise moment to murmur something low by his ear without

interrupting the flow, and then, with unhurried ease, crosses to the other end of the table, pouring wine for another man.

The man looks up, and for the first time that evening, Shane smiles. Not the sweet, unguarded smile that Ilya loves - loved, but a delicately controlled one, one that hides more than it gives, as if inviting someone to tear it away from his face to see the real emotions beneath. A smile that keeps its distance even as it is given.

When did Shane learn to smile like that? Ilya remembers Shane's smile the very first day they met. It was a regular night at Kingfisher, one of the establishments under their protection, where dues are collected in exchange for peace that is never quite guaranteed, and Shane had caught his attention immediately.

Ilya gestured to the bar manager, who moved quickly, setting down a fresh glass of vodka - his usual, already anticipated. Ilya tilted his chin toward Shane, "New?" The manager replied eagerly, "Yes Mr. Rozanov. Just started last week. Would you like to speak with him?"

Ilya had nodded once. "When he isn't busy."

He returned to his drink, watching the room the way he always did, but his attention stayed anchored at the back, where Shane leaned in to exchange a few words with the manager before making his way over.

He had smiled then, too open, too unguarded for someone working a late shift in a place like that, and Ilya had felt his heart skipped a beat.

"Hi Mr. Rozanov, I'm Shane."

After that, the rest of the night had blurred into irrelevance.

Ilya found himself at Kingfisher almost every evening in the following weeks, after finishing whatever rounds the night required of him. He would take the same table in the back, watching Shane move through the room. Shane would glance over between serving drinks, offering him that same unguarded smile, and eventually he would come by with water, with small stories from his day, as though they had always known each other.

One night when he walked in, the rhythm broke. Shane was caught in an argument with a drunk customer, his face flushed, trying to pull back as the man's hand closed around his arm. "Come on," the man slurred. "You were just so sweet to me. We'll have a good time."

Ilya got to the table before he even noticed, and the first strike landed clean, bone against bone. He quickly pulled up his fist before landing another. Ignoring the chaos around him, he locked an arm under that man's neck and practically dragged him out of the back exit. Outside, he threw him to the ground and, just as the man tried to scramble up, drove a kick into his abdomen hard enough to force the air from his lungs. "Touch him again," Ilya said, voice flat, "and you won't have a hand left to do it." He turned before the man could respond.

Shane was standing by the back entrance, eyes wide, his body trembling faintly. Ilya noticed, and dread washed over him. He had been careful - had kept that part of his life separate, softened the stories when Shane asked, spoken of collecting rents and arranging supply chains, let him believe in something cleaner than what it was. Shane had listened with quiet fascination, called him a businessman with a kind of admiration that had felt undeserved.

But now, knuckles bloody after kicking down a man with the efficiency of a trained fighter, there was no space left for illusion.

Just as Ilya tried to tell him to not be scared - his anger was really only directed towards that one person - Shane reached out instead.

He took Ilya's hand gently, careful of the bruised skin, his brows drawing together. "Does it hurt? Come on - we have a first aid kit."

He sat as Shane cleaned and wrapped his knuckles with quiet concentration, movements gentle despite his inexperience. His lashes lowered as he worked, his expression intent, as though the task mattered in a way nothing else did.

No one has ever done this for him, not since his mother passed when he was twelve.

When Shane finished, he lifted Ilya's hand slightly, blew softly over the bandage, and then, almost absentmindedly, pressed his lips against it. When he looked up, his face had flushed, freckles bright against his skin.

Ilya couldn't help but lean in, raising the good hand to cup Shane's face, and kissed him.

Shane had been too soft for a city like this.

New, uncertain, too kind for his own good, unaware of what that kind of openness invited. Ilya had known it even then, had felt the shape of it every time Shane smiled at someone who didn't deserve it.

He thought of it later, how easy it would be to take advantage of Shane, when Shane ended up in his bed, his body trembling, his voice quiet as he admitted it was his first time with a man. Ilya had been more careful than he has ever been with anyone. He had asked him again and again if he was sure, if it was still what he wanted. He held Shane's hand the entire time, anchoring him through every moment, making sure there was no fear, no pain that went unanswered.

He had thought, back then, that if he could not change who Shane was, he could at least protect that softness.

Ilya doesn't know where that version of Shane went. Because the man in this room carries none of that softness anymore. When he leans to pour wine, his shoulder tilts just enough to shift the line of his shirt, revealing a pale stretch of skin that seems almost deliberately offered, as though it exists to be noticed, to be touched. Yet he looks so expensive and distant

in a way that makes it immediately, unmistakably clear - that even a man in Ilya's position now won't be able to afford him.

When dinner ends, Viktor gestures for the group to move into another room. The air there is heavier, sweet with wine and something else beneath it. Red velvet curtains line the walls, couches arranged in deliberate clusters that offer privacy without ever fully allowing it. Slow jazz hums in the background.

A service door opens, and a procession of beautiful men and women enters.

Entertainment.

Ilya remains by the bar, observing. Always read the room before acting. Bodies move, conversations form and dissolve, attention shifts toward beauty and novelty. A tall, slender blonde slips beside him, asking what he's drinking.

Ilya doesn't look at her, his fingers tracing condensation on his glass, "Sorrow," he says evenly, "and trouble."

The girl leans over, a lock of blonde hair dangling inches away from Ilya's face, "Sounds like my kind of recipe." she presses in further, her fingers curl around his wrist, guiding the glass toward her lips. Ilya tilts it slightly, letting the liquor slide between them.

Her body presses warm against his side. He barely notices. His gaze lifts - and locks.

Across the room, Shane is already looking at him. That distance is still there, carefully placed, his expression unreadable, as though nothing in this room matters. But beneath it, Ilya thinks he sees something flicker. Fire.

Or perhaps he imagines it. Because the next moment, Shane looks away, settling back into Viktor's arm, turning lazily toward the man speaking across from him.

Ilya stands. The blonde slips off the bar stool to follow, but Ilya gives her a light squeeze on the ass, "Stay here and wait. Please." He knows that Shane saw it, because for a fraction of second, he looks a little younger all of a sudden, and there is definitely a flick of fire burning behind those eyes.

Good, Ilya thinks, at least you can feel something. Ilya turns away before the thought settles. It is petty, he knows. Holding onto resentment after all this time, when Shane owed him nothing, when whatever they had ended without promise or claim.

And yet, he crosses the room toward Viktor.

Viktor notices him before he arrives, his attention shifting with precision, dismissing the man across from him without a word. By the time Ilya reaches the couch, it is already empty.

"Mr. Orlov, lovely evening." Ilya says smoothly as he sits.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Viktor replies. "We do this often. It keeps things... close." His gaze flicks briefly toward the bar. "Elise is quite something. You should take advantage."

"I might, Mr. Orlov. But business comes first." Ilya says, "I wanted to discuss with you on some transport delays we noticed in the region. Small inefficiencies, but I am handling it before it becomes a larger problem."

Viktor listens, draws a cigar from the box on the table, turns it once between his fingers before nudging the box toward Ilya. "I'm alright," Ilya says. Shane hates smoking, and Ilya has quit for him. Shane always smelled so good, even after working the night shift in a warm and stuffy bar, and Ilya didn't want to ruin it by making their room smell like smoke.

Across from the table, Shane is already moving, slipping the lighter from the table, angling himself closer with familiarity. The flame catches on the second strike, steady in his hand as he brings it up, careful to hold it just beneath the tip, letting Viktor take the first draw on his own terms. Viktor then turned his palm, placing the cigar inches from Shane's lips.

Shane takes it without hesitation, but Ilya catches the smallest shift, the faint tightening at his throat as he inhales. Too much, too fast. He exhales all at once, the smoke breaking unevenly. A quick swipe of his thumb across his lips.

Viktor exhales slowly, controlled. "Not so fast," he says mildly. "I taught you better than that." Smoke curls between them, briefly obscuring Shane's face.

"Sorry, Viktor," Shane murmurs, settling back into the curve of his arm.

Viktor turns back to Ilya, "Tell me more about the delays. Can I help?" All business again. As if Shane is no more significant than the cigar between his fingers.

Maybe he isn't.

Ilya feels it burning a hole in his heart.

"I'm not asking for help," Ilya replies evenly. "I'm asking for permission to let it continue. There's a smaller local operation, I want to see it fully before I shut it down."

"Because?" It's more rhetorical than anything, Viktor is just testing his theory.

"I want to fix the cause, not just the symptoms. But I don't want it go unmentioned to you."

Viktor nods, "I like the way you think. Ilya. Now tell me how much you know about this local operation."

Ilya continues, his eyes focused on Viktor, but in his peripheral vision Shane starts to shift frequently. Viktor pats Shane's thigh, subtle, but not without intent.

Shane stills almost immediately. Then he pouts, "Viktor, I'm bored. And it's late." The interruption cuts through Ilya's sentence.

Viktor turns his body to face Shane, the movement is not sudden, but it shifts the air around them. "Shane, where are your manners tonight." The voice flattening.

Shane flinches.

Only slightly. But Ilya feels his heart break into pieces right then and there. He didn't notice his fingers are curling into his palm until dull pain radiates from it.

Shane has always been easy to startle. He doesn't like loud noises, or harsh light, or the crack of summer thunder, but he likes curling into Ilya's side when it storms, likes knowing someone is there.

He certainly doesn't like violent men.

And yet, here he is.

Viktor watches him for a moment longer, then withdraws his arm. "Go," he says. "No need to wait on me tonight."

Shane straightens his body and rises smoothly, and before he starts moving away, Viktor is turning back to Ilya, "These pets, constantly need to be broken in." Ilya sees Shane stills before he gently smooths his suit, and walks away.

Ilya takes Elise back to his apartment that night. He does not give himself the option of doing otherwise, not after Viktor's suggestion earlier and his eyes tracking him as their conversation ended, and he needs the distraction of a quick, thoughtless fuck to steady the restless tension crawling beneath his skin before it turns inward and consumes him.

Elise is warm, pliant, and accommodating in the way most people have been for him over the past four years, bodies that come and go without leaving any trace beyond the faint impression of heat on his sheets.

Ilya does not date anymore, not after Shane left. He does not know if it is still possible to open himself to anyone, let alone to share a life that extends beyond a few passing hours.

As faces blur and bodies rotate through his bed, he keeps the rest of his home carefully untouched, a space that belongs only to him, and yet more often than he would admit, Shane's image slips through uninvited, taking up quiet residence in corners that were meant to remain empty.

Sometimes it happens late at night, when Ilya unlocks the door and steps into the stillness of his apartment, and for a fleeting moment he sees Shane curled on the couch beneath a blanket, lifting his head at the sound, arms opening as though it were the most natural thing in the world to pull him close, to draw him down into the familiar shape of a hug that would end in a kiss. The vision dissolves just before their lips meet, leaving only the echo of it behind.

Sometimes it is in the quiet haze of early morning, when sleep has not yet fully released him, and he turns instinctively toward the other side of the bed, finding the outline of a body that is not there, soft dark hair falling across closed eyes, freckles rising and falling with the slow rhythm of breath. The illusion lingers long enough for him to reach out, and disappears just before his fingers can trace the path he remembers too well.

Sometimes it comes in the kitchen, when he cooks without thought, throwing together whatever is within reach, improvising as he always has, and in the back of his mind he hears Shane's quiet complaint about ruined recipes and uneven measurements, sees him wiping down the counter with that meticulous care, restoring order where Ilya leaves chaos behind. The imagined presence vanishes the moment Ilya turns, the reflex to silence him with a kiss meeting only empty air.

It is absurd, because Shane has never set foot in this apartment.

The place they shared had been smaller, tucked into a worse part of the city, worn in ways this one will never be, yet a thousand times better.

The window sat too close to the neighboring building, so Shane brought home a plant with wide, generous leaves that filtered the light and shielded them from wandering eyes. The kitchen barely fit the two of them at once, yet Shane rearranged every inch of counter space until it held everything they used most, the small coffee machine, the toaster, the blender for ice cold drinks in the summer. The staircase outside was dim, the wiring unreliable but the landlord never bothered to fix, so Shane found a small solar lantern and set it near their door where it could catch a few hours of afternoon light, and every night Ilya returned to that soft glow waiting for him, steady and patient.

Ilya wonders, sometimes, whether Shane would have liked this apartment. He thinks he would. Shane had always liked imagining what came next, curling into Ilya's side and tracing out a future in hopeful detail. There would be a large tub, he decided, so Ilya could soak away the ache that settled into his bones after long days. There would be a balcony, where Ilya could sit through warm summer nights or cold autumn mornings, breathing in the open air he claimed to miss. There would be a larger bed, so they could tangle together without restraint and still sleep comfortably, without Ilya's leg hanging off the edge as it so often did.

Ilya had asked him what he wanted, because every version of the future Shane described seemed built entirely around him.

Shane had only smiled and waved the question away, as though it were too simple to require thought. "I just want this," he had said. "With you."

The bathroom door opens, and Elise steps back into the bedroom, drawing Ilya out of the quiet drift of memory. She sets aside the towel, bending to gather her clothes.

Ilya remains seated on the bed, working down the tightness lodged in his throat. "Where does he keep you all?"

If she was offended by the bluntness, Elise does not show it. She pulls the thin straps of her dress back into place before turning toward him, her expression easy.

"Viktor?" she says. "He sets us up in apartments. Covers everything." Ilya nods once. "Nice arrangement."

He hesitates, just briefly, weighing the risk of the next question, and asks it anyway. “And the one with him?”

Elise lets out a quiet laugh, studying him with a knowing glance. “You do like trouble.” Her smile sharpens slightly. “Don’t think about that one. He keeps him close. Doesn’t share. Not openly, anyway.”

Silence settles for a moment.

“You have a car picking you up?” Ilya asks. Elise checks the time. “No. I’ll take a cab.”

Ilya stands, already reaching for his clothes. “I’ll drive you. It’s late.”

She looks at him then, her smile warmer than it has been all night. “Aren’t you a gentleman.”

Ilya knows, in a distant and belated way, that he should have understood from the beginning that Shane was never going to be his forever.

Shane is too beautiful, too open, too untouched by the kind of caution this world demands, the kind of person who draws attention simply by existing, who invites affection without realizing the cost of it, and it should have been obvious that someone wealthier and powerful, capable of offering him a life far beyond what Ilya could sustain, would eventually take notice and decide that Shane deserved more.

He should have known that Shane deserved better. He simply chose not to dwell on it. And Shane never made him to.

Not until Alexei showed up at his door.

“Dad is gambling again. We need money before they kill us.”

It was the first thing out of Alexei’s mouth when the door opened, blunt and unfiltered, and Shane froze where he stood. He had rushed to answer the loud knocking only seconds earlier, startled by the urgency of it, not thinking to check who was outside, not that he would have recognized the man even if he had.

Ilya stepped forward immediately, placing himself between them, one hand reaching back to guide Shane behind him without looking.

“What the fuck, Alexei.” He switched to Russian without thinking, the words coming sharp and fast, the argument escalating almost instantly, voices rising in tight, overlapping bursts until frustration builds and Ilya’s hand lifted halfway, instinctively, the motion stopping only when he felt the light tug at his sleeve.

He closed his eyes, drew in a slow breath, and turned back.

“Shane, baby,” he said more evenly, forcing steadiness into his voice, “could you give us a minute?”

Shane's gaze moved between them, wide and uncertain, taking in the mirrored build, the shared height, the same broad shoulders, the resemblance that marked them as family, and the difference that made one of them far more dangerous. He pressed his lips together, nodded once, and retreated toward the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Ilya turned back.

"I send you all the money every month," he said, his voice flat now. "You had one job. Keep him away from gambling."

"Not everything," Alexei replied, shaking his head. "Don't play games with me. I see you still have enough to keep that nice piece of ass around."

This time, there was no interruption when Ilya's fist connects with his face.

Alexei staggered, blood already running from his nose, but he only wiped it away and spit to the side, his expression cooling rather than flaring.

"They took his pinkies," he said evenly. "Next time it'll be his hands."

Ilya watched him in silence.

Alexei exhaled, his tone shifting. "I have a family, Ilya. I can't watch him every second. Your niece is five now. She's starting school. I can't have men like that showing up at the house."

For a moment, Ilya saw her, that bright, sunflower-like face lighting up whenever she sees him, small and radiant in a way that feels almost out of place in a life like theirs.

"What do you want me to do?" A wave of exhaustion ran through Ilya.

"Don't you know some powerful people, Ilya? Can you talk to them? Ask them not to come to us like that, and just help us out with this gambling debt? This will be the final time - I promise. If you take care of this, I will make sure there is always someone at home watching him. No more leaving the house by himself."

Ilya thought of the money hidden beneath the mattress, the careful savings he and Shane had been building, piece by piece, as they plan to move into a place that's slightly larger, slightly safer. The thought tightened in his chest, dull and persistent.

"I will do what I can do," he says at last. "Next time they show up, you send them to me. I'll deal with it. I'm not sending you money anymore."

Alexei studied him for a moment, then nodded once and turned away without another word.

Ilya waited a few seconds before opening the bedroom door. Shane looked up immediately, sitting on the edge of the bed. Ilya crossed the room and sat beside him, his head lowered, the tension in his shoulders refusing to ease.

"Is everything okay at home?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya pressed his lips together, the answer lodged somewhere he does not want to reach. Explaining it would mean laying everything bare, the weight of it, the ugliness of it, the way it would inevitably pull Shane into a mess he does not deserve to be part of.

Warm hands closed gently around his.

“Ilya,” Shane said, “we have some savings. We could help.”

Ilya closed his eyes, turning his face slightly away, because he cannot bear the openness in that offer, the way Shane gave without hesitation or calculation, without understanding what he is stepping into.

Those same hands lifted, settling against his face, guiding him back with gentle insistence, fingers tracing the tension along his brow, smoothing it as though it could be eased with touch alone.

“Hey,” Shane murmured. “It’s okay. We have time. The move can wait. I like it here.”

Ilya pulled him close then, burying his face against Shane’s neck, holding on more tightly than he meant to. Shane’s hands moved slowly along his back, steady and grounding. The kind of support Ilya had not allowed himself to indulge in before.

He had thought they would get through it together. That Shane would stay, that he would endure the long hours and the distance while Ilya worked his way through the debt, taking on more, pushing further, risking more than he should.

But he was wrong.

Work consumed him. Territories expanded. Risks multiplied. Nights stretched into early mornings, and by the time he returned home he was too exhausted to do more than collapse into bed, his body present while everything else lagged behind.

When he woke, usually late in the afternoon, Shane would already be gone, another shift added to his schedule, another quiet sacrifice made without discussion. There would be lunch waited on the table, sometimes along with notes in small, careful handwriting.

And then, a few months later, just as quietly as it had begun, Shane disappeared from his life.

Ilya came home to find the room unchanged at first glance, everything in place, and yet unmistakably emptier, the absence of Shane shown in a way that could not be ignored.

On the kitchen counter, there was breakfast, a neat stack of cash, and a note.

Ilya, thank you for this past year. I’m sorry it didn’t work out. I’ll miss you.

And below, written smaller, almost as an afterthought:

I saved a little extra from groceries. Maybe it will help.

It took Ilya weeks before he could bring himself to go through what was left behind. There was not much gone. Shane had taken only what belonged to him, a few clothes, a handful of small things, and the cactus Ilya had given him for his birthday.

“They said if you take good care of it,” Ilya had told him back then, “it will bloom.” And Shane looked so happy.

He found himself wishing, belatedly and uselessly, that he had given him real flowers instead.

“A cactus.” Shane’s voice reaches him before he even steps fully into the game room, carrying easily over the low murmur of conversation.

Viktor had asked him to come to his residence tonight for a meeting, and Ilya had not decided whether he wanted to see Shane there or not. It is not a decision he is given to make.

Shane is stretched along the couch, angled toward a man in an impeccably tailored suit, his hands moving lightly through the air as he speaks, every gesture effortless, practiced without appearing so.

“I would have never guessed,” he says, tilting his head just slightly, his tone carries a soft complaint that borders on playful. “I’m terrible with plants. I think I’d kill a cactus if I had one.” There is a faint lilt at the end of his voice, almost a whine, softened just enough to draw attention, and Ilya sees the way the man leans in, sees how easily that tone lands where it is meant to.

Liar. Ilya thinks.

Ilya steps in properly then, his gaze moving first to Viktor, acknowledging him with a brief nod as he crosses the room. He does not allow himself to look at Shane, though he feels it regardless, that flicker of attention settling on him for a fraction of a second before slipping away as though it had never been there.

Viktor introduces him to the two men seated nearby. He gestures toward the couch, then glances back toward Shane with mild amusement.

“Shane, enough,” he says, his tone light. “Didn’t you promise Mr. Stone a game of pool?”

Shane exhales as though burdened by the request, stretching his legs out before pushing himself upright with an unhurried grace that draws the eye without asking for it.

“You’ll have me embarrass myself,” he says dryly.

He turns toward the other man, offering a small, disarming smile. “Mr. Stone, you’ll go easy on me, won’t you?” The question is light, teasing, and the answer is already written in the way the man rises, too quickly, too willing.

“Shane,” Viktor says from behind, a faint smirk in his voice, “if you practiced instead of talking, you wouldn’t need the help.”

Shane glances back briefly, unconcerned. "Where would be the fun in that?"

He moves to the end of the table, positioning himself with casual precision, and Ilya feels the shift in the room right away. Conversation fades.

Shane bends over the table, his movement unhurried, the line of his body aligning with the shot as he lowers himself into position. The curve of his back draws a clean, deliberate arc, his weight settling through his hips as though he is aware of every pair of eyes in the room and chooses not to acknowledge any of them.

He pauses, welcoming the gazes to linger for a moment longer.

Then he straightens again, as though reconsidering, stepping back with a soft breath, adjusting his stance. This time, he scoops back a little, spreading his legs wider before bending down again.

Ilya does not need to look around to know that the room has gone quiet. He sees it in Stone's posture, in the way his attention has narrowed, in the swallow that comes once, then again, as though he cannot quite help himself.

Shane draws the cue back at last, pausing just long enough to gather the room into that single suspended moment, before snapping it forward. The crack is clean and decisive, sharp enough to cut through the room. The cue ball drives across the felt and collides with the rack, and the table bursts into motion.

The room exhales.

Ilya turns back to the conversation, presenting Viktor with his full attention, his back deliberately angled toward the pool table. He speaks in measured tones, outlining their real estate footprint as Viktor guides the discussion, offering options, adjusting terms, drawing the other men forward with precision.

Behind him, movement continues. Light footsteps pass from time to time, and he registers them without turning. There is a subtle shift in air as Shane moves through the space, bending over the table again and again, presenting the nice curve of his back, showing off the long lines of his legs.

The game doesn't last long. Ilya does not need to watch to understand how it unfolds. Shane corrects just enough to remain plausible, misses just enough to tilt the balance, allowing the outcome to settle in Mr. Stone's favor.

He hears a soft exhale that carries a carefully shaped disappointment behind him, and then a playful note, "I thought you were going to go easy on me, Mr. Stone."

Shane resumes his place behind Viktor, while Stone moves toward the couch, rejoining the conversation with an energy sharpened by the performance from Shane he has just witnessed.

The discussion gains traction. Viktor and Ilya exchange brief glances, guiding the momentum forward. Ilya presses where it matters, narrowing the space between possibility and

agreement, pushing toward a conclusion that feels within reach.

Stone leans back slightly, considering. “We’ll need to take this away and think it through,” he says at last. “But I believe we can make something work.”

His voice trails just slightly as movement returns at his side.

Shane approaches without drawing attention, a bottle of whiskey in hand. He lowers himself beside the couch with practiced ease, half-kneeling on the floor, aligning himself at just the right level as he pours directly into the glass Stone still holds. “More ice, Mr. Stone?” he asks softly, his gaze lifting through his lashes.

Stone shakes his head, though his attention lingers. “No need.” His eyes shift briefly, flickering between Shane and Viktor. “Perhaps another game next time. When we’re back.”

Shane's smile curves faintly, "I would love that, Mr. Stone." He trades a quick look with Viktor. Then, his hand settles lightly against Stone's knee, his voice lowering just enough to suggest discretion. “Or tonight, if Mr. Orlov allows it.”

Sharp, immediate heat rises through Ilya, a reaction that threatens to break through the composure he has held all evening, and yet he contains it, forcing it down, locking it into place where it cannot be seen.

Stone laughs, pleased. “You’re charming, Shane. And we will be back. We just need time.”

Shane does not falter. He withdraws his hand with the same ease, rising smoothly to his feet. “Of course,” he says. He returns to Viktor's side, setting the bottle aside, his posture once again composed, as though nothing has shifted at all.

The meeting ends shortly after. The door closes behind the departing men with a quiet finality that settles over the room.

Viktor turns slightly, his attention returning to Ilya. “You did well.”

Ilya inclines his head. “I was hoping for a deal.”

“We will,” Viktor replies, unconcerned. Then, lightly, “Though you’re right. We might have had one tonight if Shane had tried harder.” His gaze settles on Shane.

Ilya keeps his expression unchanged. *Do not react.*

“I’m sorry, Viktor.” Shane’s voice is quieter now, the earlier ease gone, his gaze lowered.

Viktor studies him for a moment. “You should apologize properly,” he says. “Mr. Rozanov is right here.”

Shane turns. His voice drops further. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rozanov.”

Ilya does not let his gaze linger. “This is business,” he says evenly. “It takes time.”

Viktor hums in agreement. “Still, we made more progress than I expected.”

His hand lifts, resting lightly at the back of Shane’s neck, the touch casual in appearance, however Ilya sees clearly how it draws a visible reaction, a small, involuntary shiver that runs through Shane before he stills.

“Why don’t you go with Mr. Rozanov tonight,” Viktor continues. “Show your appreciation.”

Shane’s eyes close briefly. He swallows once. “Yes. Sir.” The answer is so quiet, obedient.

Ilya feels the room narrow around him, every detail receding until only one remains in focus, Shane.

Chapter 2: The things you carry alone

“This way, Mr. Rozanov.” Shane says curtly, already turning away. Ilya watches Viktor disappear behind another door before following Shane out of the room. They ascend a grand staircase, their steps echoing softly against polished marble, and emerge into what Ilya assumes are the private living quarters.

A maroon carpet runs the length of a long hallway, doors lining both sides, each one closed, concealing whatever lies behind. Shane walks halfway down before opening a heavy door and stepping inside, his back settling against it as it swings inward.

His eyes are finally on Ilya again. “Do you want to come in?” he asks lazily. The obedient tone from earlier is gone, replaced by that aloof, polished indifference Ilya remembers from the dinner party.

Before the door closes fully, Ilya is already on him.

He drives Shane back against the heavy wood door, forcing a breath from him, hands gripping the lapels of that tailored suit as he pulls him in, his mouth finding Shane’s, hard and unrestrained. The kiss is messy, all teeth and breath and misaligned urgency, both of them hissing but not pulling away, their faces shifting instinctively until the rhythm clicks back into place, like a lock turning after years of disuse.

Ilya deepens it once the familiarity settles, his hands sliding from fabric to skin, up Shane’s neck and into his hair, guiding him closer. A small, broken sound escapes Shane’s throat as Ilya’s tongue presses past his lips, tracing a path he has memorized in dreams for years.

They kiss with the ease of people who once belonged to each other, and the desperation of strangers who have gone too long without.

Eventually, breath runs thin. Shane pulls away first, inhaling sharply, his forehead pressing into Ilya’s jaw, his head dropping into the hollow of his neck as he catches his breath.

Ilya’s pulse pounds in his ears, blood rushing so fast it leaves a restless tingling in his limbs. He holds Shane tightly, as though any loosened grip might let him slip away again, burying his face in his hair, breathing in that familiar clean scent, now layered with something sharper, more expensive.

They remain like that longer than they should, breath uneven, the silence between them thick with everything left unsaid.

“Why did you leave?” Ilya forces out.

Shane’s body tightens in his arms. He lifts his head and eases back just enough to search Ilya’s face, a complex mix of emotions flicker in his eyes. Disappointment, maybe, or perhaps relief?

Then it vanishes.

In the next moment, he is already moving away. The warmth lingers, but Shane has crossed the room, slipping into a seating area. He pulls out a crystal glass and a bottle of vodka, pouring himself a glass, neat.

“Chitchat seems unnecessary,” he says coolly, as though nothing had happened. He crosses back toward Ilya, offering the glass. “Shall we focus on tonight?”

Ilya doesn’t take it. “I want to know why.”

Shane sighs, visibly inconvenienced by the question, and drinks instead, wincing slightly as the liquor burns its way down. “I told you. It didn’t work out.”

“You didn’t tell me anything. You left a fucking note, Shane.” Ilya curls his fingers tight, containing the heat rising in his chest. “And it was working. I thought...”

Shane turns sharply, the last trace of warmth gone, his expression all edges now. “God,” he mutters, a hollow laugh under his breath, “you really don’t get it, do you?”

“It wasn’t working,” he continues, each word deliberate. “You were drowning in that mess, running yourself into the ground over money that was never going to stretch far enough, and I was right there with you, pretending that was a life.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “We were figuring it out.”

“No,” Shane cuts in, sharper now. “You were. I was just... there.”

Ilya searches his face, looking for the boy he remembers in the lines of the man before him. “You didn’t even give me a chance.”

“A chance for what?” Shane laughs, harsh and brittle. “For you to fix it? To save us? You couldn’t even save yourself, Ilya.”

“See?” Shane says more quietly, tilting his head as he studies him. “This is why I didn’t want this conversation.”

He takes a breath, steadier now. “Now will you stop being a whiny girl, and fuck me?”

Shane lifts his chin, a deliberate challenge in the gesture, his composure immaculate and brittle at once.

Ilya thinks in the back of his mind how dangerous it is to look like that - proud, untouchable, yet so easily fractured beneath the surface. He wonders how many men have taken that invitation, how many have reached for that polished arrogance only to strip it away to find the softness he remembers, taking it apart until nothing remains.

He does not take the bait. But he is also not letting go this chance of touching Shane again, not after it happened again and again in his dreams, for years.

He closes the distance slowly, and for a brief moment Shane shuts his eyes, as if bracing for impact, only to open them again in quiet surprise when Ilya's hands come up to cup his face.

Ilya leans in, kissing him again, slowly this time, savoring that familiar sweetness on his lips. Shane melts into it. A soft, fractured sound slips from him as he responds, his body yielding instinctively, his tongue coaxing, guiding.

Shane's hands move quickly, shrugging off his jacket, then his shirt, his belt, each piece falling away with efficient familiarity without breaking the kiss for long. He drops to his knees with just his boxer on, fingers already working at Ilya's belt with trained efficiency.

His licks, teases, and starts bobbing his head almost right away, his hands finding Ilya's hips to anchor himself as he works past his gag reflex to go deeper.

The contrast strikes too sharply.

Once, he had been clumsy, uncertain, earnest to a fault. His hands were unsure, rhythm uneven, and there was too much teeth. It had been so awkward, but so sweet.

Ilya blinks, and the memory dissolves. Their eyes meet. For a moment, the past passes between them, and Ilya sees a flick of sorrow come through Shane's gaze.

He doesn't allow that emotion set in. He pulls Shane up by his arms, kisses him gently again, his hands pulling down Shane's boxer.

He uses one hand to give Shane the firm strokes that he always enjoyed, the other reaching back.

Shane stills momentarily, his hands moving to stop Ilya's, but too late. Ilya's fingers reach a cold metal handle. His mind wonders for a second as his fingers press there, then he freezes.

A plug.

Too hard and too cold. Not meant for his Shane who is too soft for this world. Ilya realizes right away that there is no "his" anymore.

How long? The question fractures through him before he can stop it. Shane was in the room the entire evening. Before he got there. Ilya's thoughts scatter.

Shane looks up sharply, panic flashing across his face before he forces it down. "It's okay," he says quickly, almost pleading. "I'm okay."

He gently moves Ilya's hand away, reaches behind again, pulling out the plug in a swift and efficient motion, a small wince slipping through despite his control.

Ilya's world blanks for a moment, enough that the edges dull and everything irrelevant falls away, leaving behind a cold, singular focus. He lets it hold for a beat, then steps back, already moving, pulling up his pants, buckling his belt, and heading for the door before anything else can interfere.

“Ilya!” Shane catches his arm before he can reach the door, his steps uneven as he tries to pull him back, fingers tightening as though that alone could hold him in place.

Ilya stops. He looks down at Shane’s hand on his sleeve, then lifts his own, beginning to peel Shane’s fingers away one by one, as though the contact is something that needs to be carefully undone.

“No, Ilya, please - what are you doing?” Shane’s voice breaks, the words rushing over each other. “Stay. Just, please stay with me.”

“I’m going to kill him.” There is no anger in Ilya’s voice. Only a flat certainty. He thinks he might have used up all the emotions since Shane re-entered his life, and all that’s left is the cold need to kill.

Shane stills for a second. Then he moves again, faster this time, stepping in behind him, arms wrapping around Ilya’s waist, holding on with everything he has, pressing himself close as though he can anchor him there by force alone.

“Ilya, stay, please. Please!” He sounds frantic now, all the masked nonchalance and flirtation gone.

Ilya glances down at the pale arms locked around him. It would take very little to break free.

“It doesn’t hurt! I swear Ilya. It helps - it makes it easier.” The words tumble over each other, urgency unraveling whatever control he had left.

Ilya goes completely motionless. Shane feels it and mistakes it for hesitation, clinging tighter as though he has finally said the right thing.

“You don’t even have your gun,” he continues quickly, breath uneven against Ilya’s back. “You don’t need me to tell you this - Viktor...” His voice falters, the name catching in his throat before he forces it out. “He’s not someone you can just walk up to.”

“Please,” Shane says again, softer now, but more desperate for it. His grip tightens, fingers curling into fabric. “Don’t go.”

And then as if all strength left his body, his voice stripped bare,

“I’m scared.”

The words cut through everything else like air breaking the surface after too long underwater.

Ilya turns on instinct, and stops. For a fraction of a second, he just stares at Shane. At the way he is holding himself together, barely, at the tension in his shoulders, the way his breath stutters as though it might fail him if he lets it go all at once.

His arms slowly come around Shane, pulling him in firm, almost too tight,

“I’m here,” he says, quieter now, “Shane. I’m here.”

Shane hugs him back tightly, not willing to let go, and after a long time, “I’m so sorry. Ilya.”

“Don’t.” Ilya says curtly, “I’m here. I will stay.”

They hug in silence. After a while, Ilya starts to gently walk Shane back. His hand slides down Shane’s arm, guiding rather than pulling, until they reach the edge of the bed. Ilya presses him down gently, steadying him with a hand at his shoulder before stepping away just long enough to reach for an untouched glass and filling it with water. He holds it out to Shane without a word.

Shane blinks at him, holding the glass in both hands, then takes a careful sip. Ilya nudges him to drink more, before taking the glass and putting it away.

Then Ilya reaches for his own shirt, pulling it off with unhurried movements.

Shane watches him the entire time.

His gaze moves slowly, tracing the lines of Ilya’s body as though reacquainting himself with something long lost. It lingers where it shouldn’t, on the faint scars that mark his skin, on the subtle changes time has carved into him, each pause weighted with recognition.

Ilya knows that look.

There had been nights when he returned home worn thin, carrying the bloody evidence of whatever had gone wrong, and Shane, still half-asleep, would always push himself upright to tend to him with aching softness in his eyes. Ilya would always dismiss it, brushing it off, telling him it was nothing.

And now Shane looks at him with the same painful look, as though the damage of these years belongs to Ilya, as though he is the one who has been breaking all this time.

Slowly, Shane reaches out, his fingers hovering for a moment before settling against one particularly ugly scar on Ilya’s thigh, tracing the line with an unsteady touch.

Ilya can almost hear the thought forming behind his eyes, that it had come too close, that it could have been much worse.

“I’m okay, Shane,” Ilya says quietly.

The words sound hollow even to him.

There is a strange, bitter irony in it, the two of them in this room tonight, assuring each other that they are okay, across the distance of four lost years, when neither of them remotely believes it.

Ilya gets into bed with Shane, pulling him closer, and exhales when Shane stays close.

“You will be here when I wake up tomorrow; right?” Shane asks as Ilya drags the heavy duvet over both of them.

“Yes, Shane. I will be here.”

“Promise? You won’t leave before saying goodbye?”

Ilya does not have the heart to say goodbye. He also doesn’t know why he is the one giving assurance, when it was Shane that left without saying anything in the first place.

But he will never be able to say no to Shane.

“I promise. Shane.”

Shane finds Ilya’s hands, locking their fingers. And they just look at each other, too much left unsaid.

Shane’s eyes begin to close. He fights it at first, blinking slowly, trying to stay awake, as if knowing sleep might take something from him if he lets it come. But exhaustion wins, inch by inch, his body loosening despite himself.

Shane’s lashes flutter once, twice, “I’m sorry, Ilya.” he murmurs, the words barely formed before sleep takes him completely.

Carefully, almost hesitantly, Ilya lifts his free hand and traces the faint scatter of freckles across Shane’s cheek, the motion light enough not to wake him. He presses a brief, quiet kiss against his own fingertips before resting them against Shane’s forehead.

Shane mumbles in his sleep, furrowing his brows. His form tightens slightly, before it relaxes when nothing happens - his body slowly settling as if relearning something it used to know.

Ilya stays awake long after.

Ilya wakes to a lazy voice. “No, I need a driver. Now.” A quick uh-um, “I don’t care about your hand. If Viktor finds out I miss the photoshoot because you mess up scheduling... you might not have one.” A pause. “See? Not that hard is it.”

Ilya keeps his eyes closed as he huffs out a laugh at that unfamiliar, bossy tone. A second later, he feels long fingers brushing his face, “Wake up, handsome.”

He opens his eyes to Shane standing next to the bed, already in an outfit that aims for casual but nonetheless seems staged. He looks like an expensive art in the morning light.

Ilya catches his hand and tugs him back down.

Shane lets out a soft sound of surprise, but his body follows easily, settling over him with instinctive familiarity, bracketing him with his thighs.

He presses his nose down, rubbing Ilya’s nose lightly, and gives him a quick peck on the lips. “Don’t do anything stupid,” Shane murmurs near his ear, his voice low, intimate in a way that feels at odds with everything else. “Stay alive for me, alright?”

Ilya holds his waist as he tries to get up. "Only if you do the same."

Shane smiles meekly, "Deal."

As Shane moves to the door, Ilya sits up, "Shane. You said you left because of the mess I was in, that mess is gone now." He doesn't bother saying it out loud, but there is that the strong yearning in his heart - *Would you come back?*

Shane turns around to look at him. Then a small smile touches his mouth. "Good. Ilya." He looks Ilya in the eyes, "I'm happy for you."

And he means it. That much is unmistakable.

But the sadness beneath it remains, just as clear, settled deep enough that it no longer needs to hide. *But there is no way back now.*

Shane turns the handle, then hesitates, glancing back one last time. "Goodbye, Ilya."

Ilya's throat tightens, but no words come.

The door closes softly.

Ilya tightens control across every front.

Legal or otherwise, it makes no difference; he pushes harder, faster, ensuring nothing slips through the cracks, his factories running at full capacity, his routes busier than usual, his people stretched thin under the weight of it.

Even Svetlana has complained - Svetlana, who has never once questioned him lightly, his most loyal lieutenant and the closest thing he has to family, who stood beside him long before the titles and the territory, through every brutal night on the street and every step of his rise.

"Ilya." Svetlana closes the door behind her, the quiet click sealing them into the room. "What's going on?"

He doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he leans back slightly, gaze drifting past her. "We can move faster," he says at last. "There's still room to tighten things."

"At what cost?" she asks, sharper now. "When you rush, you stop doing things right. And we don't get to make mistakes, Ilya. If you slip, our people die. Or worse, you die."

He exhales through his nose, a quiet, controlled sound. "We won't make mistakes."

"That's not what I asked." She leans forward, resting her forearms on the desk. "You were very careful. Now you're... distracted. What is it?"

Ilya's jaw tightens, the answer sitting there, unwelcome.

Finally - "I saw him."

Svetlana stills. She doesn't ask who. She doesn't need to.

Her voice, when it comes, is more careful. "Where?"

Ilya looks at her then, frustration and pain surface behind his eyes. Reluctantly, he offers -

"He's with Viktor."

The words come out flat, stripped of everything but fact.

Svetlana leans back, exhaling slowly. "Well. That's..." She shakes her head once. "That's bad."

Ilya lets out a short breath, something bitter threaded through it. "I stood there and watched." His jaw tightens, the next words dragged out of him despite himself. "While he was being handled like that."

Svetlana's expression shifts. She moves to his side, her hand resting briefly on his shoulder in a rare gesture of comfort.

"That was the right call," she says. "You know that."

Ilya doesn't respond.

Because knowing it doesn't change anything.

He needs a plan. He needs to see Shane. Everything else can wait.

The years he survived without him now feel impossible to comprehend; he cannot remember how he endured it, how he let time pass without tearing the world apart to find him. It has only been weeks since that night, and already it stretches behind him like an eternity, unbearable in a way that turns him inside out.

And then, one afternoon, as Svetlana sits beside him in the car, idly lecturing his driver about controlled betting after catching him gambling with the others during a long wait outside an event, the answer comes to him with quiet clarity.

Drivers talk.

They wait for hours outside buildings with tinted windows and guarded doors, smoke curling into the stale air as they trade stories, complaints, favors, information they do not think matters.

Ilya counts on that.

He clears his throat lightly. "That's enough, Sveta. These things drag on forever. The kid needs something to pass the time."

“I’ve seen you talking to the others,” Ilya says lightly, as though the thought has only just occurred to him. “Viktor’s drivers.”

Tom glances up in the mirror, cautious. “Sometimes, Mr. Rozanov. Just passing time.”

“Mm.” Ilya’s gaze drifts out the window, uninterested on the surface. “They still complain as much as they used to?”

Tom lets out a small laugh, relieved. “More, if anything. Long hours. Always waiting.”

“For him?”

“And his people.” Tom hesitates, then adds, “He moves them around a lot. Different places every day.”

Ilya does not turn.

“His people?”

“Oh. One of them was saying there’s this...” Tom falters, searching for the word, “Boy. Pretty. Always busy.”

Ilya’s attention sharpens, though nothing in his posture changes.

“Busy how?”

Tom shrugs. “Photos, I think. Lessons. Stuff like that. They were joking he’s got a busier schedule than Viktor does.” A brief pause. “Said he’s... a little bitchy.”

Svetlana snorts lightly.

“Tom.” Ilya’s tone softens just enough. “Perhaps you can do me a favor.”

Tom meets his eyes in the mirror again, eager now. “Anything, Mr. Rozanov. Truly, anything.”

“Let me know next time this... boy is out somewhere for a while,” he says. “Quietly. No attention.”

“Yes, of course. Mr. Rozanov.”

“Thank you, Tom.”

He thanks himself, briefly, for the decision he made years ago to pull this boy out of a filthy alleyway, to feed his family, to put him in a suit and give him a place in his world.

Beside him, Svetlana glances over, she doesn’t say anything.

Ilya does not need much. A pattern is enough.

When Tom mentions the recurring address in a studio in the trendy part of the town, Ilya waits two days before acting on it.

The studio is brighter than he expects. White walls stretch upward into high ceilings, the air faintly chemical beneath the sharper scent of hairspray and heat from the lights.

Ilya steps away as assistants move quickly, sliding racks of clothing across the floor in a constant, restless motion. A few starve-looking people draped in little fabrics sit around, looking bored or staring into the void like they are lost.

Ilya lingers near the entrance, an observer who does not belong yet carries himself as though he does, the quiet confidence of someone accustomed to moving through any space unchallenged.

He finds Shane without effort.

There are others arranged under the lights, positioned and adjusted with the same careful attention, but Shane draws the eye without trying.

He stands beneath the lights, a white sweater slipping loosely off one shoulder, revealing the clean line of his collarbone, the delicate structure beneath skin that still holds that same soft warmth Ilya remembers.

“Chin down, Shane. Yes, like that. Softer. Think...” the photographer pauses, searching, “like you’re waiting for someone.”

Shane exhales, barely perceptible. And then he gives it to them.

It isn’t quite a smile, but a shift so subtle it settles into his expression like a memory he hasn’t decided to release, and it hits Ilya with unexpected force, sharp enough that for a moment he wants to cross the room, pull him close, and tell him - *I’m here. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.*

Ilya watches, arms loosely crossed, posture relaxed enough to disguise the precision of his attention. Under the harsh white light, Shane is handled by various people, turned gently by a stylist, brushed, adjusted, reset. Each bright flash draws the faintest crease between his brows before it smooths again, his expression then quickly snaps back into place with quiet control.

Ilya waits when they call for a break.

He lets the room shift, watching the energy scatter into smaller conversations, until Shane slips away unnoticed, his body carrying a faint stiffness from holding himself in place for too long.

The hallway beyond is quieter, lined with half-open doors that reveal mirrors framed in light, counters cluttered with brushes and palettes, chairs pulled slightly out of place.

Ilya pauses just long enough to be certain that there is no one else. Then he steps inside. The door closes behind him as he quickly turns the lock.

Shane looks up immediately.

“Ilya!” A flicker of bright, unguarded surprise breaks across his face, gone almost as quickly as it comes, shuttered behind that careful, practiced distance, “you shouldn’t.”

“I won’t stay long,” Ilya says, stepping closer, his voice low and steady. His gaze holds Shane’s. “I missed you.”

Shane looks at him without a word, glancing briefly at his reflection as though to confirm this is real, that Ilya is actually standing here, impossibly present in a place he should never have found.

Then the distance disappears.

Shane closes it in a single breath, his hands finding Ilya, his lips brushing along his jaw in small, unsteady kisses, and it takes only a second for Ilya to respond, to turn him and press him back against the wall, caging him in as his mouth claims his, rougher, hungrier, years of restraint collapsing all at once.

His hands slide down, catching on the waistband of Shane’s jeans - the same jeans that had been adjusted again and again on set, pulled just low enough to expose the curve of his waist and the dimples on his back - and he drags a sharp breath from him with a single touch.

Shane’s legs falter. His breath breaks.

And Ilya follows him down.

A knock comes too soon. “Shane? We’re starting in five.”

Shane leans back against the wall, voice still unsteady. “I’ll be there.”

Ilya straightens slowly, smoothing his hands over him, pulling his jeans back into place and zipping him up.

“Still takes me less than ten,” he murmurs, his mouth brushing Shane’s ear, wearing a smugly smile.

Shane looks wrecked. Flushed in a way no makeup could recreate, eyes bright, unfocused for a moment as he looks at Ilya like he hasn’t quite caught his breath yet. And then, just as quickly, the awareness returns, settling over him like a weight. His expression shifts. The softness replaced by painful control.

"Hey, hey." Ilya shushes. "I will come see you again. I have my ways."

Shane drops his head, "No, Ilya. I don't think you should. It's a terrible idea."

Ilya kisses his freckles, and then his lips, "Yes. But not seeing you is worse."

From the back of the room, he watches as Shane returns to the set.

There is a difference now. The tension that held his body rigid earlier has softened, his movements more fluid, his expression warmer, though he fights it, reins it in, reshaping it back into the indifference he wears as an armor now.

Their eyes meet, just briefly. Ilya lifts his hand, a small, fleeting gesture.

And then he turns away.

He knows he can't stay. Because if he does, he will not leave without breaking something.

By the time he steps back into the street, he already knows what comes next. There is no version of this where he waits.

The relief of being able to see Shane again - albeit in short, carefully managed intervals - seems to revive something in Ilya that had been held in suspension. He returns to work with a steadiness that borders on relentless, long days folding seamlessly into longer nights, decisions made with a clarity that leaves little room for hesitation.

Quietly and precisely, he begins to push at the edges of his assigned territory, testing where resistance lies and where it has already begun to thin, building alliances where it serves him and removing obstacles where it doesn't.

He buries himself in the work, not out of ambition but out of necessity, chasing power with a focus that borders on obsession, because each piece he secures feels like another step toward a future where he can keep Shane safe.

When the report comes in about the shadow operation in a warm summer evening, Ilya knows an important piece is clicking into place for his pipeline.

The operation they have been watching for weeks has started moving again, quiet but deliberate, the kind of movement that suggests confidence rather than caution. By the time the location is confirmed - an abandoned factory at the edge of someone else's district, stripped long ago of any legitimate purpose but still useful in all the ways that matter - Ilya has already decided how it will end.

They arrive late.

Late enough that the men inside have settled into the comfort of routine, into the false security that comes from repetition, believing that tonight will look like every other night.

Ilya does not give orders so much as set direction. The first breach lands with force, a sharp rupture of the large loading door that tears through the quiet. Voices rise, someone runs, someone else reaches for something they should not, and within seconds the space collapses into noise and motion.

Svetlana is already deep in the factory, Ilya follows, quickly scans the room before pointing to the corners where large barrels lie. "Sides." His men are on it before he needs to say more.

A few more yelling and loud bangs, a single shot. And then it is over. What remains is the aftermath.

Ilya steps through it the way a predator crosses ground it already knows belongs to him, unhurried, untouched by what surrounds him.

He has done this too many times for anything here to feel new. Overturned chairs. The sour edge of spilled alcohol seeping into concrete. Products spread chaotically on the ground like trash instead of the multi million dollars they are. A man trying to push himself upright and failing halfway, breath catching in a low, broken sound.

He moves toward the office at the back.

The door is locked. It does not stay that way.

Inside, the air is stale, thick with neglect. Papers lie scattered across the desk, someone had been in the middle of leaving, interrupted just before they could make it clean.

Ilya crouches, one hand snapping a wrist that tries to reach for a gun. He catches the man by the collar and hauls him up before he can crawl any further.

“Names.”

The man laughs, the sound wet and uneven, eyes flickering before settling on Ilya. He spits, missing him by inches.

Ilya tightens his grip. His foot comes down on the man’s knee, not enough to break it, but enough to remind him how easily it could.

“Names.”

The man squints, his expression shifting, searching, trying to place a face that does not belong in this context.

And then - “It’s you,” he says, the words dragged out through a shallow breath. “You’re... Rozanov’s kid.”

A shaky laugh follows, thin but persistent. “I used to collect from your old man. And your brother.” His voice steadies, gaining traction now that memory has caught up. “Before they sent me to you, and your pretty boy.”

Ilya’s eyes narrow, just slightly.

The man in front of him flickers against another image, one pulled from years ago, standing in his doorway, hand outstretched, taking cash while Ilya stood between him and Shane, blocking the view, blocking the access, thinking that was enough.

“Look at you now,” he mutters. “Walking in like you own the place.”

His eyes sharpen. “Funny thing is,” he adds, voice dropping, “you weren’t so untouchable back then, were you?”

Blood gathers at the corner of his mouth as he smiles, thin and unpleasant.

“Who would’ve thought,” he continues, words slower now, meaner, sharp as a knife, “that the great Rozanov - ”

He spits again.

“- had his little bitch pay off his family’s debts.”

The world shifts. Ilya’s grip tightens, but his mind stalls, blanking for just a second too long.

The man sees it. His smile widens, ugly with realization.

“That’s right,” he says, almost delighted now. “That boy of yours walked in and cleared it. Didn’t even ask for terms.”

There is nothing left in Ilya’s mind now. Because that statement is so unfamiliar, it does not fit in any memories he put away deep in his heart.

The man goes on. “Should have turned him away, and you would have been dead on the side of a road now.” He spits again.

Ilya’s head spins, the world tilting just enough to throw everything out of alignment, and he finds himself reaching back, grasping for the version of Shane he remembers from those last few months, from a time when he had been too worn down by work and debt to look closely at what was right in front of him.

The way Shane stretched every dollar, the additional shift he picked up, the way he never asked, never complained. The cash left on the counter.

Maybe it will help.

Ilya lets go of the man. His fingers loosen, releasing their hold even as his mind sharpens with sudden, unbearable clarity.

The man collapses back against the floor, still watching, trying to read what he has just broken open.

Svetlana is beside him before the moment can go on. Her boot connects with the man’s sternum, driving him flat, her movements efficient as she flips him and forces his arms behind his back.

“Enough,” she says quietly, not looking at Ilya. “We’re done here.”

Ilya does not answer. He turns.

The rest happens without him.

He does not remember the drive, only the arrival. Alexei's building rises in front of him, dim and unchanged, familiar in a way that now feels strangely distant. It's a shadow that belongs to a version of his life he has already stepped out of.

Ilya leans against the car, the metal still warm beneath his palm, calls once, then waits, watching as the door opens and his brother steps out into the night.

Ilya closes the distance before Alexei can speak, his hand catching the front of his shirt and dragging him forward with enough force to cut off whatever greeting might have followed. "You said that was the last debt," he says, the words low and tight, each one forced through a space that has already begun to narrow.

It takes Alexei a moment to understand. He frowns, thrown off balance not by the grip but by the question itself. "That final one? I messed up, okay? I locked him up after!"

He observes Ilya, confused, "Didn't you take care of that already? The old man's dead anyway."

"How much was it." Ilya's voice is flat, deplete of emotion.

Alexei shrugs, though the movement is less certain now. "...More than usual," he admits. "But that was it. The last time." He hesitates, then adds slowly, "If you didn't pay it, then -"

Ilya lets go.

The strength leaves him all at once, not in a sharp break but in a quiet collapse, as though whatever had been holding him upright until now has simply ceased to exist. He steps back, the edge of the car catching him as he sinks against it, one hand dragging through his hair, gripping hard enough to ground himself in the brief, clarifying sting of pain.

Shane did. For him.

The thought is so sharp that it feels almost unbearable. They must have come to the apartment while he was away, found Shane alone, seen that face, that open, unguarded kind of beauty that draws attention too easily and holds it for too long.

They would have recognized it immediately, understood what it could be turned into, and they would have used it.

Threatened him. Cornered him. Given him a choice that was never really a choice at all.

And Shane - his Shane, who had never learned how to protect himself in the ways that matter here, who had always believed in people a little too easily, who had only wanted Ilya to be safe and happy - made his choice.

Ilya presses his eyes shut, the darkness behind them offering no relief. *You were so busy surviving, you couldn't even protect him.*

Behind his closed eyes, he sees Shane took the weight, carried it without asking, and walked into a world that would never give him back unchanged, all to close a debt that had never been his to bear.

All he had wanted - what Ilya sees now with a clarity that feels way too cruel - was a future that held the two of them in it, both alive.

And he traded himself for it.

Chapter 3: The shape of choice

Chapter Notes

Welcome back :) Please check tags for CW

The mirror in the bathroom reflects the careful ruin built into him over the course of the night. His dark hair falls just past his shoulders, the styled strands damp at the temples; his collar is left open, exposing the line of his throat, still holding the faint trace of Viktor's breath. The gloss on his lips is slightly smeared, catching the light each time he exhales in a way that feels quietly disorienting.

Shane keeps his eyes lowered as he shuts the door behind him, avoiding his own reflection, postponing the moment he has to gather himself and step back into it.

Ilya looks better than he remembered.

His already sharp features have only grown more so, his shoulders broader, carrying his suit with an ease that lends him a natural authority in a room full of dangerous men. His eyes have become cold and precise, stripped clean of the warmth that used to spill freely in front of Shane.

That's good, Shane tells himself. If he belongs in a room like this, he cannot be that Ilya from years ago.

Shane starts to strip. Viktor's cigar has sunk deep into him, the smell clinging stubbornly to his skin. He frowns as he peels the clothes away, a flicker of distaste crossing his face, tempted for a moment to throw them out before he folds them instead, careful and precise, and sets them into the laundry basket.

He hasn't needed to do laundry in a long time. Everything is returned to him clean, pressed, sorted neatly by color and fabric. Still, he folds each piece before setting it aside, a quiet ritual he maintains, as if the small act might help him hold on to what little remains of who he used to be.

Once he rids all the clothes, he reaches behind, fingers finding the metal flange wedged in between himself. He takes a breath in, twist gently, and slowly pulls it out. It still hurts like hell, especially after long nights like this where he doesn't get to lube himself up in between.

Shane sets the metal object on the counter, leaning forward slightly as he catches his breath. Exhaling slowly, he lifts his head.

For a moment, he does not recognize the person looking back. The face is still all the same - the curve of his mouth, the faint scatter of freckles that even makeup cannot completely

erase. But there is a mask now, an ease in the way he wears himself that has been learned piece by piece, taught in rooms that smell like cigar and lust, under eyes that measure and consume. There is no hesitation in that reflection, no softness left unguarded.

He thinks of the way Ilya used to hold him, one arm firm and certain around his shoulders, telling him he was too soft, too good for a world like this, warning him not to trust so easily, always placing himself just slightly in front - between Shane and a loud crowd, a raised voice, a threat that might turn violent.

Ilya would probably hate this version of him.

That's good, Shane thinks. It's safer for Ilya, if whatever they once had is buried deep enough to be mistaken for indifference, or even contempt.

He rarely lets himself think about how he got here anymore. It belongs to a version of his life that no longer serves him, and revisiting it does nothing except add an unwelcome weight he has learned to live without. But seeing Ilya tonight has unsettled that dusty memories, pulling old times back into reach, reminding him of something he has tried not to name for a long time - that he has been loved, not only by Ilya, but long before that, in a life that once felt simple and whole.

There had been a small house in a quiet town, where money never stretched far but dinner was always warm and enough, shared between three people at the dining table, trading stories from their day. It was not a remarkable life, not the kind anyone would envy from a distance, but it had been steady, and it had been theirs.

He had grown up open because there had been no reason not to be, no lesson that taught him to hold back or to guard himself against loss, no warning that what he loved could be taken without notice. He spoke easily, laughed without thinking, reached for things without weighing the risk of losing them.

And then, without warning, that life was gone.

One moment everything had been as it always was, bright and uncomplicated, and the next it had collapsed into a single phone call, a hurried trip from school to the hospital, and words that did not make sense until they settled into something final and irreversible. The people who had filled that house with warmth, who had shaped every part of the life he knew, were suddenly past tense, leaving behind a space that felt too large and too small all at once.

He had been close to finishing high school, close enough that he tried, for a while, to continue as if the structure of his life still held, moving through the days with a kind of numb determination that felt more like obligation than purpose.

But the house no longer felt like a home. The walls echoed in a way they never had before, amplifying the absence until it became impossible to ignore.

So he left.

He took what little he had saved from working at the diner in town, a place where everyone knew his name and no one ever raised their voice without reason, and took a bus to the big city with nothing resembling a plan. He did not know what he was looking for, only that he would not find it by staying where he was.

Looking back, he understands how much of that decision was built on hope rather than sense, but at the time it did not feel reckless.

He found work at Kingfisher easily enough. There are always places willing to take someone who works hard and does not complain, and he learned the rhythm of it quickly, the long hours, the late nights, the understanding that you take what is given and do not ask for more.

And within weeks of starting, he met Ilya.

It unfolded from there with a kind of inevitability he never thought to resist.

Ilya showed up at Kingfisher night after night, pushing an energy bar across the table and watching him eat it, because he had noticed that Shane always waited until closing to take whatever scraps were left in the kitchen. He took his hands without asking, brushing gently over the chafed skin of his knuckles, and returned the next day with a pair of gloves. He saw the cramped room Shane shared with a stranger he had met on the bus into the city, decided it was neither safe nor acceptable, and handed him a key to his own apartment, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

It felt like home.

Not identical to what he had lost, but close enough that the difference did not matter, and in some ways even better, because this time he understood what it meant to have it, what it meant to lose it, and how fragile it could be.

He felt loved again.

And somewhere along the way, he shaped his understanding of that love into something simple and absolute. Life had already taught him that love does not always mean surviving together. Sometimes it means making sure the person he loves survives at all.

So when the threat came - when dangerous-looking men appeared at the door, when the possibility of losing everything again became immediate and real - he did not question what he was meant to do.

He was given a number that made his head spin, along with a warning that Ilya would be taken away if it remained unpaid. He watched as Ilya worked himself to the bone, and took on more shifts of his own in response, trying in whatever small way he could to keep up, to close the distance between them and that looming figure. And in the end, when the men arrived with another, scarier number, the choice came simply - wipe the number clean, free Ilya from it entirely, in exchange for himself.

So he chose.

And now he stands on the other side of that choice, in a life that has been built entirely around it, telling himself again and again that it was the right thing to do. That belief has carried him through the years in between, through difficult nights that demanded more than he thought he could give, and through this evening, where he stands at Viktor's side, stealing glances at the man who still pulls his attention like gravity.

It is only when he sees someone else pressed close to Ilya, her hand wrapped loosely around his arm, Ilya's hand resting low against her back, that the certainty fractures.

He wonders if Ilya will take her home, to a place better than the one they once shared - although that place will always be so dear to his heart. He wonders whether they are tangled in sheets that are smooth and cool and untouched by memory, the kind they once looked at together and promised, half-laughing, that they would buy when they had more. The image settles too easily in his mind, and with it comes a thought he cannot afford - that he wants to be there instead, to be wrapped in those strong arms, to be held in a way that he has been longing achingly without realizing.

The jealousy was immediate. The regret followed just as quickly. He did not let either linger.

He retreats to the shower, turning the water hotter than necessary, letting the heat press against his skin until it becomes almost unbearable, until it drowns out everything else.

It was the right thing to do.

He repeats it until it feels solid again.

Shane had hoped that Ilya would hate who he has become. That would have been easier and safer in a way that give meaning to the choice he made years ago.

He had not expected Ilya to show up again, and then keep showing up, with that same persistence he once had back at Kingfisher, as if the distance and dangers between them were mere inconveniences rather than lines between life and death. And when Shane pushes him away, when he tells him again and again that this is pointless, that he should stop, he knows, somewhere deep in his heart, that he does not want it to end.

These stolen pieces of closeness are what carry him through his days now.

Sometimes it's the heated tangling of limbs behind a closed door. He will step out of a dance class, body still aching from all the brutal stretches that he was made to hold, and see a tall figure emerge from the back of the changing room. Ilya's long fingers will grab onto his thighs, massage the overstrained muscles gently, before he kisses him slowly as if they had all the time in the world. And when Shane is reduced to a whimpering mess, Ilya will pop him up the small counter space of the sink, lift his legs above his shoulder, and enter him at a slow, determined pace. He will deepen it gradually but relentlessly, making Shane bite on his shoulder to keep down the sound that inevitably escapes, his lips smirking at the view but his eyes so soft with love.

Sometimes it is quieter than that. A coffee left on his dressing table after a long shoot, still warm, paired with a pastry he likes but is never allowed under the scrutiny of the house manager, and a note written in that controlled hand. *Eat. Or, Came to see you, had to go. Or, I missed you.*

He always stares at them, tracing the shape of the words as he commits them to memory, before tearing the paper into small pieces and discarding them carefully.

Sometimes it is under Viktor's presence, when their interactions are reduced to nothing more than a glance across a crowded room, a brief brush of shoulders as they pass each other in a hallway, a momentary pause when Ilya hears him fake his laugh at something, his body pressing close to the wrong person.

It is a dangerous rhythm they have fallen into, this quiet, relentless pull toward each other that neither of them seems willing to break.

And despite everything - the risks and the cost, Shane has never felt more alive.

Which is why when the absence comes, it feels unbearable. When Ilya stops showing up, when days blend into weeks and then into a full month without a single glimpse of him, the space he leaves behind is not just empty, but suffocating.

The panic starts slowly at first, then growing sharper with each passing day. Shane wakes in the middle of the night with more nightmares he can count, all involving some version of Ilya lying in blood.

He finds himself searching frantically at every face that walks into Viktor's house, his heart dropping every time he realizes that familiar one is not there. He gets distracted in his thoughts when he is supposed to be in the moment, sometimes receiving a warning look, a slap on the face, or a casual command that leaves him confined in the room for days. Yet he keeps hanging on to every chance he gets. He listens more carefully than ever before, to every name mentioned, every shift in tone, searching for a sign that Ilya is still there.

Still breathing.

Still alive.

The car taking him back from his usual tennis class pulls up in front of the house. The wide curve of a quiet cul-de-sac has several cars lined up, each one with a tinted window and a presence that quietly repels any passerby.

Shane steps out, his gaze drifting over them for a moment, recognizing they belong to Viktor's inner circle. They are the men who don't need invitations to arrive, who are simply here because they are already part of the structure that holds everything together.

He is not called for this. He is supposed to head back to his room and wait for the evening, when Viktor brings him out to an event.

That's usually how it goes. When Viktor summons him, it is almost always for meetings with outside partners, where Shane is placed carefully within view as a calculated display of power, dressed up as indulgence. He is there to be admired and desired, to remind others of what Viktor controls and what he might choose to offer.

But these meetings, the quieter ones held behind closed doors, are where the real exchanges happen, and today he needs something - anything - that might give him back some evidence of Ilya.

In the hallway, he stops one of the maids carrying a heavy tea tray, the porcelain cups rattling faintly with each step.

"I can bring it in," he says, his voice light, already reaching for the weight before she can decline. "It's heavy."

He offers her a brief smile, bright enough to disarm, and she flushes under it, her grip loosening as she passes the tray to him, murmuring a quiet thanks before turning quickly away.

Shane adjusts the balance in his hands and continues down the hall, his steps silent against the polished floor, until he reaches the heavy door at the end. He pushes it open just enough to slip through, drawing a few glances his way. Recognition settles quickly before the conversation resumes as if he were always meant to be there.

He crosses the room at an easy pace and sets the tray on the coffee table, then lowers himself to his knees with practiced ease. His fingers steady the kettle as he lifts it, pouring tea into each cup in turn, the soft sound of liquid against porcelain slipping into the background hum of conversation.

When he finishes, he lifts one cup and sets it before Viktor first, his head turning just enough to allow a faint smile to touch his lips, before moving on, distributing the rest with the same careful attention, placing each cup within reach without interrupting the flow of discussion.

He rises as fluidly as he knelt, stepping back into position behind Viktor, his hands coming to rest lightly against his shoulders before he begins to knead and work, slow and deliberate, easing into the familiar rhythm of it.

Viktor continues speaking as if Shane's presence requires no attention, and Shane lets himself blend into the background.

His fingers press deeper, finding the tension beneath the surface, the tightness coiled into the muscle, and works it loose with precision, his focus outwardly fixed on the task while his attention sharpens around the conversation unfolding in front of him.

Names move through the room, one brushing against another as Viktor speaks in that low, measured cadence he reserves for things that have begun to matter.

"Rozanov," he says, almost idly. "He's moving very fast. Hasn't held region three for long, and already he's built a respectable network. The numbers are strong."

Shane's hands do not pause.

Viktor exhales, a faint shake of his head following. "Ambitious," he adds. "Perhaps too reckless. It's a shame. They tend to burn out... and die."

A quiet scoff comes from across the table. "You would know," another man says, leaning back slightly. "Took a hit not long ago, didn't he? Had to disappear into a safe house for a while."

Shane swallows it down, the tightness rising in his throat without permission. His fingers keep moving, steady in their rhythm, though a tremor slips through them before he forces it still.

"Didn't slow him down," someone else adds, leaning forward now, interest threading through his voice. "If anything, he accelerated. Like he has a reason to rush."

A faint ripple of amusement moves through the room, subtle but shared, the kind that comes when ambition is recognized even as it complicates the board.

The conversation drifts from there, shifting onto other matters, until eventually it begins to dissolve, chairs scraping softly against the floor as men rise and filter out, their voices fading into the hall.

Shane's hands slide from Viktor's shoulders to his temples, pressing lightly, his touch slow as the room empties.

"You're tired," he murmurs, voice low.

Viktor's hand comes up without warning, closing around Shane's wrist with a firm grip that allows no resistance, pulling him forward in one smooth motion. Shane lets himself fold easily, settling into his lap with compliance, his balance adjusting without thought.

Viktor's fingers find his jaw, tilting it upward, forcing his gaze into alignment. "How long have you been with me, Shane?"

Shane's brows draw together slightly under the pressure, his breath steadying as he meets Viktor's eyes. "Three years, Viktor" he says, his voice even despite the tension coiling beneath.

"And I see you're getting comfortable," Viktor continues, his fingers tightening slightly against Shane's jaw. "Inviting yourself into meetings now."

Shane stills for a second before placing his hand lightly over Viktor's, only to realize his fingers are ice cold. "I'm sorry, sir," he says softly. His gaze lowers just enough, lashes casting a shadow before he looks back up. "You've been busy. I felt... lonely."

He leans in, his lips brushing Viktor's lightly, before deepening it just enough. Viktor does not respond immediately. When he pulls back, Viktor's expression is unreadable, his gaze neutral, neither softened nor sharpened by the contact.

His hand shifts to Shane's hip, patting it once and Shane slides off his lap without hesitation.

Shane makes it almost to the door before Viktor's voice stops him. "Behave, Shane." His fingers rest against the handle, stilling. "You remember what happened to Soren?"

Shane turns slowly. "Yes, sir." Viktor raises a brow, waiting. Shane closes his eyes for the briefest moment, then opens them again, his voice steady. "You sold him in pieces, sir."

"Good." Viktor nods. "Now remember," he says thoughtfully, "You, as a whole, are worth far more than a heart and a pair of kidneys." He pauses, "Go get ready for tonight."

Viktor takes him to a charity gala that night.

Shane sits at a round table, mindlessly cutting through the bland vegetables on his plate, his attention drifting across the room as he observes without really seeing. The absurdity of these events never quite loses its edge. Men and women dressed in fine gowns and sharp tuxedos move through a space lined with expensive champagne and carefully arranged delicacies, offering generous donations to causes that exist at a distance too far for their lives to ever touch.

Viktor is introducing him to someone now, his hand resting briefly against the small of Shane's back, the intentional pressure carries more meaning than the gesture itself.

Shane straightens, pulling on that polite, distant smile as he extends his hand, allowing the man to take it, to measure him in that brief moment of contact, before he withdraws it and lets his fingers settle against his collarbone, nudging the fabric aside just enough to suggest rather than reveal.

"What a good cause tonight," Viktor says smoothly, his tone warm in a way that feels practiced. "Are you still working those pro bono cases?"

The man smiles easily. "You bet. I like to help in all the ways possible. Human trafficking victims can really use a hand getting their lives back together."

Shane holds his gaze for a moment longer than necessary, something unreadable passing through his expression before it morphs into a lighter, more agreeable look.

"That's incredibly kind of you, sir," he says quietly. "I'd love to hear more about how you help them."

And he does.

He hears about it all that night, in the man's living room, on his knees, his body stuffed, his hands bound behind his back while the details spill out in fragments and breathless pride.

Shane learned a long time ago that a man's profession says very little about what he is capable of when no one is watching. If anything, the ones with the most respectable facades often carry the darkest indulgences.

He does not remember when he passed out.

Only that the sharp chime of the doorbell cuts through the haze, dragging him back to the surface in pieces, and when he opens his eyes again, the morning sun is already spilling across the marble floor, cold and unforgiving beneath his cheek, his hands still tied behind him, his body stiff from where it has been left.

The door opens. Two of Viktor's men step inside without a word.

They untie him efficiently, hauling him up onto his feet before draping a jacket over his shoulders, the fabric heavy against skin that no longer feels entirely his own. He does not resist as they guide him out, into the car, back through the gates of Viktor's house, across the long stretch of hallway that seems to blur at the edges, before they deposit him unceremoniously onto his bed.

The darkness takes him quickly.

When he wakes again, it is not rest that greets him, but heat.

A fever burns through him, his body caught between extremes, his skin flushed while his hands tremble with a cold that settles deep into his bones. He reaches for the telephone at his bedside, the motion slow, unsteady, pressing it to his ear as the line connects.

"Hey." His voice is hoarse, barely recognizable even to himself. "I might need to see a doctor."

There is a pause on the other end, the house manager hesitates before he responds, his tone carefully neutral.

"We won't have time, Shane. Viktor says he's taking you to a meeting tonight."

Shane closes his eyes briefly, the effort of speaking already pulling at what little strength he has left.

"I don't think I can... like this." The words trail off before he can finish them, his grip loosening as the last of his energy drains away, pulling him back under before he can fight it.

A cool hand presses against his forehead when he wakes. For a disorienting moment, his reaches to familiar faces buried deep in his mind - his mother, the quiet comfort of her touch, then Ilya, the memory of warmth that feels too distant now to belong to him. He wants to reach for it, to hold onto it, but his body does not respond, every muscle aching too deeply to obey.

The light has shifted. It's evening now. He forces his eyes open, his vision taking time to sharpen, and when it does, he realizes the hand resting against him does not belong to either of them.

"Viktor... sorry," Shane murmurs. "I don't know if I can go."

Viktor shakes his head once. “Stone asked for you to be there,” he says, his tone calm, almost gentle. “We’re very close to closing this deal, Shane. Sit up for me.”

Shane watches as Viktor reaches into his pocket, drawing out a syringe, pressing the plunger just enough for a small droplet to bead at the tip before he brings it to Shane’s arm.

“Just a little stimulant to get you through tonight,” he says, “You can rest tomorrow.” The words almost sound like care.

Shane lets out a faint breath, a sarcastic smile flickering across his lips at the thought.

“Some water, please, Viktor.”

His voice is still rough, but already he can feel the shift beginning, the drug running through his system, dulling the edge of the fever, sharpening something else in its place. Viktor lifts the glass to his lips, and Shane drinks slowly, the coolness easing the burn in his throat as he forces himself back into the shape required of him.

The car pulls into the garage of a discreet building, the kind that disappears into the city if you are not looking for it.

Shane follows Viktor to the elevator, where a guard stands waiting. Viktor reaches into his jacket, drawing out his gun and handing it over without a word. The guard nods once and swipes the panel, and the elevator doors slide open with quiet efficiency.

They ride up in silence.

When the doors open again, they walk through a long hall way before reaching a door. The space that greets them behind is strangely bare.

It is meant to be a living room, Shane realizes after a moment, but stripped down to its bones, reduced to two couches facing each other and a single armchair at the end, where Stone sits as if the rest of the room has been cleared for him alone.

There are men along the perimeter. None of them look at Viktor directly, but their spacing is too exact to ignore. One stands near the entrance, so still that he reads less like a guard and more like a boundary.

Stone does not rise. Instead, he gestures toward the couch to his left. “Viktor. You took your time.”

His gaze settles not on Viktor, but on Shane.

“I don’t rush for invitations,” Viktor replies smoothly. “Besides, beauty takes time to prepare.” His hand presses lightly against Shane’s back, nudging him forward.

Shane offers a faint smile. “Mr. Stone.”

His fever burns beneath his skin, held carefully behind a composed expression, his body sustained by the stimulant running through his blood with an unnatural clarity. Stone's eyes rest on him for a moment, attention fixing on the flush high on Shane's cheek.

Viktor crosses the room and takes his seat, and Shane moves automatically to stand behind him, only to pause when Stone lifts a hand slightly.

"You should sit," Stone says. "You don't look well."

Shane lowers his head, stealing a glance at Viktor. Viktor pats the space beside him once, casual, and Shane sits.

For a time, the conversation remains clean.

Numbers. Routes. Timelines. Their clipped language turning risk into structure, violence into something that can be measured and moved around the table. Viktor speaks with authority, presenting conclusions rather than proposals, while Stone listens more than he answers, his gaze shifting between Viktor, the men along the walls, and Shane, always returning just as Shane begins to believe he has faded from relevance.

Stone sets his glass down. "These all sounds good. Except... I've heard about your complications."

Viktor does not react. "All temporary. The nature of business."

Stone tilts his head slightly. "Is it?" He pauses. "Because parts of your operation seem to be performing... better than the rest." He offers next, tone light, "And I begin to wonder whether I should be speaking to the hand that's actually moving things."

Viktor smiles faintly. "We wouldn't be sitting here if that were an option."

"Everything is an option with the right price," Stone replies, just as easily. "However, I was told he prefers to remain loyal. With a price."

His eyes settle fully on Shane now. Shane's mind blanks.

Viktor looks between them. Then he stands.

The movement is smooth, but decisive, his hand closing around Shane's wrist and pulling him to his feet. The grip is not rough, but it contains the entirety of the command.

"Excuse us. I just need a word."

Stone inclines his head. He does not object. He takes a sip from his glass and looks at Shane, like he is appraising a piece of art at auction.

Viktor releases Shane slowly once they are in the hallway, then turns to face him with an expression so calm it makes something cold settle in Shane's chest.

"You've been placing yourself where you don't belong."

Shane lowers his eyes, steadying his breath against the heat rising in his body. “Viktor, I don’t _”

“Don’t.” The word is soft. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“I’ve been generous with you,” Viktor continues, almost gently. “We are close to closing this deal, and someone is standing in the way.” There is no need to spell out the name. “And it is because of you.”

Shane looks to the floor. He is still processing what that means, when Viktor reaches into his jacket and withdraws a small vial, the liquid inside catching what little light there is. Shane looks at it, and something inside him goes very still.

Viktor has noticed, and he has come prepared. All he needed was a confirmation from Stone, before he takes an action to destroy Shane, like disposing an asset that has been tainted.

Shane’s chest tightens. Viktor lifts the vial slightly. “So you’ll make a choice.” There is no anger in the voice, just inevitability, as if the natural course of the evening casually took them here. “You take this, and whatever you think you are doing ends here.”

He watches Shane pale, and smiles faintly.

“Rozanov stays alive. You stay with me. I keep you... alive.” A pause. “A perfect outcome.”

“And if I don’t?” Shane whispers. Viktor’s gaze does not shift. “Then I won’t need to ask again.”

There is no need to explain; Shane understands him perfectly, understands Viktor standing in front of him clinging to a control that is already beginning to slip, Stone beyond the wall weighing cost against opportunity with the patience of someone who profits either way, and Ilya somewhere close enough for that suspicion to sharpen into danger, risking everything he has built for a chance at him.

He understands, too, that refusal is not defiance but exposure, and once exposed, he becomes proof, and Ilya becomes the consequence.

So he reaches for the vial. His hand does not shake.

For one brief, impossible moment, he thinks of Ilya showing up night after night at Kingfisher, of a key placed in his palm, of those crisp, smooth sheets they once stood over and promised themselves they would buy.

He thinks of love as a house with the lights on, warm and open, and then of love as a door he closes from the outside, standing there long enough to be certain the person inside will survive without him. He doesn't know if he can shoulder what's coming at the door for that much longer, but he has to give it a try, just like he did all those years ago.

His fingers tighten slightly around the glass, grounding himself in the certainty of what comes next, and for a second, everything narrows down to the simple, inevitable outcome to finish what he started.

He lifts it, a quiet *goodbye* settling deep in his heart, followed by an even quieter *sorry*, and in that small, final movement, he lets go of the last part of himself that still believed he could be chosen.

Chapter 4: The terms of surrender

Chapter Notes

This chapter went longer than I expected, so I added one more chapter after this. Enjoy reading! xx

Ilya sits in the car, engine off, his gaze fixed on the window he knows too well.

Second floor. Third from the left.

The lights are on, the same warm, steady glow that used to spill into the dark when he came home late, when exhaustion sat heavy in his bones and Shane would still look up the moment the door opened as though Ilya returning to him was the easiest, most natural thing in the world, until one day it stopped meaning home and became only another lit window in a building he no longer belonged to.

Below, graffiti thickens along the concrete walls in uneven layers, new names carved over old ones, and somewhere above, through the thin structure of the building, a voice rises sharp with anger before something heavy slams hard enough against a wall for the sound to travel down into the street.

It was never a place worth keeping.

The pipes screamed in winter, the walls were thin enough that strangers' arguments became part of the evening, and the radiator broke often enough that Shane used to laugh and wrap himself around Ilya beneath layers of blankets like human warmth alone could make up for everything the apartment lacked.

And somehow, impossibly, it had.

Because Shane had lived there as though chipped paint and cramped rooms and flickering lights meant nothing at all, as though the place became enough simply because Ilya was inside it with him.

And Ilya had let himself believe that would last.

Before tonight, he told himself Shane left. That things fell apart. That love had not been enough to survive the kind of life surrounding them.

But the thought collapses almost immediately now, brittle and pathetic under the weight of what he finally knows.

Because somewhere beneath every excuse he fed himself over the years, beneath the anger and the silence and the careful refusal to look too closely, he had always known the truth would destroy him if he let himself touch it fully.

Shane had not left him. Shane had traded himself away for him.

And the worst part is that Shane would do it again.

Ilya knows that with terrifying certainty now.

His hand tightens against the steering wheel until pain shoots through his knuckles. He lowers his head briefly, eyes closing against the pressure building behind them, and for one weak, shameful moment he allows himself to imagine another version of his life, one where Shane never had to become this person, one where they stayed in that miserable apartment forever and somehow remained happy anyway.

Then he opens his eyes.

After that, Ilya turns himself into a machine.

He fights, expands, calculates. Viktor is not a man who can be dragged down through force alone, not without tearing apart everything around him in the process, so Ilya stops thinking like a soldier and starts thinking like structure itself. He studies routes, dependencies, weaknesses buried deep enough that most people mistake them for stability, and he begins building carefully around them until entire sections of Viktor's operation begin leaning on foundations they no longer fully control.

But before any of that can matter, he has to prove loyalty.

Absolute loyalty.

So when word reaches him about a mole inside the organization feeding information where it should not go, Ilya moves immediately instead of waiting for a cleaner opportunity later, even though he knows patience would give him better odds.

Because patience has stopped feeling tolerable.

Every day that passes is another day Shane remains trapped beside Viktor, smiling through things that should have broken him long ago, and Ilya cannot stop seeing it now that he has allowed himself to look directly at it. The tension hidden beneath Shane's pliant form whenever Viktor enters a room. The exhaustion masked beneath small smiles that appear too quickly whenever Shane notices Ilya watching him. The cigarette burn scar on his leg, small enough to miss if he had not traced along Shane's thigh while Shane pretended not to flinch.

That memory alone nearly tears him apart.

He does not have time anymore.

So when he tracks the mole down outside an abandoned building, he acts before backup fully arrives.

The man barely gets halfway through the doorway before Ilya is on him, driving him hard against the pavement, knee crushing into his thigh while the barrel of a gun presses against his skull.

And then - a single dull crack splits through the night.

For a moment, Ilya only feels the impact, hard enough to twist his balance sideways. The pain doesn't come until much later.

His grip never loosens. He fires toward movement without hesitation, one clean shot disappearing into the dark, followed immediately by another when the man beneath him begins struggling violently enough to break free. The next bullet tears through the man's thigh with brutal force, ending the attempt instantly.

Only then does warmth begin spreading heavily down Ilya's chest. He looks down and sees red.

The world shifts strangely after that, sounds arriving slower than they should, his body suddenly distant from him in a way he deeply dislikes.

"Ilya!" Svetlana's voice cuts through the blur.

He hears footsteps pounding toward him as his strength slips hard enough that one hand nearly gives out against the pavement. Panic hits him then - not fear of dying exactly, but something much worse, something infinitely crueler.

Shane.

All he can think about are Shane's eyes looking at him across crowded rooms, carrying pain so carefully hidden beneath affection that most people would never notice it. Shane waiting. Shane enduring. Shane surviving one unbearable day after another because he still believed that there could be a future where he and Ilya belongs to each other.

An arm catches him before he fully falls.

"I got you," Svetlana says sharply, hauling him upright with visible effort. "Come on."

"Sveta." Blood catches thick in his throat. His fingers close hard around her wrist. "If I don't..."

"No." Her voice cracks like a whip. "Don't start."

"Get Shane out." The words cost him more than the blood does. "If I can't make it... get him out."

For the first time in years, Ilya hears pleading in his own voice. And Svetlana hears it too.

Something breaks across her expression before she shakes her head violently, one hand pressing hard against the wound in his chest. "Shut up. You're not dying. You hear me? You get him out yourself."

His vision blurs harder around the edges.

But all he can think is that Shane cannot survive this world alone.

"Please," he whispers again.

Svetlana curses viciously under her breath. "Fine. Fine, fuck you, Ilya, okay? But stay conscious. Stay with me."

More people reach them then, taking his weight as they drag him toward the car while darkness pulls steadily at the edge of his vision.

"You are not dying today," Svetlana snarls at him. "Not before you finish this."

The doctor at the safe house tells him he needs a month before he should even consider moving normally again.

Ilya gives himself a week.

Antibiotics flood his system while painkillers keep his body functional enough to obey him, and despite Svetlana's fury, he forces himself back into work before the stitches have properly settled.

But he stops going to see Shane. He knows Shane too well. He knows that one look at him like this would unravel every careful mask Shane has spent years building, and Ilya cannot risk that before his plan is ready.

So he stays away.

And he promises himself something with the kind of certainty that draws a clean line between life and death: the next time he sees Shane, he is taking him home.

He expands the network carefully, not loudly, replacing weak links before they have the chance to fail, tightening routes, restructuring supply lines, placing his own people where they matter most until operations that once depended entirely on Viktor begin, slowly and almost invisibly, depending on him instead. Not because he demands authority, but because reliability has a way of making itself indispensable, and Ilya understands better than most men that power lasts longer when people lean on it willingly.

But Ilya knows dependence alone is not enough.

Viktor values control above all else, and men like Viktor do not surrender what belongs to them because of sentiment, or threats, or loyalty. They surrender only when keeping it becomes more dangerous than letting it go.

So Ilya waits for the right leverage. He knows it comes in the form of Stone.

The man controls the largest contract that could potentially move through their routes, enough money and influence tied into it that whichever side secures his confidence will effectively control the future of the network itself. Stone is careful, famously difficult to impress, the kind of man who survives this long because he treats criminal empires the same way other people treat the financial markets: never emotionally, always mathematically.

Which is why Ilya is mildly surprised when Stone seeks him out first.

Their meeting happens in a private lounge, stripped of theatrics, two men seated across from each other with untouched drinks between them while the city moves distantly beneath the windows.

Stone wastes very little time. "Viktor built something useful," he says evenly, turning a glass once between his fingers. "But useful isn't the same as stable anymore."

Ilya says nothing.

Stone studies him for a moment before continuing. "The routes improve wherever your hands touch them. The delays disappear. Product stops vanishing. Problems stop repeating themselves." He pauses. "That tells me the future of this operation is sitting in front of me, not above you."

Ilya understands it is not praise, but an assessment.

"And?" Ilya asks calmly.

"And I don't enjoy tying my money to old men who think fear is infrastructure." Stone leans back slightly. "Walk away from Viktor. Bring your people over to me. We build something cleaner."

He is simple and direct, making the kind of offer powerful men make when they are accustomed to being accepted immediately.

Ilya only shakes his head once. "No."

Stone's brows lift slightly, curious instead of offended.

"You're refusing money, territory, protection, and independence in one word," he says. "Either you're loyal, or you're stupid."

"It's neither." Ilya says evenly.

For the first time, Stone looks genuinely interested.

Ilya's voice remains even when he speaks again. "I'll oversee the deal personally. End to end. Your product moves through my hands, my routes, my people. No interruptions. No surprises. You'll get the smoothest operation you've ever had."

“And Viktor?”

“I stay where I am in his org. At least for now.”

Stone watches him for a long moment then, eyes narrowing slightly as he studies the answer beneath the answer, intelligent enough to realize immediately that this is not about business at all.

“Ah,” he says softly.

Stone exhales beneath his breath, faintly amused, and sets his glass aside. “You’re smarter than most men in this business, Ilya. Smart men don’t anchor themselves to people.” His gaze sharpens. “Money is leverage. Territory is leverage. Fear is leverage. But a person?” He shakes his head once. “A person is a liability. That’s the kind of weakness that gets men buried.”

Ilya is quiet for a moment. “He buried himself for me once.” He swallows the lump as memories surface, “And I’m not letting it happen again.”

The amusement disappears from Stone’s expression.

Stone studies him with a different kind of attention now, something more cautious than before, because men like him understand obsession when they see it, and there is something deeply dangerous about a man who has already decided what matters more than his own survival.

Finally, Stone leans back. “So that’s what Viktor has.”

It is not really a question, so Ilya does not bother answering it. Instead, he says, “Broker the meeting.”

Stone taps one finger once against the table, thinking. Then he smiles slightly.

“You know,” he murmurs, “most men in your position would be trying to take Viktor’s chair.”

“I don’t want his chair.”

Stone’s gaze lingers on him. A man that's not driven by ambition. And somehow, that makes Ilya far more dangerous than ambition ever could.

Stone eventually agrees, though not out of kindness, because men like him do nothing for free. He agrees because he recognizes something inevitable taking shape in front of him, and he understands the balance of power is already shifting beneath Viktor’s feet whether Viktor realizes it or not.

Before they part ways, Stone pauses beside the door.

“If this goes badly,” he says lightly, “Viktor will kill you first.”

Ilya meets his gaze without hesitation. "Then I'll make sure he gains nothing from it."

Stone laughs once at that, quiet and genuine.

And for the first time since they met, he offers Ilya his hand like an equal rather than an investment.

"Fine," he says. "Let's see how far you're willing to go for your liability."

Ilya steps out from the hidden door only after Viktor and Shane were out of the room, the door sealing shut behind them without a sound. As always, he waits long enough to understand the shape of the negotiation before he ever allows himself to become part of it. Ilya does not enter a room unless he already knows where it will end.

Stone remains in the armchair, one leg crossed over the other, as though none of this concerns him. Ilya passes without slowing.

"You may want to have that looked at," Stone says evenly. "Before he removes the leverage entirely."

Ilya reaches the door, and he stands just beyond it, listening. He thinks about how fragile Shane looked like when he walked in earlier, and how frightened he must be now, on the other side of the door.

"You'll make a choice."

Viktor's voice carries the same quiet cruelty it always does, smooth enough that someone unfamiliar might mistake it for patience.

And that is all Ilya needs.

Ilya understands instantly what is happening. Viktor's desperate attempt to strip Shane down into something unrecognizable, something emptied enough that Ilya will no longer look at him and see the man he loves. A living corpse bound obediently at Viktor's side, kept breathing just enough to survive what remains of his life.

And Shane - Shane is considering it.

Because he is still the same boy who once sold himself to settle Ilya's debt and held on the belief that his suffering mattered less than Ilya's survival.

Ilya pushes the door open immediately. The space stills around them.

Shane stands in front of Viktor, pale beneath the warm light, one trembling hand already lifting the vial dangerously close to his lips.

He crosses the space in between in seconds and catches Shane's wrist before the vial can reach his mouth, fingers closing tightly enough to stop the motion without hurting him.

“Wrong choice, Shane,” he says quietly, because anything louder will break his voice apart entirely.

Shane jerks his head upward.

The look on his face nearly destroys Ilya where he stands.

Disbelief crashes first, followed so quickly by relief that it physically weakens him, and beneath both of them sits an emotion even worse - terror, his gaze flicking instinctively back toward Viktor not in fear for himself, but with the frantic calculation, already trying to figure out how to keep Ilya alive through this, how to throw himself between danger and the person he loves even now, even here, even in the state he has been reduced to.

And God - he has gotten so thin.

Ilya feels like something is splitting open beneath his ribs. Shane’s frame, once warm and solid beneath his hands, has narrowed painfully under the soft fabric draped over him, sharp edges where there should have been softness, pain and exhaustion carved so deeply into him it clings to the way he breathes, and still, somehow, his first instinct is not self-preservation.

It is protection.

“Shane,” Ilya says again, his free hand rising instinctively to cradle his flushed cheek, thumb brushing lightly against skin burning far too warm beneath his touch. “You made that choice once.” His brows draw together as he looks at him, the pain in his chest suddenly unbearable for reasons that have nothing to do with the bullet wound that still has not fully healed.

“Not again.”

A cough from behind breaks the moment.

Stone hasn’t moved from the armchair. One hand rests lazily against the armrest, the other lifting just enough to offer two light claps, as though he’s been watching something unfold exactly to his liking. His smile widens, unhurried, his gaze drifting first to Viktor, whose fury held so tightly it borders on disbelief, before sliding back to Ilya and Shane. They’ve drawn closer in the silence, Shane half-folded into Ilya like something reclaimed, Ilya’s hand still braced at his back.

“As much as I enjoy a good love drama. We don’t have the entire night. Shall we talk business?” Stone smirks.

Ilya presses a light kiss on Shane’s forehead. “Just a bit longer, and then we are going home.”

“Home?” Shane repeats softly, the word sounding unfamiliar in his mouth, like something half remembered from another life.

Ilya’s chest tightens. For a second, he cannot speak at all. Because Shane sounds genuinely uncertain that such a place could still exist for him.

“Yes, Shane,” he says again, quieter this time. “Home.”

Shane's lips quiver as he lowers his head, to finally allow himself to rest it on Ilya's shoulder as his strength gives out. Ilya wraps an arm tighter around him immediately.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs against Shane’s hair, though the words nearly tear apart in his throat. “I’ve got you now.”

He guides Shane back into the room, easing him down onto the couch before settling beside him, one arm draped across his shoulders to anchor him, because letting go is no longer an option.

Steps away, Viktor sits down on the couch across, he says nothing.

The shock has burned away, leaving behind a cold, sharp fury that settles deep instead of exploding outward. Ilya can feel his gaze fixed on them, on the shape they make standing together, on Shane folding instinctively toward Ilya despite years spent under Viktor’s control.

He is furious of a loss. Not of business, but of ownership.

Stone sees it unfold in real time, and his amusement deepens as he rises from the armchair, smoothing one hand down the front of his jacket.

“Well,” he says lightly into the tension thickening through the room, “I believe that answers the question of loyalty.”

Viktor’s eyes shift toward him slowly. “Be careful, Stone.”

“About what?” Stone asks pleasantly. “Backing the side that actually keeps my shipments moving?”

Ilya speaks before Viktor can. “You’ll release him.” His hand tightening around Shane's slim shoulder.

Shane goes very still beside him. For a moment, he thinks he’s misheard. His gaze flicks up, searching Ilya’s face, trying to find the compromise that he is making.

Viktor’s attention snaps back to Ilya. “You presume - ”

“I’m offering you continuity,” Ilya cuts in, his arm never shifting where it rests around Shane. “My territory holds, still yours. Your routes stay intact. Mr. Stone - you have my words that your shipments move without disruption, and I will guarantee that with my life.”

Shane’s breath catches, shallow, almost soundless.

“I remain where you need me to be.” Ilya continues.

“And in return,” Viktor says, eyes landing on Shane who leans into Ilya in a way he has never seen, “you take what is mine.”

Shane flinches.

Ilya's gaze doesn't shift. "He was never yours. You held him because he was useful." He pauses briefly. "I'm more useful."

Shane feels a weight pressing in his chest, because he can see what Ilya is placing on the table now, the years it must have taken to build whatever stands behind those words, the control, the distance, the independence that kept him alive in rooms like this - and he is giving it up.

For him.

His head feels dizzy with the disorienting weight of it. Part of him wants to speak, to tell Ilya that this is not worth it, that he is not worth it. But there is no way where he asks Ilya not to do it that doesn't sound like a lie.

"I keep my loyalty," Ilya says, unwavering. "I keep my work. You keep the structure you built me for." He turns to look at Shane, eyes gentle, "I take him, and we are even."

Stone nods approvingly. "It's efficient," he remarks, as though discussing numbers rather than lives. "You'd be wasting time arguing anything else."

Viktor doesn't acknowledge him. His gaze remains fixed on Ilya, searching for anything that suggests this can still be bent back into his control. But there is none.

"Fine." Viktor says. "But understand this," He adds, "you don't get to walk back from it."

Ilya's arm tightens around Shane just slightly.

"I will never." he says.

And Shane knows, amid the blurry mind and the burning fever, that this isn't something Ilya is saying to Viktor.

The room stills again. But Ilya barely feels the rest of it. Because Shane's weight has grown heavier against him, his fever burning straight through the thin fabric between them, his breathing uneven in a way Ilya deeply dislikes.

He looks down immediately. "Shane."

"I'm okay," Shane whispers automatically. The lie is so familiar it almost breaks something inside him.

"No," Ilya says softly, brushing his thumb once again beneath Shane's cheekbone. "You really aren't."

Shane's eyes flutter briefly at the touch.

Exhaustion is pulling at him now that the adrenaline is fading, stripping away the last fragile pieces of control he had been forcing himself to maintain. Up close, Ilya can see it all too

clearly - the shadows beneath his eyes, the feverish flush spread across his skin, the terrible strain hidden beneath every composed smile Shane offered him over the past months.

Ilya cannot bear it.

Without another word, he stands up, bends and slides one arm beneath Shane's knees before lifting him fully into his arms.

Shane startles faintly but is already too weak to talk. "Ilya - " is all he manages.

"Hush." The word comes out gentler than anything Ilya has said in years.

Shane goes quiet almost immediately after that, one weak hand curling instinctively against the front of Ilya's shirt as though some part of him still cannot completely believe this is real, that Ilya is truly here, holding him, taking him away.

Ilya adjusts his hold carefully and turns toward the door. Only then does he finally look back at Viktor, not with anger or triumph, but with the quiet finality of a ledger being closed - your business for him, my loyalty for the outcome, and whatever remains between us is now even.

Viktor's expression barely changes, his eyes cold and dark, showing a stillness that doesn't signal acceptance so much as calculation, but he does not move, and in that refusal to respond, there is a reluctant acknowledgment that the terms have already been set without him.

Stone exhales softly beside them, sounding almost entertained by the entire thing.

"Gentlemen," he says, "I do enjoy making deals with you."

Ilya ignores him completely. His attention never leaves Shane again. He is leaving, and this time, Shane is going with him.

Chapter 5: You are safe with me

Chapter Notes

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

Heat, cold, and aches blur together until Shane can't tell where one ends and the other begins. His skin burns, his bones feel packed with ice, and there is a deep, pulsing pain dragging at him.

His eyes stay shut. There's no urgency to open them. He lets his mind drift instead, slow and heavy, sifting through what little he can remember.

There was definitely a meeting. Someone important. Right - Viktor took him to meet with Stone.

Viktor had said something when they were in that hall way. Something about a term, or a condition. There had been a vial in his hand, a cool glass pressed into his palm

And then - there was him. Ilya.

The memory blurs there, becoming uncertain. It must have been a dream.

It *felt* too real. There was the steady strength of a hand at his back. The way it shifted, firm and careful, to his shoulder. The moment the world tilted as he was lifted, carried like he weighed nothing at all. Shane's mouth parts slightly, his breath catching.

What a cruel, beautiful dream.

His eyes move faintly beneath his lids as if he could chase it back, find the exact moment it slipped away. If he stays like this, if he doesn't wake, maybe he can find his way back into that warmth.

He's had dreams like that before too many times. Waking is always the worst part. Worse than anything that comes the night before. When every trace of warmth breaks apart the moment he reaches for it.

Still, he always chooses them. He savors the brief illusion of safety, of gentleness, of being held... even knowing it vanish the moment he opens his eyes.

His throat burns. The pain is sharp enough now to cut through the haze. He tries to swallow and immediately regrets it, a strained sound catching in his chest as the ache flares hot and raw. Shane frowns - he might have to wake up now, to get some water.

"Shane, baby." The voice is low, roughened at the edges, but impossibly gentle.

Shane's lips tremble. It's still there. The dream hasn't broken yet.

“Hi,” he whispers, the word barely formed, his voice frayed and thin, but also impossibly warm, because it’s for *him*.

“Open your eyes for me? I’ve got water.”

Shane’s mouth curves faintly. He gives the smallest, stubborn shake of his head. Not yet. Just a little longer.

A warm, gentle hand brushes his cheek. His brow furrows. That feels too real.

Before his mind can chase that thought, something softer presses to his lips.

A kiss. So light but so certain. So achingly familiar.

Shane’s eyes snap open. For a split second, he regrets it, expecting the dream to shatter. But his vision sharpens gradually, and -

“Ilya.”

The name breaks out of him, hoarse and disbelieving, barely more than breath. Tears spill immediately, hot against his overheated skin, his chest stuttering as his pulse kicks hard and uneven.

Ilya looks wrecked. His eyes are bloodshot, shadows carved deep beneath them. His hair is disheveled, like he’s run his hands through it too many times to count. There’s a tightness to his mouth, something strained beneath the relief.

But the way he looks at Shane is still the same. The fondness spills out of his eyes even though he looks so tired.

Carefully, Ilya slides an arm beneath him, lifting him just enough to bring a glass to his lips.

“Slowly,” he murmurs.

The water is cool, grounding. Shane clings to it, to the steady presence holding him up, his eyes never leaving Ilya’s face as if looking away might make him disappear.

“The doctor said you’ll be okay. You just need rest.” Ilya says quietly, “Don’t worry, I’ve got you now.”

Shane swallows again, wincing faintly this time, but he doesn’t stop looking.

Nothing makes sense.

“Ilya...” His fingers twitch, then lift, catching weakly on the fabric of Ilya’s sleeve before drifting higher to brush his jaw, as if he needs to confirm he’s really there. “You’re...”

Real. He doesn’t quite say it.

“...Is this a dream?”

Something in Ilya's expression breaks. He leans down immediately, pressing a series of soft, almost desperate kisses along Shane's cheek, his lips, his temple.

"*Moya lyubov*," he breathes. "I'm here. With you. At home."

Shane's breathing quickens, his brain searching through a mix of reality and dreams, looking for the thing that has lodged in his mind for months. And then, it surfaces.

"Ilya - " His grip tightens as much as it can. "Did you get shot?"

Of course. Of course that's what he asks. Even now. Ilya's chest tightens sharply, but his voice stays gentle. "I'm okay. Hey, look at me. You're the one who's hurt."

Shane shakes his head, weak but insistent. "No. Tell me. Please." The effort costs him. His voice cracks, barely holding together.

Ilya exhales slowly, then reaches for his shirt, undoing it just enough to reveal the healing wound - the stitches are still angrily red.

"It's already closing," he says, watching Shane the entire time.

Shane's hand lifts again, trembling, fingertips barely grazing the skin before they falter. His strength gives out halfway, his hand dropping back as tears slip free, quiet and helpless.

"Shh." Ilya wipes them away with his thumb, infinitely careful. "It's nothing."

Shane closes his eyes, breathing uneven. Then his fingers curl again, tighter this time in Ilya's sleeve.

"Hold me," he whispers. "Please. I missed you so much."

Ilya is already moving before he finishes. He slips into the bed with him, every motion cautious, like Shane might shatter under the wrong shift of weight. The difference hits him immediately. Shane is way too light. Something dark and violent stir in his chest, but he buries it, wraps his arm around him instead, pulling him in close.

Shane presses into him without hesitation, breath hitching as the movement pulls at something painful, but he doesn't stop.

Ilya's hand begins to move over his back, rubbing slow, steady circles. He presses soft kisses into his hair, his temple, wherever he can reach.

"You're safe," he murmurs. "I've got you. I'm not going anywhere."

Shane nods faintly against him, already slipping, his body giving in now that it has somewhere to rest. He goes limp in Ilya's arms, breath evening out, the tension draining all at once.

Ilya holds him long after he's asleep.

It takes three days for the fever to break. Three days of heat soaking through the sheets, of Shane shivering even as his skin burns, of Ilya counting breaths in the dark just to make sure they keep coming.

Another three before Shane can keep food down.

Ilya doesn't leave. He closes the world out with the bedroom door like sealing a wound. And every moment, waking or not, he stays within reach. Close enough to hear if Shane's breathing changes.

Svetlana comes once a day, bringing supplies, updates, and decisions that still require his name.

Ilya meets her in the living room, with the bedroom door popped open for just an inch so he can step right back if Shane needs him. He has mostly been sleeping.

It was after a particularly long night with Svetlana studying the routes, when Ilya opens the bedroom door to an empty bed.

For a second, everything inside him goes completely still. Then his pulse slams back in, loud and violent, blood running cold.

He finally lets out the breath he's holding, when he sees the familiar form folding into himself in the corner of the room. "Shane." He keeps his voice calm and low, slowly walking towards him. Shane trembles at that voice, further folding into himself in a desperate attempt.

Ilya's heart clenches. Up close, he can hear Shane whispering under his breath, words too fragmented to make out, his body shaking hard enough to be visible.

Ilya lowers himself carefully beside him, not touching yet, his hands hovering, waiting. "Shane," he says again. "It's me. I'm here."

This time it registers. Shane's head lifts. His eyes are unfocused, glassy, tear tracks still wet against his skin.

"Ilya?" he whispers.

Ilya doesn't hesitate this time. He pulls him in, firm but gentle. "I'm here."

Shane collapses into him immediately, a broken, quiet sound leaving him.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. "Bad dream."

Ilya's jaw tightens, but his hands stay steady as he gathers him up, easing him to his feet.

"Hey," he murmurs. "No, no - "

Ilya lifts him the rest of the way without asking, carrying him back to bed like it's nothing. He tucks the blankets around him, then sits, taking Shane's freezing hands between his own.

"Shane," he says quietly. "You don't apologize for that."

Shane snuffles, eyes dropping. "I just..." His voice falters. "I wish I was more... Stable. You're busy," he adds quietly. "And I only make you worry."

Ilya goes very still. Then, carefully, he leans forward, pressing his forehead lightly against Shane's.

When he speaks, his voice is lower and rougher.

"You think this is... inconvenience?" he asks quietly. He slowly pulls away his head, and he doesn't bother hiding the rawness in his expression now. "You think I would rather be anywhere else?" His thumb brushes over Shane's cold fingers, warming them up with steady motions.

"You being here, breathing, waking up, asking me to hold you." His voice thickens. "That's it. That's all I care about."

Shane's eyes lift, searching for something in Ilya's eyes. Ilya squeezes his hands, just enough to anchor him.

"You just need to be here. And I will take care of the rest."

Shane's lips tremble. He leans forward slowly and hesitantly, but Ilya closes the distance quickly, pulling him in again, one hand cradling the back of his head.

This time, when Shane presses into him, he doesn't apologize.

Ilya tries to be home every night, making a quiet ritual of watching over Shane as he sleeps. On the rare nights he has to step out, he asks Svetlana to stay, ensuring that Shane never has to wake up to an empty apartment.

The home itself is secure - Ilya makes sure all the alarms are setup and systems are layered, always with some guys stationed close enough to respond within minutes. However, Shane's sleep hasn't improved. Nightmares find their ways to him most nights, and all Ilya can do is to hug him tightly as he wakes up gasping, chest heaving, eyes wide and unfocused.

Each time, something in Ilya fractures a little. His Shane fought his way through hell to be here with him. And yet it keeps finding its way back, slipping through the seams of sleep, like it was never fully gone to begin with.

The only thing he seems to take comfort in is Ilya. One night, Ilya comes home to find Shane curled around a T-shirt he had worn the day before, clutching it like something essential. The sight loosens something deep in his chest, and he crosses the room without thinking, slipping into bed to replace the fabric with himself.

He starts to leave his clothing on the bed. More often than not, he returns in the early hours to find Shane pressed into it, face buried, his expression still faintly drawn even in sleep.

Ilya tries to ask him about the nightmares. But Shane has been stubborn in keeping his silence. "It doesn't matter, Ilya. I'm here, and you make me feel safe, and that's enough." Ilya swallows his concerns, his heart settling for Shane's answer, knowing it might all still be too raw, hoping one day he will eventually open up.

Running and expanding the network keeps him occupied. Before, he worked for power as a way back to Shane. Now it's different - now it's to hold up the fragile safety net above them. To keep them both alive, still together. He knows there is no version of this where he messes up, because losing Shane again would cost him everything, including his own life.

Sometime it feels like a distorted echo of their old life in that cramped apartment. Shane waiting at home for him. Ilya buried in work that never loosened its grip. But this time he knows to not waste even a single second he has with Shane.

He makes a point of being home in the evenings to go through the familiar evening routines of cooking and eating together, like most couples in the world. First just with Shane sitting at the counter as he was still recovering physically, and later as he got better, Ilya starts to ask him to decide what to make for dinner. And then, one evening, Ilya comes home to find ingredients already laid out. Vegetables chopped, broth simmering softly on the stove, the apartment carrying the faint warmth of something being *made*.

He starts to notice that small decisions like this helps Shane gain control of his life. And it hurts, sometimes, to realize just how little of that Shane must have had before.

He still isn't comfortable with Shane leaving the apartment on his own, and Shane doesn't ask either. But when Ilya is home, he offers, "want to go out for a walk?" It took two weeks for Shane to say yes. They don't go far. Just a slow loop around the block, Ilya's hand wrapped firmly around his the entire time. He points things out as they walk - small stores, flowers and leaves, giving Shane something to look at that isn't memory.

It took another week for Shane to work up the courage to step inside somewhere. A bakery. Shane hesitates at the counter, hands damp, shoulders tight. But Ilya doesn't rush him. He just stays close, thumb brushing slow, steady circles against his skin. When Shane finally manages to order, Ilya leans in slightly as they step aside. "You did great, sweetheart."

His Shane used to be the most open, unguarded person he knows. Now even the smallest interaction with the world seems to cost him something. But Ilya is just grateful that Shane is here. And he keeps telling himself that they have a whole life time to rebuild, as long as Shane lets him.

The guilt never really leaves. It's impossible to look at the timid, vulnerable Shane moving through the world, or waking up with a silent gasp, to not feel a strong tug of pain and guilt. And no matter how much Ilya knows the truth, it doesn't change the feeling that this leads back to him.

That Shane chose him.

That Shane suffered for that choice.

He keeps everything down and pulls up the strong appearance for Shane, only letting it out quietly when occasionally Svetlana stops by at night. The two of them sit at the counter, drinks in hand, guarding the slightly ajar bedroom door like two guards posted outside something fragile and irreplaceable.

"Ilya. You are holding too much by yourself." Svetlana tells him.

"He was strong for me," he says after a moment. "This is the least I can do." But deep down he doesn't feel strong, he feels hopelessly scared, that his Shane may drift away any day, that his guarding and protection isn't enough to pull him back from the dark depths that keeps staring at Shane.

"I wish he'd let me in," Ilya admits, voice lower now. "Even just a little." His fingers tighten around the glass. "I hate seeing him try to come back... and struggle."

"Did you tell him?" Svetlana doesn't need an answer to know, but she still asks.

"I can't possibly ask more of him, Sveta. You know that - not after he gave me absolutely everything he had." Ilay shakes his head. "It makes me feel... useless. Watching him hurt like that but can't do more to protect him."

Svetlana's fingers rest on Ilya's forearm, her large eyes finding his and lock in, "You are not useless, Ilya. You burned down half of the world get him back." Ilya scoffs, but Svetlana doesn't let go her grip, "You are just an idiot in love."

Shane wakes up choking on air. A sharp inhale burns his throat as his body jerks like it's trying to escape itself. His hands clutch at the sheets, nails digging in, expecting something to happen, but there is only silence around.

"Ilya..." The name slips out before he can stop it. He scans the room, spotting the shirt that Ilya left by the pillow, and he hungrily dips his head in it, letting the familiar scent calm his pounding heart.

He doesn't want to lie there. He can't close his eyes again. So he slowly sits up, feet touching the ground as he stables himself slowly, before he stands up and follows the light in the hallway that's intentionally left on.

Svetlana is in the living room, seated on the couch with a file open on her lap. She looks up immediately when she hears him.

It's been a steady arrangement for months now, but it never takes away the shame when Shane realizes that Svetlana is only here because of his condition, because he can't stay in a quiet home by himself at night. He still feels relieved though, finding a presence that symbolizes safety after his haunting nightmare.

"Hey, you are up." She says matter of factly, lips pressing together as she watches Shane with her big warm eyes.

"Sorry," he murmurs automatically. "I didn't mean to - "

"Don't," she cuts in, voice not sharp but firm. She sets the file aside. "You don't apologize for waking up."

"You want some water?" she asks.

Shane hesitates, then nods. By the time she comes back from the kitchen, he's lowered himself onto the far end of the couch, sitting a little too straight, like he's trying to take up less space.

She hands him the glass without comment, then watches him for a moment as he drinks.

"Nightmare?" she asks.

Shane's grip tightens slightly around the glass.

"Yeah." His voice tight as he hopes she doesn't make him elaborate.

Svetlana leans back, stretching her arm along the back of the couch, she looks out of the window.

"It's quieter out tonight," she says. "Traffic's low."

Shane glances toward the window, though he can't really see anything beyond the reflection of the room.

"You want to get out for a bit?"

He looks at her, surprised.

"It might help," she adds. "Change of air."

Part of him wants to say no. Stay home and wait for Ilya. But another part - the one still shaking under his skin - knows he won't sleep if he stays.

"...Okay."

The car ride is quiet at first.

Svetlana doesn't turn on the radio. Just lets the low hum of the engine fill the space. The city slips by in soft lights and empty stretches of road, the kind of late-night calm that feels almost unreal.

Shane leans his head back against the seat, watching it pass. His shoulders slowly drop, tension unwinding just a little.

Svetlana glances at him once, then back to the road.

“What was it about?” she asks eventually.

Shane’s fingers curl slightly in his lap.

He could say “nothing.” But something about the quiet hum of the car, about not being watched too closely by Ilya's worried gaze, makes the words sit differently in his throat.

“...Same as usual,” he says.

“Viktor?”

He nods.

“He doesn't even have to do anything. ” He exhales, shaky. “It’s like my body already knows.”

He presses his hands to his eyes, trying to ground himself. “I wake up before anything really happens,” he adds quickly. “So it’s not...” He shrugs, like that makes it better. “It’s fine.”

Svetlana doesn’t respond right away. When she does, her voice is gentle. “That doesn’t sound fine.”

She glances at him again, longer this time. “Does Ilya know?”

Shane’s shoulders tense immediately. “No. I mean, he knows I have nightmares,” he amends. “Just... not details.”

“Why not?”

Shane’s answer comes too fast. “He’s already dealing with enough.”

The car slows at a red light. Svetlana taps her fingers once against the steering wheel, thinking.

She turns slightly in her seat, “You think you’re protecting him.” She studies him for a moment. Then, very evenly, “He gets hurt more when you shut him out.”

Shane stills. "He doesn’t need to carry that. He already carries enough. Look at what he has given up just to have me here.”

Silence fills the car. The light turns green. She doesn’t move right away.

“You don’t have to protect him from caring,” she says gently in the end. “That’s already a lost battle.”

That almost pulls a smile out of him. Instead, his eyes sting.

“I just...” He swallows. “I don’t want to look at him and see what it does to him.” He quietly wipes the corner of his eye.

Svetlana nods once. “Yeah,” she says. “That part’s real. But he will still choose to know.”

Shane's eyes close briefly.

The car comes to a slow stop near the water, city lights reflecting in broken lines across the surface.

Svetlana shifts into park but doesn't turn off the engine.

"You don't have to tell me anything," she says after a moment. "But if you want to, it might help."

She leaves it open and doesn't press further. And then after a while, as Shane starts to shift uncomfortably, Svetlana adds evenly, "You don't have to talk. Silence is also allowed."

Shane looks out to the water, the reflected lights dancing in his eyes. He then looks at Svetlana, as if deciding whether she can keep his secret.

Eventually, he sighs.

"He never liked when I slept." Shane's voice slips out quietly. Almost like he's whispering to himself.

"Viktor?" she asks gently. Shane nods once.

"He said it made me... inattentive." A hollow breath. "So he'd keep me up. A day. Sometimes two." His fingers shift restlessly against his sleeve, like he's trying to ground himself in the fabric. "And when I finally slept, he never let it last."

Svetlana doesn't interrupt.

"Sometimes he would wake me up with a loud noise." His eyes unfocus for a second. "Close enough that it felt like a bullet that went through me. Sometimes it was something else, pain."

His jaw tightens. He doesn't elaborate further.

"I still don't sleep right, I just wait for something to happen." Shane adds after a moment, voice roughening. "Even with Ilya there." His mouth presses thin. "It's worse, sometimes."

Svetlana's hand shifts slightly closer, not touching yet. Slowly she nods once, like she understands more than she says.

"The dreams aren't even - " He stops, shakes his head once, sharper this time. "They're not about me. They are things he made me watch."

Svetlana doesn't flinch. "What kind of things?" she asks, carefully.

"Other people," Shane says, voice thin. "Punishments. To 'learn.'" His hands tremble slightly now. "And he didn't like it if I looked away."

"Watching was somehow worse," he says quietly. "At least if it's happening to me, it ends when I pass out. There's nothing to hide behind when I'm just... staring at it."

Shane exhales frustratingly, "I feel so weak, constantly needing Ilya - and you - there, even as I sleep in a perfectly safe place, just because I can't shut off my brain."

Svetlana shakes her head, her fingers brushing over Shane's as she speaks with absolute certainty. "You are the bravest person I have ever met."

He lets out a shaky breath, almost a break. "That's not true."

"I work with men who think violence makes them strong," she says, steady, unwavering. "Men who enjoy it." Her gaze settles on him. "You *survived* it for Ilya. And even after all of that, you are still trying to protect him. If that is not bravery, I don't know what is."

Shane glances at Svetlana gratefully, knowing what she is trying to do there, his voice coming out easier now that he let something out.

"I just... I wish I could make it easier for him. For Ilya. But it has been hard, because Viktor -" he forces out the name like the sound of it hurts him, "he liked to test how long I could stay quiet, to see whether I'd break the way he wanted."

His breathing starts to uneven again, but he keeps going. "I learned pretty quickly that reacting made it worse. So I stopped. Even when I thought I wasn't going to make it."

"I still find myself doing that with Ilya. Staying quiet, because I don't want to mess things up." He looks at his hands like he's shameful of that admission, "I know Ilya will never hurt me. But it's like my body doesn't care what I know."

Svetlana turns just enough to face him more fully. "Can I tell you something about Ilya?" she asks.

Shane glances at her.

"I've known him a long time," she finally says. "Long enough to know what actually gets to him." Her eyes flick to Shane. "It's not the violence. Not the risk. Not even the losses." She pauses to make sure Shane is still with her.

"It's you pulling away. He can handle everything else," she says. "But not that."

Shane stares down at his hands.

"He does not break because someone he loves is hurting," she says. "He breaks when they shut him out."

"I just don't want to put more on him," he mutters. "He's already... everything is already because of me."

"No," she says, calm but unyielding. "Everything is *with* you. That is different."

"You think you are protecting him," she continues. "But what you are doing is making him stand outside a locked door, knowing you are suffering inside."

Shane's throat tightens, his face nearly crumples.

Svetlana reaches a hand over, resting on his clasped hands gently, "I'm not blaming you. You are incredibly brave to trust me with all these, and I will never tell him unless you want me to. I am just saying - he would rather bleed with you than be safe without you."

Shane stares out the window again, but his posture has shifted to be less caved in.

"I don't think I can tell Ilya everything," he admits.

"Maybe start small," she says. "Tell him something. One piece. Let him in a little." A small pause. "He will meet you there."

Shane nods slowly.

"...Okay."

"Thank you," he adds softly.

Svetlana smiles faintly, eyes back on the road as she pulls out of the parking lot. "I like you, Shane. You make him so much better."

A corner of Shane's mouth lifts, barely, but it's real.

They pull into the garage and park right next to Ilya's car. Ilya is leaning against it, his face brightens up a little as they come into view. Svetlana lowers the window and smirks, "Ilya, I told you we were just going on a short drive. You couldn't wait at home?"

Ilya shakes his head as he opens the passenger side door for Shane, his hand already resuming that familiar position around his shoulder, protective. "Can't waste any minutes with you." *Not after all the years I already did.*

Svetlana snorts. "Alright. I'll leave you two to be disgusting together. I'm going home."

Shane leans down slightly, looking at her through the window. "Um... thank you, Svetlana. For tonight."

Svetlana just waves at him and drives away.

Ilya hugs Shane a little tighter as they swipe into the elevator, "what was that about?" He asks, his eyes are smiling as they trace Shane's face that looks more relaxed than most nights.

Shane is on the verge of brushing it off with a *nothing*, before he remembers the conversation in car. "I had a bad dream, again." He quickly eyes Ilya and sees him frowning in concern, "So Svetlana offered to take me to get some fresh air, and it was nice." He offers a small smile, assuring Ilya that he is feeling better now.

Ilya sighs in relief, "Yes, she is good at that." He takes Shane's hand as they step out of the elevator, bending at the foyer to take Shane's shoes off for him, despite his small protest.

By the time they settle on the couch, Shane is already leaning into him. Ilya huffs a quiet laugh. "She wasn't always like this, you know."

Shane glances up, curious.

"She used to be feral," Ilya continues, a hint of fondness in his voice. "Even the worst boys on the block stayed out of her way. She fought like her life depended on it. I was lucky she was on my side... most of the time."

Shane is looking at him with sparkly eyes as Ilya tells him a story, far from the reality they are living now, and he feels warmth in his chest as he learns more about Ilya's childhood.

Ilya notices that and places a quick kiss on Shane's forehead as he continues. "When my mom passed... when I thought there would never be sunshine in my life again." his voice turns somber, but his heart beats a little faster as Shane's fingers immediately clasp around his, "Sveta showed up at my door, and dragged me out like I didn't have a choice."

"We had nothing back then. Barely left that neighborhood. But somehow she found two bikes and told me to follow her." He shakes his head. "I did. Mostly because I didn't want to deal with her if I didn't."

Shane smiles softly.

He looks at Shane as he continues, "We rode for hours, out of the city, to this little hill. We left the bikes at the bottom and climbed the way up. And we sat there and watched the sunset."

Shane looks like he is mesmerized. His eyes wide, lips parted slightly.

"She told me she knew my life was dark," Ilya says quietly. "But that the sun would come back. And she would stay until it did."

His gaze drops to Shane.

"I knew she was right the first time I saw you smile at me. You looked like sunshine."

Shane's face crumples, he dips his head immediately, "Well.. I don't think I still -"

Ilya doesn't let him finish. His hands come up, cupping Shane's face, grounding him there as he presses soft, insistent kisses to his lips, his cheek, his temple. "Shh, *Solnyshko*. Sunshine doesn't disappear, yes? It may hide when it's cloudy, when it's dark, but it is always there."

His forehead rests against Shane's. "And as long as you're here with me," he whispers, "you warm me more than anything ever could."

Shane surges forward and buries his face in Ilya's chest now. Ilya gathers him immediately, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other smoothing slowly through his hair.

Shane lets his emotion out quietly, and indulges in the steady voice, and gentle pat in his hair.

They stay like that for a while, before Shane raises his head again, biting his lips as he looks Ilya in his eyes. "Ilya, can I tell you a little about the dreams?"

He has never seen Ilya smile like that - he looks like he is in pain, but also so relieved, a little hopeful, "Yes, of course, Shane. As much or as little you want, I would love to know."

Ilya shifts their position so Shane can lie on his chest as he starts. He gently brings Shane's legs up the couch, draping a blanket over his torso. He raises one hand to slowly comb through Shane's hair, and keeps the other on his waist, grounding him.

By the time Shane finishes, he feels a thousand times lighter. He doesn't give much details, not the worst of it, just the reasons for his trouble falling and staying asleep, and why it was hard to open up, even though deep down he knows Ilya is the person he can trust with all his heart.

Ilya stays quiet the entire time. His hands are still moving slowly along Shane's arm, gently applying the grounding pressure.

When Shane finally looks up, there is apprehension in his gaze. But Ilya doesn't look shattered - not the way he feared. There is still pain, and a tightness in his brows, but there is more than that. His eyes are tender with a mix of emotions like newly learned understanding, and... pride.

"*Solnyshko*." Ilya finally says, "You are everything I think you were, and so much more." He brushes Shane's cheek slowly as he murmurs, "So brave, so resilient, and so bright. Just like sunshine."

They sink down together, shifting until they're fully tangled on the couch. Ilya pulls the blanket higher around them, tucking Shane close against him.

After a moment, he murmurs near Shane's ear, "Maybe it will help if I talk to you before you sleep? No loud noise, nothing will reach you, just my voice there to protect you. Would you like that?"

Shane nods quickly, almost before he finishes speaking. it seems to be such a simple solution, and he just knows it is going to work, although he isn't sure why he never thought about asking for it before tonight.

Ilya continues murmuring sweet, gentle things to Shane, first in English, then slipping into Russian, low and rhythmic, the words soft and unfamiliar but steady as a heartbeat. Shane doesn't understand them. But he understands the *tone*. The promise beneath it.

Shane closes his eyes and lets sleep comes closely. And as Ilya's voice wraps around him like a warm cocoon, for the first time in years, Shane lets himself fall asleep without fear.

As much as Shane wouldn't have believed it possible, life begins to ease, shaping itself into a rhythm he can follow.

It doesn't happen all at once, but in small, careful steps it starts to build. Ilya makes up for every absence accumulated over the years, spoiling Shane in ways that feel both new and deeply familiar. There is always Shane's favorite pastry waiting for him as he wakes up in the morning, the same one Ilya used to leave at his photoshoots, and even earlier than that, back when they could only justify the expense on a payday. On days when Ilya is pulled away by work, Svetlana drags Shane out into the city. They roam on streets that feel too open at first, Svetlana pointing out each storefront that "belongs to his man".

And slowly, almost without noticing, Shane begins to move on his own again, within the familiar boundaries of their neighborhood. He knows he isn't truly alone; there are always one or two men trailing at a distance, shadows that never touch him but never leave either.

When he tells Ilya that it's not necessary, that he feels safe enough around home now, Ilya just smiles and tells him, "They are not watching you. They are watching everything else, for me."

The call comes early in the afternoon, when the warmth of May has finally arrived. The air moves gently through open windows and the leaves outside are still new enough to glow. Shane has the windows cracked just enough to let the breeze in, carrying that faint green scent that always reminds him of beginnings.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Ilya's voice comes through the line, warm but apologetic. "I'm tied up this afternoon and won't make it back to pick you up. I'll have Tom take you to the restaurant. We can meet there, is that alright?"

Shane leans back against the counter, phone tucked between shoulder and ear as he organizes the spice rack. "Just come home. We can go another night."

"No. It's your birthday. Let me spoil you. Please?" A brief pause, and then there's that shift in his tone, a hint of flirtiness coming through. "I promise we'll have a good time tonight."

It's enough to make him smile despite himself, heat rising to his face. "Okay, Ilya" he says shyly.

Six months of careful distance sits behind that small answer. Six months of Ilya holding back with a patience so deliberate it had bordered on infuriating, of Shane trying to close that gap faster than he should have, only to be gently but firmly slowed every time. And then, when it finally happened, it hadn't been awkward or fragile. It had been so easy, like their bodies had never forgotten, like everything between them had simply been waiting.

Shane presses his lips together as the memory surfaces, warmth spreading through him again, and he has to look away to the leaves outside to steady himself.

Tonight will be like that, he knows it will - dinner first, because Ilya insists on rituals and doing things properly, white tablecloths and impeccable service and something so exquisite

that Shane won't even want to look at the price of, and then home, where they get to be alone and madly in love with each other. He considers, briefly, telling Ilya to forget the restaurant, to just come back and stay in, takeout and the couch and the bedroom without the pretense, but he lets it go. This is how Ilya shows his love too, and Shane has learned how to receive it.

The car is already waiting downstairs when he steps out into the warm afternoon, the same make he's grown used to, the same darkened windows, Tom behind the wheel. It's familiar enough that Shane doesn't hesitate before he reaches for the handle and pulls the door open -

- and the gun is there, steady and unassuming, as if it has been waiting for him to notice it.

"Get in," the man in the back seat says, his voice even. "Don't make a scene."

Shane doesn't move right away. His eyes flick forward first, taking in Tom's posture, the way his shoulders are drawn tight, both hands fixed where they can be seen, and then the passenger seat, where another man has turned halfway around, his own weapon angled toward Tom's side, not pressed close but near enough. Shane exhales once, steadying himself, and lowers himself into the seat.

"I'm so sorry, Shane." Tom's voice trembles, barely contained.

Shane meets his eyes in the mirror and gives a small shake of his head. It's done. Panic won't help him now.

The door shuts, sealing them in, and the man in the front says, "Drive."

Shane shifts slightly against the seat, his attention turning to the man beside him. The face is unfamiliar, his expression tight as if he hasn't yet learned how to carry this kind of situation without thinking about it too much. That alone gives him enough to begin.

"This isn't a good idea." Shane's voice is almost conversational. "You're new," he continues, watching closely for the smallest reaction. "I would remember you."

The man's expression doesn't change, but there's a fraction of hesitation as he adjusts the grip on the gun, now that he's aware of being watched.

"I don't know what Viktor told you," Shane goes on, his voice steady, "but I can tell you how this ends when Ilya - Rozanov - finds out." He pauses at the name that should ring a bell before adding evenly, "Not the way you think."

Shane glances forward briefly, his eyes catching on the green blinking light on the console, small and easy to miss unless you know to look for it. He lets out a quiet breath.

"He already knows," he says, almost lightly. "Everything in this car, who you are, where we're going."

"I've been with Viktor for years," Shane continues, settling back as if he has all the time in the world. "Long enough to know when he is desperate enough to pull off something reckless like this." His gaze shifts back to the man next to him.

The man's jaw tightens slightly as he forces out, "You should shut up."

"Do you know what happens to the people around him when he gets desperate?" Shane ignores the threat, his eyes dark as memories flash back in them. "They don't get rewarded for loyalty," he says quietly. "They get used up."

The man's eyes flicker quickly toward the front. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the guy sitting in the front.

"I'm not saying this to threaten you," he adds, voice so soft almost as if he is caring. "I'm saying it because I've watched it happen more than once."

Then he tilts his head slightly, studying him again. "How long have you been with him?"

The question hangs there, unexpected. The man doesn't answer.

Shane nods once, as if that silence confirms something. "Not long. You still think this is an opportunity."

There's a faint tightening in the man's posture. Shane shifts his gaze forward again, as if the conversation is only half his attention now. "Tom," he says, "how long have you been with Ilya?"

"Five years," Tom answers immediately, his voice is tense but certain.

Shane lets that sit for a moment before turning back. "Five years," he repeats. "Do you know how rare that is in Viktor's circle?"

No answer.

"Do you know why it isn't rare with Ilya?" Shane asks, there is almost a smile tugging at his lips as he says that name. "Because people don't leave him unless they choose to."

Shane doesn't interrupt the silence this time, letting it press in on them until it starts to work. Outside the window, a car slides into view, pacing them, same make, same tinted glass, Shane notices it without turning his head, tracking it through the reflection in the window. The man next to him also notices, his body getting even more tense.

"At this rate," he says, almost absently, "you're not going to make it where you're trying to go."

Another car appears behind them, completing the picture, and he lets out a slow breath. "And even if you did, handing me over like this doesn't end cleanly for you."

Shane leans back, his posture relaxed in a way that feels almost at odds with the situation. "You still have a choice," he says. "I can call him. We can settle this before anyone has to prove a point."

The two men exchange a glance, brief but loaded, words passing between them in Russian, quick and tense, and Shane listens without understanding, focusing instead on the cadence,

the hesitation that creeps in between phrases.

“Why would he spare us?” the man beside him asks finally, the first real question, his voice no longer entirely steady.

Shane meets his gaze. “Because you didn’t hurt me - he cares a lot about that,” he says simply. “And because he keeps his word.”

The man exhales through his nose, his grip on the gun loosening just enough to notice. He glances toward the front again, another exchange in Russian, this one slower.

“...Call,” the man beside him says finally.

Shane nods once, as if that was always the direction this would go. “Have your friend take the gun off Tom first,” he adds, his tone still reasonable. “He’s not the problem here.”

There’s hesitation, then a reluctant shift as the weapon lowers just enough, and Shane reaches for his phone, only noticing the tremor in his fingers once he’s already dialing. The line connects immediately.

“Shane.” Ilya’s voice comes fast, controlled but tight. “I love you. I have people on you. You will be safe. Don’t escalate this, just do what they say.” Ilya gets everything out in one sentence.

“Relax,” Shane cuts in gently, “I think they’re ready to talk to you.” He closes his eyes briefly as he imagines Ilya on the other side of the line. “Be nice.”

He pauses for a response, then smiles faintly, “I love you too.”

He hands the phone over without another word, watching as the man listens, his expression shifting in small, almost imperceptible ways, calculation, doubt, flicker of hope mixed together. Another exchange follows, more Russian, more tension, and then the call ends. The man slides the phone over, and finally, the gun lowers.

Shane leans back into the seat, only then becoming aware of how hard his heart has been pounding, how tightly he has been holding himself together, and he lets out a slow breath as the car changes direction.

When the car pulls up in front of the office building, Ilya is already there, standing alone at the entrance, two large duffel bags at his feet. He looks exactly as he always does in moments like this: composed and immovable like he is carved out of something colder than steel. And yet, even from a distance, Shane can see it - the tension held just beneath the surface.

Then Ilya looks up.

Their eyes meet through the windshield, and the entire world contracts to that single point of contact. Everything else drops away, leaving only the space between them. There is that familiar softness that belongs only to Shane.

Ilya doesn’t look away from Shane as the exchange unfolds around them.

The person in front steps out, examines the bags, and brings them back as he lets Tom out of the car. Ilya remains still, watchful, his attention fixed entirely on Shane, as if the rest of it is nothing more than background noise to the simple fact that Shane's here, unharmed.

“Out,” the man beside him says.

Shane steps onto unsteady ground, his legs threatening to give for a moment before he forces them forward. He closes the distance step by step as he keeps his eyes on Ilya, who rushes forward to meet him half way there.

The moment Shane is within reach, Ilya's control breaks in a way that only Shane can notice. His arms come around Shane with unmistakable force, pulling him in close like he has no intention of ever letting go again. The grip is firm, almost bruising, but the way his hand presses into Shane's back, the way he dips his head with a controlled sniffle makes Shane's eyes sting.

“So brave,” Ilya murmurs against his hair, his voice roughened, stripped of the cold precision he carried moments ago. “My *solnyshko*.”

The word is soft in a way nothing else about him is.

Shane exhales, the tension slipping free as he presses closer, breathing him in. “Ilya,” he says quietly, and it feels like coming back to himself.

For a second longer, Ilya doesn't move. Then he forces himself to pull back, though the reluctance is obvious, his hands are slow to release, his fingertips dragging slightly as if memorizing the shape of him all over again.

“We'll have to miss dinner, sweetheart.” Ilya apologizes. “But I'll make it up to you later tonight.”

Shane searches his face, his grip tightening on Ilya's arms, “Ilya,” he says, searching his face. “What are you doing?”

The shift is immediate. There is a coldness flashes through his eyes, “He doesn't get to break terms,” Ilya's voice sounds lethal, “He will pay for it.”

Ilya looks at him again, and everything hard in his expression softens, carefully set aside as if it has no place here with Shane. His hand comes up almost unconsciously, brushing back a strand of Shane's hair. “You trust me?” he asks.

Shane holds his gaze, and for a fleeting second, memory folds over the present - the night at Viktor's mansion, the way he had clung to Ilya then, desperate to keep him in that room, to keep him safe. Beneath it all was an aching need to have Ilya next to him again, possibly for a final night, a want that surfaced so sharply in the moment when his body was close to giving out.

But this is different now. Everything is different, and the man standing in front of him is no longer that person who once had to hesitate.

"I trust you," Shane says, slowly he releases his hold, his eyes still locking in Ilya's, "You promise we are still on, tonight?"

A real smile this time. "I promise, Shane."

He leans in, just briefly, pressing a soft kiss on Shane's lips, his hand tightens once more at his back before he lets go.

Then he steps away.

Shane watches him go, watches as he returns to the car, the same one Shane had just stepped out of, the same men now falling into line around him instead of against him. The engine starts. As they move away, a few more cars start to follow quietly, driving into the sunset.

The summer and fall pass in a blink, and before anyone knows it, the air is crisp and cold.

Shane blinks his eyes open and smiles softly at the sight of Ilya beside him. It has been a few months since his last nightmare, and waking each morning in soft light, next to Ilya - his curls a soft, unruly mess against the pillow - still feels surreal. The best kind of surreal. The best thing in his life.

The nightmares have been fading ever since the night of his birthday, when Ilya came home with his shirt stained in splashes of blood, his body otherwise untouched. He had kissed Shane fiercely that night, taken him to bed with an urgency Shane hadn't felt in a long time.

They didn't talk about it until later. When Shane was half-asleep, Ilya had murmured softly to him, voice warm and tender, until it shifted.

"I wanted him to die slowly," he had said, quietly as if telling a story. "To pay for everything he did to you. A hundred times over. But I promised I'd come back to you tonight. So I had him folded into a barrel. Filled it with rocks. Sealed it. And had them roll it into the river."

He pauses as if telling the end of a story, "It went in quietly. No splash."

Shane had opened his eyes, staring into those pale blue ones, grimacing, "Ilya, that's not exactly a calming bedtime story."

Ilya had shaken his head slightly. "I know, sweetheart. But maybe it helps anyway."

It had helped. Night after night, the things that haunted Shane seemed to sink down to the bottom of that same river, carried away by the current, buried in silt and darkness.

Shane reaches up now, gently brushing the curls away from Ilya's eyes. Ilya mumbles something incoherent, already reaching for him, pulling him close, tucking Shane against his chest like it's instinct. Shane chuckles softly. He tilts his head up, pressing a kiss to Ilya's cheek, then another.

"I need to get up," he murmurs. "I'll see you tonight." Ilya's eyes open slowly, lips pulling into a faint pout. "Don't go, *solnyshko*." Shane laughs under his breath at that version of Ilya

no one else ever sees. "I'll let you pick me up later," he says, "if you let me go now." Ilya leans in, stealing a proper kiss before finally loosening his hold, letting Shane slip out of bed.

The center smells faintly like tea and industry cleaner, a weird mixture of warmth and sharpness. Shane has tried different ways to soften the smell, but with frequent arrivals and departures, the sanitation needs outweigh the possibility to create something homey. He picks up the stack of paper left neatly behind the front desk and starts to sort them into piles - new, pending, placed. It's a quiet morning, no overnight emergency stay, and he loses himself in the rhythm of it until the door opens with its usual reluctant scrape.

"Shane!" A young voice calls out to him, and Shane's face blooms into a wide smile as he stands up and steps around the front desk. The kid - around six, maybe younger, runs straight at him, colliding into his legs. Shane steadies him, hand coming down automatically to the kid's shoulder, "Careful, Max. Slow feet."

Max grins, digging into his pocket and pulling out a small pine cone. "I found this for you, Shane." Shane crouches to his level, accepting it like it's something precious. "Wow. This is perfect. Thank you."

Behind Max stands a young woman in her early twenties. She smiles nervously, her feature is soft but exhaustion etches beneath her eyes. "Shane, I'm so sorry," she says quickly. "I just got called in for an interview. I'm trying to find a job, but there's no school today..." Her voice trails off, guilt creeping in.

"Hey, it's more than okay." Shane smiles brightly at her, "It gets lonely in here, Max can keep me company, right Max?" The boy nods enthusiastically.

Relief washes over her face. "I'll be back as soon as I can." She crouches slightly toward Max. "Be good, okay? Don't make a mess."

As she turns to go, Shane calls after her. He opens the fridge, pulling out a sandwich. "Here," he says, handing it over. "You'll do better if you eat something first." She hesitates, then takes it with a grateful smile before hurrying out.

Max is already tugging at Shane's sleeve, asking for cereal. Shane obliges, then returns to the paperwork while Max eats contently. Later, Shane drags a chair over, letting Max sit beside him - his self-appointed assistant, drawing diligently with bright markers.

The door scrapes open again. Shane glances up. A teenager stands in the doorway. He is thin and tense, his eyes flicking quickly across the room. He doesn't step inside.

Shane doesn't react immediately. He finishes stacking his papers neatly, then looks up. "Hey," he says easily. "You can come in."

The kid doesn't move.

"It's cold out," Shane adds. "Want some tea? We've got food, too." Max looks up. "And markers! I'm drawing a spaceship."

The boy hesitates, then slowly closes the door behind him. He steps inside, one careful step at a time, hands twisting together.

Shane nods to the couch, "You can sit if you want. I will make some tea." He turns around to the pantry and turns on the kettle. Then he grabs a bottle of water, loosens the cap, and walks it over, taking a longer path, not approaching too directly. He sets it down on the coffee table and steps away.

The kid eyes him for one more moment, and when nothing happens, he quickly grabs the water bottle and retreats, taking a few sips too quickly. Shane turns his back, pretending to organize the neat pile of paper again. And then after a while he says evenly, "You don't have to say anything. You can just sit."

There is no answer. But after a moment, there's the sound of fabric shifting. A careful step. Then another. Shane glances just enough to see him reach the couch and sit on the edge, body angled toward the door.

The kettle clicks as the water boils, Shane pulls out a teabag, and pours hot water into a mug. He carries it halfway across the room and sets it down on the low table, "Careful, it's hot."

There is an awkward silence in the room. The teenager eyes the tea suspiciously, before looking at Shane again. "You gonna ask me stuff?" he snaps suddenly, like he's been holding it in. Max raises his head at that sharp sound.

Shane shakes his head, "Not unless you want me to. You can stay for the day."

"Are you going to call anyone?" He forces out the next question.

"Depends," he says. "On what you want. On what's safe."

"You will have to, eventually, right?"

"Sometimes," Shane admits. "If you're under eighteen, there are rules. But they don't just... send you back. Not if it's not safe."

The teenager's jaw tightens, his hands pulling on his long sleeve subconsciously. "It's not."

"I figured," Shane says quietly. His voice is softer now, "You get a say in what happens next. I can talk it through with you on the options. If calling them isn't safe, there are other ways."

He lets the kid digest that, before taking a clipboard from the front desk, "There is no rush in filling this out. As I said, you can stay for the day, even the night if you want, and we can figure it out."

That seems to take the edge off the teenager visibly. Shane sets down the form on the low table, returning to his seat beside Max.

Outside, the air has cooled with the fall of evening. The light above the center's entrance flickers faintly. Ilya stands a few steps back from the door, hands in the pockets of his coat.

His attention never leaves the glass. Shane moves around the center with ease. He does the quick handover with the staff that steps in for the evening shift, and pulls out clothing, blankets, and a small bag of toiletries, setting them on one end of the couch, careful not to crowd the boy sitting on the other end. The boy's eyes never leave him, he tracks Shane's movements as if Shane's presence itself gives him enough comfort to stay in an unfamiliar place for the night.

As Shane puts on his jacket, he turns around one last time, saying something to the room. The boy gives him a quick nod, and Shane turns back, a big smile on his face.

Ilya feels dizzy by that smile for a moment. He has built his world on control and on the understanding that safety can only be carved out of chaos by force and will. But Shane stands in a room of thin walls and secondhand furniture and gives someone the quiet protection that is just as real, maybe more powerful.

He sighs just as Shane is stepping out, the smile on his face becoming even bigger as he surges forward to wrap his arm around Ilya's neck. "Ilya, why didn't you come in? It's cold out."

Ilya nods to the inside, "You have a new intake. I don't want to intrude."

Shane studies Ilya's face, "What's going on? Did something happen?" He never misses anything.

Ilya sighs again, "I was just thinking... In many years, when we die, you will go to heaven." He pauses, "And I will go to hell."

Shane snorts softly, brushing his thumb along Ilya's cheek. "No," he says. "I'm not leaving you again." He takes Ilya's hand, guiding him toward the car. Then he leans back against it, pulling Ilya down into a deep kiss.

"I'll talk them into letting you in," Shane murmurs against his lips. "And if not..." A small, dangerous smile. "I'll figure something else out." His hand is sliding down Ilya's torso, stopping at his crotch. He splays his palm and starts to slowly rub and press in.

Ilya sucks in a breath, his hand holding onto Shane's waist as his other hand fumbles to open the door behind him. He pushes Shane down to the backseat, towering him as he lowers himself. The spacious car barely fits both of their long bodies together, but it will have to make do. Shane wraps his legs around Ilya's waist, hands working swiftly to open his fly. His fingers tease from outside of the boxer as Ilya moans deeply into Shane's mouth, his own hands moving south.

Shane pushes against Ilya's chest to pull himself up and leans back against the door, his hand wrapping both of their cocks together, giving them a few firm strokes. They both moan out

loud in unison. As Shane deepens the rhythm, Ilya threads his fingers in Shane's hair, tugging it lightly to tilt Shane's head up. He leans down to kiss those freckles dancing on those warm, flushed cheeks, feeling Shane's lashes brushing lightly against his face, before he moves his mouth to claim those sweet lips again, suckling on them.

Shane's hand are working faster now as he pants sweetly in Ilya's ear. "Hmmm. Ilya.. 'M close." Ilya cups Shane's face as he thrusts harder into his hand, "Me too, *solnyshko*, come for me." Shane's eyes are squeezed shut as he continues to work his hand up and down. Ilya nibbles on his ear, pressing down kiss after kiss on his jawline and neck, the body below him is incredible warm, heaving up and down as it shivers under the gentle kisses.

The next second, Shane's body goes taut. He lets out a whimpering yelp, shooting white streaks across his own shirt. Ilya's hand flies up and takes over to give a few more firm strokes before the release finds him as well, adding to the mess in front of Shane's chest. Shane is shivering, overstimulated by the final few strokes, the flush sits high on his cheek.

They finally settle on the seat, Shane leaning against him, breath still uneven. Ilya closes his eyes, one arm wrapped securely around him. Shane traces a finger across the mess on his shirt as he murmurs, "There. I did something bad. I will get to go down with you."

"No," Ilya murmurs softly. "This is heaven." He tilts his head down, pressing a slow kiss to Shane's temple.

"Heaven is wherever you are."

Chapter End Notes

A special birthday shoutout and gift to Shane! 🎂

Thank you for going on this journey with me. I've had so much fun writing this fic and the previous one in the series (you can find it in the series now if you haven't already).

As always, I'd absolutely love to hear your thoughts, and I deeply appreciate every comment, kudos, and share. It means a lot more than I can properly say.

Thank you for reading and being here with me through it all 💛

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