

No limits, until him

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/85891081) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/85891081>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Troy Barrett/Harris Drover
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Troy Barrett , Harris Drover
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - BDSM , Dom/sub , Slavery , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Soft Dom Ilya Rozanov , Sub Shane Hollander , Hurt/Comfort , Subdrop , Subspace , Impact Play , Dark Romance , Power Imbalance , Angst with a Happy Ending , house slave shane , protective dom Ilya , Rescue , learning consents , Past Abuse , Torture , not between the main characters though! , Dubious Consent (due to Shane's conditioning) , Praise Kink , Orgasm Denial (Self-Imposed / Conditioned) , Dark Fic with Soft Core , Puppy Play , Starvation , Eating Disorders , Food Kink , Hand Feeding , Punishment , Aftercare , Trauma-informed play , Orgasm Edging , Total Power Exchange , Consent King Ilya Rozanov , Domdrop , Degradation , primal play , Boxers finally in Shane's mouth , Cages , Anal Hooks , Roleplay , Consensual Non-Consent , Reunions , Human Trafficking , Safewords , Ruined Orgasms , Orgasm Control , HEA
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Soft things in hard places
Collections:	Anonymous
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-31 Completed: 2026-09-29 Words: 142,524 Chapters: 24/24

No limits, until him

by Anonymous

Summary

“Eyes on me.” There is a sharp satisfaction as those eyes lift immediately to meet his again. “I need your name.”

The man’s lashes flutter. “Shane, sir.”

Ilya nods and lets his hand move through Shane’s hair. It is soft, and Shane leans into the touch, eyes closing briefly as if the contact alone is enough to ground him. The response is so natural that it gives Ilya pause.

“Tell me about your limits.” Ilya doubts he is going to be close to any limits tonight, as Shane looks like he already had a pretty rough night. But he still needs to ask, good hygiene.

A small smile appears on Shane’s face, he looks at Ilya deeply, eyes not wandering away as he speaks, “There are no limit, sir.” He looks at the disbelief appearing on Ilya’s face and offers, “I’m the house slave.”

Or, Ilya didn’t come for attachment, but Shane, bruised, obedient, and unraveling, becomes the one thing he can’t leave broken.

Notes

Welcome to my fic! ❤️

TW: This is a heavy story dealing with dark topics, including past abuse and human trafficking, so PLEASE heed the tags before diving in.

I promise it gets better, and the healing is worth it. But if at any point you find this fic hard to digest, please don’t push yourself! No fic is worth risking your wellbeing. :)

With that said, I hope you enjoy this dark, twisty, but somehow also fluffy and sweet ride with our two favorite boys. There is a big HEA waiting for you at the end! ❤️

Chapter notes: The main fic is complete at Chapter 20. From Chapter 21 onward, I’ll be continuing with one-off chapters, mostly smutty little adventures featuring our boys.

- Translation into Русский available: [No limits, until him \(rus\)](#) by [superashka](#)

Chapter 1: The house slave

The banquet lasted far too long, stretching into an afterparty and eventually an even later private gathering with the host and several of the most prominent guests. By the time everything wraps, it is three a.m. Ilya thanks the host for their hospitality and walks toward the guest wing where his room is. Troy follows him like a shadow, as always, his earpiece blinking a slow green as he keeps several steps behind.

The guest wing is decorated with taste, nothing too flashy, but the oak hardwood floors radiate warmth, and the darker walnut doors lining the long hallway stand heavy, granting privacy behind each one.

There had been entertainment earlier in the evening, and several guests had already left with beautiful people in their arms. But Ilya is not here for indulgence, and while several pretty faces approached him that night, he declined them all with polite disinterest.

A thud suddenly comes from behind one of the walnut doors, and Troy appears in front of Ilya before he fully registers it, his hand already reaching inside his jacket.

A muffled moan follows, along with a few vague profanities, and then everything goes quiet.

It is too late for gossip. Ilya glances at Troy before continuing down the hall. Troy frowns at the door, and when nothing else happens, he resumes his steps behind him.

Just before Ilya reaches the end of the hall where his room is, the door behind them flies open with a much heavier thud before clicking shut again. Troy turns immediately, gun drawn and pointed toward the sound as Ilya turns to look.

He is not prepared to meet a pair of large brown eyes.

For a moment, that is all he sees. Striking, soft, and arresting in a way that slows his thoughts before they can fully catch up. It takes him a second to take in the rest.

A young man lies on the floor, dressed in nothing but a pair of tight boxers and a black leather collar around his neck. His body shows lean muscle, but it is marked with long, fresh welts, raised and angrily red.

For a moment, the three of them freeze in the hallway. The man struggles, hands pressing against the ground as he tries to push himself up but fails, managing only to drag himself into a seated position against the wall. Troy's gun remains trained on him.

After a while, Ilya reaches over and pushes the barrel down, giving him a look that makes it clear *this is not a threat*.

Ilya's gaze shifts briefly toward his door and then back to the man on the floor before he steps closer. The man tries to rise again as Ilya approaches but only manages to brace himself upright against the wall when Ilya stops in front of him.

His eyes flick up, long lashes casting shadows over his pale face.

Something in Ilya's chest catches, subtle but undeniable, and without thinking he reaches out a hand, intending to help him to his feet.

The man tilts his head slightly, his gaze locking onto Ilya's, and then slowly he parts his lips, extends his tongue, and drags it along Ilya's fingers. His mouth follows, soft and warm, closing around them as he begins to suck gently.

The effect is immediate. A sharp jolt runs through Ilya's body, his mind blanking for a beat before he gathers himself. He withdraws his hand abruptly, a soft, wet sound escaping the man's mouth, and in the same motion his fingers hook into the collar, hauling him to his feet.

The man stumbles but forces himself to steady, falling into step without resistance as Ilya leads him down the hallway, the collar guiding him forward.

Troy watches the man closely before stepping aside. Ilya catches the hint of disapproval in his expression before shutting the door. Troy would want a full check before allowing this, but Ilya does not have the patience to wait, and the man beside him radiates no sense of threat.

Inside, under better light, Ilya takes a closer look. The man is undeniably beautiful, but it is his eyes that stand out most, large and open in a way that draws attention.

"What is your name?" Ilya asks.

The man lowers his gaze as he kneels by the door with practiced obedience. "You can call me anything you want, sir."

"Eyes on me." There is a sharp satisfaction as those eyes lift immediately to meet his again. "I need your name."

The man's lashes flutter. "Shane, sir."

Ilya nods and lets his hand move through Shane's hair. It is soft, and Shane leans into the touch, eyes closing briefly as if the contact alone is enough to ground him. The response is so natural that it gives Ilya pause.

"Tell me your limits." Ilya doubts he is going to be close to any limits tonight, as Shane looks like he already has a pretty rough night. But he still needs to ask, good hygiene.

A small smile appears on Shane's face, he looks at Ilya deeply, eyes not wandering away as he speaks, "There is no limit, sir." He looks at the disbelief appearing on Ilya's face and offers, "I'm the house slave."

Ilya takes a small step back, looking at him again as the words settle. It is late, and his thoughts feel slower than usual, but the meaning is clear enough. Slave contracts exist, but they are rare, and the few he has seen were far worse off than the man in front of him, bodies worn down by the absence of limits and protection. A life signed away, no refusal, no exit.

When a house slave is shared, the boundaries are not theirs to give. They are set by the owner, if they are set at all. Without limits, Shane can be treated in any way at a guest's discretion.

"Why..." Ilya stops himself, discarding the first question that comes to mind before settling on another. "Why didn't Manny set any limits for you?"

Shane's smile deepens as the name of his master is mentioned, "Master has his own reasons. I only have to follow his orders to serve him well." He straightens his body as he gains more strength from this short conversation, and gracefully links his fingers behind, chin up, knees spread wide, settling into the perfect submission posture.

"Now, sir, may I serve you?"

The welts on his body are not done neatly. There are some open wounds where blood is slowly seeping through. Some strokes are overlapping too closely, and some in areas that are too dangerous for potential permanent damage.

Ilya decides he can't add to this in any way that may jeopardize the man in front anymore. He also realizes, given the way he is thrown out of the room just now, Shane probably did not get any aftercare.

The desire that was lighting up his body is now considerably tamed. His protective instinct kicked in, even though he didn't even play with this beautiful sub.

"You should eat." He decides. Turning around to rummage through the small fridge in this guest room. There is nothing much in there, water, some small bottles of liquor. He grabs the water, and takes a banana from the fruit basket on the table, these will have to do.

"Sir, did I do something wrong? Please punish me. I will learn." Shane looks so eager to learn now, determined to fix something he didn't break.

"What? No." Ilya shakes his head. "You didn't do anything wrong. You're just not in the condition for anything else tonight. We are going to make sure you come down safely, clean those wounds, and get some rest."

"Oh." Shane remains perfectly still. "I'm okay, sir. I almost never drop. You don't need to worry about that."

"What do you mean?" Ilya frowns, he is so confused. By the way that Shane submits so easily, it has to be so easy to put him in sub space. And if not handled properly, he for sure will have to drop.

"Master trained me on that. I dropped too easily before and it was inconvenient. So we went through some training. And now I rarely ever drop." He smiles at that, almost beaming with pride.

Something stirs in Ilya's chest. It feels too wrong.

He knows what that means. Conditioning. Repetition. Endurance. Being left alone at the worst point of the fall again and again until the body learns to stop reacting, until the drop dulls into something manageable.

How many times had he gone through it alone? How many times had he been left shaking, disoriented, unraveling, until there was nothing left in him that could?

And now he says it with pride.

"Go sit down there." Ilya says curtly in his dominant voice, and Shane understands perfectly. He gets up from the floor, walks over to sit down at a lounge chair in the corner of the room.

Ilya opens the water and brings it to his lips, watching closely as Shane drinks in small, careful sips. He peels the banana and feeds him a piece. Shane's lips close around his fingers again, softer this time, the touch lingering just long enough to register before Ilya pulls back.

They continue like that until the banana is gone. Shane's gaze never leaves him, steady and open. Ilya lifts his hand almost without thinking, brushing his fingers lightly across Shane's cheek where a scattering of freckles catches the light.

Shane leans into the touch, a quiet sound slipping from his throat, his body relaxing under the contact.

Ilya rarely finds himself uncertain with a submissive. Dominance has always come easily to him, instinctive and controlled. Tonight, there is hesitation. Shane responds too readily, offers too completely, and Ilya cannot ignore the marks left behind by someone else's hands.

After a moment, he decides. "You will warm my bed tonight. Get in."

Shane moves right away, he walks over elegantly, climbing into the bed and settling under the sheets. Ilya watches for a moment before stepping into the bathroom for a quick cleanup.

When he gets into the bed, Shane presses closer gingerly. His full body is rigid, careful not to bend into Ilya's space. Ilya wraps one arm around Shane's waist, pulling him in. He whispers, "relax for me." At that, the man in his arms gradually softens. Shane's head dips forward slightly, nose lingering inch away from Ilya's crook of neck. Ilya rests a hand on the back of his head to guide him forward, until Shane's head rests fully on his shoulder.

"Good boy." He murmurs. The body in his embrace shivers, the head lifting slightly as those big eyes look into him again. He looks happier than he looked the entire night.

So eager to please.

Ilya sighs in his chest, thinking about the way he got thrown out earlier, how that must have destroyed Shane who clearly desperately wants to be good.

He says again, "Good boy. Warming my bed so well."

Shane's eyes grow misty, and he blinks quickly, pressing closer, seeking warmth.

Ilya watches him for a moment before reaching over to turn off the lamp. The room falls into darkness. "Sleep here tonight. I don't want to find you on the floor in the morning."

"Thank you, sir." Ilya hears the quiet voice. And then it's just breathing sound that eventually evens out.

Ilya sleeps weirdly well that night. He usually doesn't sleep too deeply in a new bed, or with someone next to him, but strangely that combination worked well for him for once.

*

A series of knocks wakes him. It takes a moment to orient himself, his gaze settling on Shane, who is already awake, watching him calmly.

The knock sounds again. "Come back later, Troy." Ilya says towards the door, voice still rough from sleep.

Another three, persistent knock.

Shane slips out of Ilya's embrace, bracing his arm on the bed as he sits up, "That must be for me, sir." Ilya opens his mouth to ask him to stay for a bit, something about Shane in the daylight is making him more intriguing. The rest looks good on him, his eyes a little brighter, and the muscles on his naked body look more defined under the golden sunlight.

But the words never come.

Shane stands slowly, the marks on his back darker now but still vivid. Before reaching the door, he turns back, his expression soft. "Thank you, sir, for last night." He flashes a gentle but dazzling smile, a few faint lines crinkling on his face, making him look even younger.

Ilya sits up as Shane opens the door. A voice cuts through, low and sharp. "Found yourself a second room last night? Slut."

There is a faint clink of chains before the door closes.

*

The farewell lunch is the final event of the engagement party, with most guests leaving after. Ilya is staying a few more days, given the closeness of him and both of the couple tracing back to their childhood.

"Rozy!" An arm flings over his shoulder, Manny's voice booming next to his ears. "How was your evening?"

Ilya drops his fork down and wipes his mouth on the napkin. "What do you mean? My evening ended with you being drunk in Nat's lap reciting love poems." He grins. His friend may be fucked up to keep a slave without setting any protective limit, but he is still one of his oldest friends and madly in love with his other close friend Natasha.

"Not from what I heard." Manny wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. Oh, so the little encounter in the hallway isn't a secret. Ilya isn't surprised. The impressive mansion is probably protected by more security cameras and details than a small city.

"Yeah, about that." Ilya clears his throat, "I didn't know you kept someone like that." It's not really a taboo, at least not for families like theirs, but still the word *slave* doesn't seem appropriate for the quietly luxurious luncheon they are having.

Manny shrugs, "He was a gift." His shoulder tensing imperceptibly, "Is there a problem?" He studies Ilya, likely knowing how he has been progressive in equality between the Dom and Sub community.

When Ilya doesn't answer, Manny pats his shoulder, "It won't be long anyway, I'm getting rid of him." That comes as a surprise. Ilya raises one eyebrow as he stares back.

"Nat doesn't want one. Says it's awkward now we are getting married."

Ilya nods, that makes sense. "How do you... What are you going to do?" Ending a mutually agreed upon dom and sub contract is easy, but Ilya has no idea how ending a slavery contract works.

"Probably sell him off market, well trained ones are hot commodities. But if I can't find a buyer readily, I can always just send him to a market to auction off."

Ilya falls silent at that. He knows so little about this world but either option sounds horrible. He doesn't understand how someone can sign their life away like that, to give up any control, only to be transferred to the next person without any power to object.

Manny studies him, "Wait Rozy, you like him? Do you want him? That would be so much easier - hey, it can be your gift to my wedding, taking him off my hand."

Ilya shakes his head, "I can't. It doesn't feel right to keep one. Sorry - no offense."

Manny shrugs, "None taken. Well, obviously let me know if you change your mind." Manny pauses before he moves on, "You are staying for a few more days right? I will ask my guy to bring him to you after the luncheon. He is worth more than a night."

Ilya hums under his breath, his mind drifts back to those pretty brown eyes, the rest of lunch suddenly feels like an inconvenience.

Chapter 2: What you hate

Chapter Notes

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

Shane follows the handler down the hallway. He called him a slut when he fastened the leash, and now he keeps it pulled tight, forcing Shane to scramble to keep up. At least this one doesn't make him crawl, and for that he is grateful. Crawling is usually fine, but today the halls are busy, and to his surprise, there is still a faint, lingering shame when he has to do it among finely dressed guests, even though any one of them has the power to make him do things far worse.

It should feel normal. Like life. Because this is his life.

He doesn't even remember what life before this was like. And yet the shame still finds him, tightening slowly until it feels like a noose around his neck.

It was a strange night.

It began like most nights when he was sent to a guest's room. As always, something painful waited behind the door. As always, he tried his best to behave, and failed, measured against ever-shifting standards. As always, the pain came sharp enough to break him into begging, tears and snorts tangling together, muffling his cries. And in the end, he was thrown out when the guest deemed him unsatisfactory.

He failed to please. And he knows too well what that means to pretend otherwise.

He doesn't dread punishment. That's how he learns to be good. And good slaves stay alive.

But he dreads the waiting, the long stretch before it comes. Especially after nights like this, when he is discarded and sent back to his small chamber to lie awake, counting down the hours until his trainer arrives.

But then the night changed.

He was taken to another room. He didn't do much; he barely did anything at all. And yet the guest, with strong arms and dark golden curls and sharp green eyes, called him a good boy, and told him to sleep in his bed for the night.

It felt unreal. In the early morning, he checked once, twice, and then again, just to make sure it had been real. He shifted closer, breathing in the faint, clean scent left behind. Then, carefully, he traced a finger over the broad shoulder, letting the warmth linger on his fingertip. And, almost without thinking, he leaned in, brushing his lips just beneath the mouth that had called him good, letting the trembling warmth spread through him.

He held onto that moment for as long as he could, memorizing every detail.

Something to survive the morning.

The handler opens the dungeon door and shuts it behind him once Shane steps inside. He goes on to kneel by the door, settling into a proper submissive position.

The door scrapes open soon enough.

Shane looks up. Trainer A.

There are two of them. He named them in his head. Trainer A is the better one. He is less interested in messing with his mind, more focused on physical endurance. Shane prefers that. Today, the sight of him feels like a relief, because his thoughts have been... wrong since last night. Too messy. Too loud.

“How was your evening, slut?” the trainer asks, his tone uninterested, already bored.

“It was fine, sir,” Shane answers, keeping his eyes lifted just enough, steady and attentive.

“Another complaint?” the trainer asks, one eyebrow raising.

“Yes, sir,” Shane says. *But I was called a good boy.* He swallows it down before it can surface, because it was not what was asked.

“What did you do this time?” the trainer sighs, reaching out to drag a finger across one of the welts on Shane’s back, pressing hard to draw a tremor from him.

“I couldn’t keep my form while being caned, sir,” Shane replies, forcing the words out evenly even as the pain sharpens under the touch.

“Then we will have to work on endurance again,” the trainer says. “Middle of the room. All fours.”

Shane obeys immediately, moving into position, lowering himself carefully, and as soon as he settles he closes his eyes, reaching for that familiar distance inside himself, because if he can just step away far enough, float somewhere just beyond his own body, then it will not hurt as much.

He hears water running from the sink in the corner, the quiet clink of something being prepared, and then the sensation comes, a warm towel pressed against his back and drawn slowly across the welts, the heat almost soothing at first until a chill follows close behind it, because he knows better than to trust anything that feels gentle here.

Something small is placed carefully on his upper back.

Then the trainer steps away, and almost immediately the pain blooms, sharp and searing, spreading outward from every welt at once, and Shane draws in a breath, holding himself still with effort, focusing on balance, on control.

“Keep your form,” the trainer’s voice comes from somewhere behind him, lazy and distant, “and keep the teacup steady. If it spills, we will have to apply the mixture again.”

Shane lowers his head slightly, steadying his breathing as best he can, because the burning sensation is already spreading, building in layers, wave after wave with no pause between them, and his fingers curl into his palms as his body begins to tremble despite everything he does to stop it, to hold still, to endure.

When is he allowed to beg?

Not yet, he knows, because too soon will only make it worse, but the pain is climbing quickly, alive and biting under his skin, and he can feel sweat gathering along his body, the teacup on his back

beginning to tremble faintly with him.

Is he already near his limit?

The thought feels wrong even as it forms, because he is not supposed to have limits, because limits are for others, for real submissives with contracts and protections, not for someone like him.

And yet his body is reaching something, a narrowing point where everything else is falling away.

“Please,” he hears himself say, the word slipping out thin and unsteady before he can stop it.

“Begging already?” the trainer replies, faintly amused now, footsteps drawing closer.

Shane forces himself to steady, to show he can still be good, even now, even like this. “Please, sir, I learned, I promise, please.”

The pain spikes higher, white-hot and consuming, dark spots breaking across his vision as it overwhelms him, and he cannot think past it, cannot hold himself together the way he is supposed to.

He always survives this, he reminds himself distantly, no matter how impossible it feels. And this is not nearly as bad as some other things he went through before.

A hand catches his chin and lifts his head, and only then does he realize how little he can see, tears blurring everything, his body shaking too hard to control, the teacup rattling faintly against his back.

And then his arm gives out. His shoulder hits the floor, the teacup slipping and shattering beside him, the sharp sound cutting through the room.

For a moment, there is only silence.

“Well,” the trainer says from somewhere above him, “that’s disappointing. Shall we try again?”

He needs to move, needs to get back into position, because the faster he obeys the easier it will be, but the pain has sunk too deep, burning through him, and all he can manage is to curl inward, folding into himself in a small, instinctive attempt to escape it.

The door scrapes open again, voices murmuring low and indistinct as the trainer steps away to answer, and Shane curls tighter, a quiet apology slipping from him as he tries to gather enough strength to push himself back up, to fix this before it gets worse.

A hand settles into his hair.

He braces immediately, expecting the sharp pull, the force that will drag him back into place, but it does not come, the hand remaining where it is, fingers moving slowly, carefully, threading through his hair in a way that feels so unfamiliar it almost startles him more than pain would have.

His breath stutters, caught somewhere between fear and something he does not recognize.

Slowly, he opens his eyes, blinking hard until the blur begins to clear.

And then he sees him.

The man from last night. The one who let him sleep in his bed.

Shane parts his lips, but no sound comes out, his tears spilling freely now as he tries to push himself up into a kneeling position, only for the hot, white pain to flash through him again and pin him back down against the floor.

Failing like this, in front of the one person who told him he was good, unravels something inside him, and all he can manage is, "I'm sorry, sir, sorry," the words tumbling out breathless and small as he fights the urge to curl in on himself, to hide, to disappear, to go back to training and learn how to be better before he disappoints again.

Strong arms wrap around his shoulders, and the floor vanishes from beneath him as he is lifted with surprising ease, draped over the man's shoulder and folded at the waist, his head hanging downward as the world tilts, that faint, familiar woody scent surrounding him and making his eyes sting all over again.

When Shane wakes, he is lying on his stomach in a real bed. He is not in the dungeon, or his narrow chamber where he is usually left after sessions, and there is still sunlight filtering in through the window, though it has shifted into the softer light of afternoon. He moves tentatively, noticing the blanket has been pushed down to his waist, leaving his back exposed to the air, the earlier burning dulled now to something distant and manageable.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

The voice comes from the other side of the bed, and Shane's entire body jolts, startled.

He has been sleeping in a guest's bed, in the middle of the day, after failing a correction session so completely, and the realization hits all at once. This has never happened before, and he does not know what consequences will follow, only that there will be some.

Before he can lose another second, he scrambles forward onto his hands and knees, lowering his chest against the mattress and lifting his hips high up in the air. He extends his arms out in front of him so his chest presses fully into the bed, his legs spreading wider in practiced submission, leaving himself open and exposed.

It is a useful position for punishment, one that often pleases his trainers and master enough that they might lessen what follows, or promise him a lighter punishment in exchange for something else.

The room falls very still.

When nothing comes, Shane presses his face into the bedspread and says, muffled, "Please punish me, sir."

"And why would I do that?"

The voice is closer now, just above him, and a finger brushes lightly along his spine, tracing from his upper back down to his tailbone, drawing an involuntary shiver from him.

"Because I failed at training today, sir," Shane answers quickly, the explanation coming easily, as it always does. There are always reasons, always something he did wrong.

A soft hum. "You failed, how?"

The question throws him, just for a moment, but he gathers himself quickly. "I didn't keep still, sir. And then I... I passed out." The last words come quieter, edged with shame.

A hand settles into his hair, gathering it into a loose grip and tugging just enough to guide his head up, not punishing, but firm, until Shane is forced to meet those green eyes.

"Shane."

The man's expression is serious now, the lines of his face sharper as his mouth presses into a thin and controlled line, and Shane doesn't dare look away, his lips parting as he tilts his chin up obediently.

"If you pass out in a session, it's not your fault. It's the Dom's fault."

Shane blinks, once, twice, his mind struggling to follow.

The hand shifts, sliding from his hair to his chin, holding him there. "...I don't understand," Shane admits quietly, his gaze wavering even as he tries to hold it.

A soft sigh, and Shane's stomach drops.

He disappointed the guest again.

"But I will learn, sir," he rushes to add, the words tumbling over themselves. "I'm good at learning. You can correct me, punish me. I will learn."

Ilya's thumb brushes lightly over his cheekbone, and there is something in his eyes that Shane cannot read, something unfamiliar and unsettling in its softness, because he knows how to recognize lust, anger, amusement, but this is none of those.

Uncertain, he follows instinct instead, tilting his head into the warmth of that touch, and when the thumb drifts lower, grazing the edge of his lips, he parts them and brushes it with his tongue in a small, tentative motion.

The thumb presses briefly against his lower lip, just enough to still him before withdrawing, and Shane finds himself leaning forward without thinking, chasing the loss of contact, catching a flicker of a smile in return.

The man looks so good like that, smiling, radiating warmth, and the thought startles Shane as soon as it forms.

"Do you really want to learn?" the man asks, "With me?"

Shane nods immediately, eyes bright, eager. "Yes, sir. I can be good. I promise."

"Okay, then." The smile returns, softer this time, and something about it makes Shane feel strangely unsteady. "I need to step out until after dinner, and I want you to stay here."

Shane's thoughts jump ahead at once - to restraints, to chains, to being confined in some small, dark space, and he accepts it without hesitation, because he can endure that until after dinner, he knows he can, and if he does well, perhaps that can count towards some of the punishments.

The memory flickers up unbidden. Those days locked alone, losing the shape of time, the desperate relief of being let out, of returning to the dungeon and taking however many cocks were there, and finding comfort in doing *that* simply because it meant he was no longer alone in a vast nullness.

He pushes it down quickly, forcing himself back into the present.

Shane shifts to straighten his back. He sits back on his heels and brings his wrists forward, pressing them together and offering them up, waiting for a cuff.

Instead, something light is placed into his hands.

A notepad. A pen.

Shane stares at them, confused.

“Can you write?” the man asks.

Shane hesitates, then nods. “Yes... maybe, sir.” He knows he can, somewhere, even if the memory feels distant.

“Good.” A brief ruffle through his hair. “I want you to write down three things you dislike the most.”

Shane’s breath catches, his mouth falling open slightly as confusion knots tight in his chest. “Sir... There are no limits. I can take whatever you give me.”

“I’m not asking about limits,” the man replies. “I’m asking what you hate. Does that make sense?”

Shane nods slowly, though his grip tightens around the notepad. “I... I will try, sir,” he says, uncertain, bracing for the cruel trick hidden somewhere in the request.

“Good.” That same bright, disarming smile. “You stay here and write, I will have dinner sent up for you.”

He pauses, meeting Shane’s eyes again.

“And if you do well,” he adds, “you’ll have a reward tonight.”

*

Shane sits at the desk, the posture so foreign to him that he has to shift and adjust until he finds a position that feels vaguely sustainable.

He grabs the pen with his whole palm wrapped around it, only to realize that’s how one holds a cock, not a writing instrument. He pauses, then readjusts, maneuvering it awkwardly between his fingers until a distant, half-faded memory clicks back into place.

A deep breath.

He writes down the first thing. His handwriting is a little shaky, but the letters come out neater than he expected.

- *Locked in a small space alone for too long.*

This one comes easily, as it had already been sitting in his mind ever since Ilya told him to stay in this room earlier.

He pauses, staring at the words, thinking about what to write next.

It feels... wrong to try to rank things he dislikes, as the concept does not quite hold. He is used to taking whatever is given to him.

Why would it matter if he dislikes anything? He dislikes most of what is done to him anyway.

A few knocks on the door jerk him out of his thoughts.

He drops the pen immediately, turning toward the sound. Is he being taken back? But the guest said he should wait here until after dinner.

Still, he cannot risk failing to obey an order from the master. He glances once at the notepad, then places the pen neatly on top of it before walking to the door and opening it.

To his surprise, it is not staff with chains in hand. It is a man in a full black suit, holding a dinner tray.

Shane vaguely recognizes him from last night, the man with the gun.

"Mr. Rozanov asked me to bring this up to you," Troy says, his voice a little tight. His eyes avoid Shane's mostly naked body, settling instead somewhere near the doorframe that Shane braces with his shoulder. Then, as if remembering something, he adds, "He said you should eat before he comes back."

"Oh. Thank you."

Shane lifts his hands, palms flat and open, but does not reach forward. He has learned better than that, as reaching for things uninvited carries consequences.

Troy clears his throat, stepping closer just long enough to set the tray onto Shane's hands before backing away again.

Back inside, Shane sets the tray down and looks between the plate of food and the notepad, a faint unease rising in his chest.

It is a full plate. Still hot.

He has not had that in a long time.

Food in this house is not scarce, except when it is used as punishment, but his usual meals are bland, measured, and often cold, nutritionally balanced but repetitive, built for function rather than comfort.

This is not that.

He swallows, then moves the plate to the far corner of the table, out of immediate reach, deciding he will finish the list first.

He closes his eyes, letting memory surface. There is nothing before the slave ring. He knows there must have been a life, but there is no trace of it left in him.

In the ring, it was all about survival. Some faces disappeared before they were sold, and several times Shane saw staff carrying human shaped bundles down the hallway.

He learned quickly. Do what is required. Do it well. Do it without hesitation.

He can still feel it, the slow stripping away of everything unnecessary, hope first, then dignity, then anything resembling preference.

He shivers at that memory, and decided to not write anything down from that period. He doesn't want to visit there in his mind.

And then comes the masters. There were two houses before this one. Both were a lot worse.

The first house had no structure, no limits. He was used by the master, by guests, by anyone who decided they could, with no end to it and no defined interval of rest, where a few hours without being touched was considered a break.

The wounds never had time to heal. There was a point when he could not walk properly, with too many injuries, some infected, but he hid it as best he could, as being too damaged to serve had consequences he understood very clearly.

He was sent to the second one when a guest won him through some sort of wager with his first master. That house required less of him, but gave even less in return. The master rarely used him, often forgot him entirely. It should have been a much easier life, except coupled with the disinterest was also negligence.

Food came only after he was used. What he remembers most clearly is the constant hunger, the way it hollowed everything out, until he ate anything - scraps, spills, whatever he could access - and licked surfaces clean if there was even a chance something had been left behind.

He was a bag of bones when he was gifted to his current master, who took pity on him and started feeding him regularly. For that he would forever be grateful. There is structure, trainers, rules that are at least consistent. He understands how to function here, and he likes that a lot.

He wants to do everything right so he can stay in this house. It's probably his best chance of staying alive.

He feels answers forming in his mind, and slowly and carefully, he writes them down on the notepad.

- *Too sick to be used*
- *Too many days without food*

He really hopes that this is not some kind of test where Mr. Rozanov intends to make him experience everything on the list. He is hopeful that it is not, because Mr. Rozanov has only been kind to him. But he has seen that before, kindness as a surface that can shift without warning.

Shane exhales slowly, pressing the feeling down. There is no point in anticipating. His eyes drift back to the plate of food now.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya: I'm just one of the guests a big bad dom

Also Ilya: Write down what you dislike

Shane: ???

Welcome to Ilya accidentally inventing therapy

Shane did not sign up for this (or anything really in this world) but here we are!

Chapter 3: What you like

Chapter Notes

Tags are added as I go because there are too many Hollanov kinks in my messed up brain to plan out from beginning. Happy reading!

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

Dinner that night, Manny teases Ilya again about how eagerly he rushed off to rescue that sub from his “little training session,” and a flash of heat burns through Ilya so quickly it surprises him.

He manages, eventually, a dry, “A little training session that ended with him passing out, Mann.”

Natasha catches the exchange and smiles, slipping her hand into Manny’s. “Oh, Ilya, I’m with you. Those sessions are brutal.” She squeezes Manny’s fingers. “But it was a stupid gift from two years ago. And Manny is a better man now. He’s getting rid of him.”

She says it with pride. As if this is the respectable thing to do. As if they are discarding something distasteful to restore the family name.

Ilya thinks of those eyes, so eager to be good, so terrified of being hurt. And yet that pretty sub presents himself openly to be hurt, again and again, by people Ilya calls friends.

“Why do you even do the training?” Ilya asks at last. “You both have subs you play with, no?”

Manny shrugs. “It’s an investment. Like grooming your horses, feeding them well. Keeping them in condition.”

Right. Because Shane is probably worth less than the horses in Manny’s stables.

Manny glances at him, then adds casually, “You should take him. I know you’re interested, Roz.”

Ilya opens his mouth to object, but Manny lifts a hand, cutting him off.

“I know, I know. You’d never keep a slave. You’re a better man than I am.” A faint grin. “But if you like playing with him, he’d make a hell of a sub. Eager as they come.”

Ilya keeps turning Manny’s words over in his head on his walk back, Troy a step behind as always.

He hasn’t really played with Shane, but he’s already certain. Shane would be... sweet. There’s something in him, beneath the damage, that leans toward submission like a plant toward light.

Mistreated, and still wanting to give.

“How was he when you brought the food earlier?” Ilya asks Troy, pausing just before the guest wing to get more of the crisp evening air.

“Scared,” Troy says evenly. “He looked at the plate like he wanted it, but like it might burn him alive if he touched it. Had to tell him to eat.”

Ilya nods, jaw tightening.

He turns just enough to glance back at Troy. “Is it bad if I want to keep him?”

Troy doesn’t answer right away. He finally says evenly, “Hard to make it worse than what he has now.”

*

Shane is kneeling by the door when Ilya steps in. Ever so obedient, his hands resting on his laps, head down, his pale skin and still posture make him look like one of those statues carved out of marble. Still enough to pass for decoration.

Ilya’s breath hitches when Shane leans forward and presses a gentle kiss on his shoe.

Fuck.

He loves a sub with good manners. Only if he is not a slave.

“Did you write the list?” Ilya leans down slightly to pat Shane’s head, delighted to see him melting into the touch as expected.

“Yes, sir.” Shane answers. He picks up the notepad resting on his side and raises it above his head, palms facing up in a gesture like offering.

Ilya hums approvingly, taking the notepad and walking into the room, settling down on the lounge chair at the sitting area. He snaps his fingers, “Come here.”

Shane moves right away, taking his command elegantly as he starts to crawl over, hips swaying in a way that draws all Ilya’s attention. He settles next to Ilya’s leg, sitting back on his heels with palms on his laps again.

He really is so well trained. Ilya thinks, berating himself a moment later as he remembers what kind of training sits behind this beautifully obedient man.

Ilya sets his eyes on those neat handwritings as he processes what’s on there.

Solidary confinement.

Body damage.

Extreme starvation.

He asked for the list so he can figure out what feels off limits for Shane, even though he knows he has a really high tolerance for everything - he wants to see what feels *extreme*. But the list he gets screams *survival* instead.

His chest tightens as he moves his eyes to Shane. He is looking down on the floor, his body so still that the only things moving are his chest that slowly rises and falls, and his trembling, long lashes.

“You did well writing down the list. Shane.” Ilya finally says. And at that, Shane’s eyes flick up, filling with lights brighter than stars. “Thank you, sir.”

“Do you want a reward?” Ilya asks.

The brightness fractures. He swallows before he forces out, “I... No, sir.”

“Why not?” Ilya can practically hear Shane’s loud thinking - what kind of answer gets him into less trouble and out of a trap from that seemingly harmless question.

He was hoping to use the list as some guidance to proceed the night, but now he has to rely on his instinct.

“I... I haven’t been good, sir. I don’t deserve a reward.” Shane struggles for a while. The admission costs him so much. His beaming face is gone, his shoulders hunched in.

“Shh.” Ilya leans forward, catching Shane’s chin between his fingers, forcing his head up just enough. “I just told you you were good.”

His eyes darken as he fixes them on Shane, “Or are you just a dumb puppy, not able to understand?” His voice inches towards stern, tugging the collar upward until Shane is forced to kneel straight up, face getting so close to Ilya’s that he can feel the quickened breath on his face.

Ilya looks at Shane closely, not missing the way his eyes flutter shut briefly, his sharp inhale, and a slight tremble jolting down his spine.

Oh. Ilya thinks. Maybe that’s the way to get him out of his slave mindset. Make him something else.

Shane’s breath quickens visibly, his eyes widening as Ilya tilts his head, inching even closer to Shane’s face. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out. Ilya is amazed - they have barely started, yet Shane is already losing his words.

Ilya tugs one more finger into the collar and yanks it up again, making it impossible for Shane to look anywhere but him.

“Answer me. Are you just a pathetic pup, too dumb to understand?”

Shane’s pupils are so big that the warm brown is being swallowed by molten black now. “Yes, yes sir.” He pants, a bit breathlessly through the tightened collar.

“Yes what? Tell me again.” Ilya smirks.

“I’m just a dumb puppy, sir.” His lips are glistening with a shiny layer of saliva, because admitting this makes him *drool*. Ilya resists the urge to kiss those sweet lips.

“Good pup.” Ilya praises, grinning as Shane melts at the praise again.

“Is very hard for a pup to write a list, no?” He continues, “and for that, my pup should get a treat.”

Shane’s eyes are watery now. The desire in his eyes is replacing the fear, to Ilya’s delight.

“Does my pup want to lick a big bone?” Ilya palms his bulge that’s getting hard at the sight. He wasn’t planning to do anything sexual tonight, but the night has taken a turn and it seems to be going in a better direction, so he goes with it.

Shane darts out his tongue quickly to lick at his bottom lips, as if he couldn’t help himself. “Yes, sir. Yes. Please.”

“Good pup. Asking so nicely.” Ilya praises again. His hand moves to Shane’s hair, pushing him backward slightly, “Stay.”

He slowly unzips himself, releasing his growing cock from his pants. It’s half hard and heavy in his hand. He gives a few strokes lazily, leaning back into the lounge chair as Shane watches with wide eyes.

Shane swallows at that sight.

“Open your mouth, pup, let me see your tongue.” Ilya smiles at him.

Shane obeys immediately, his mouth opening wide as he sticks his tongue out, big eyes fixed on Ilya’s cock shining with *want*.

“Okay, now lick.”

Shane *whimpers* at that, he leans forward, placing his arms in between Ilya’s legs, tilting his head to lick from the base of the cock all the way to the head.

Ilya hisses under his breath. Shane is remarkably well trained. It takes just one lick to draw a strong reaction from him, his cock bouncing with excitement. “Eyes on me.” His keeps voice cool and controlled, belying the heat coiling tight beneath it.

Those brown eyes lift to his, and Ilya stills. They are so open and unshielded. There’s an aching purity in them, set in stark contrast to the heavy cock in between his gleaming pink lips.

The tongue starts to flick in quick up and down motion along the length. Ilya places one hand in Shane’s hair, guiding those beautiful lips around his swollen head, and sighs contently as they envelope the first half of his cock tightly.

He looks down between Shane’s legs, smirking as he sees a bulge growing inside that black boxer.

Ilya lifts a leg to nudge at that bulge, and Shane lets out a noise that Ilya never heard from him before. It’s a soft and full moan, almost dazed. Not one with tears or breathless begging, just a startling note of pleasure.

“Is my pup getting worked up sucking on the treat?” Ilya teases, delighted to see Shane’s face darken with a blush. He moans louder now, trying to nod his head while working diligently to take Ilya in deeper.

Shane’s throat works magic - just as Ilya thinks his cock is reaching the back of Shane’s throat, the muscles there relax just enough, spasming around the cockhead, taking him in more. Shane slides his mouth back and forth around the length, each time taking Ilya in a little deeper. His lashes are turning a little wet, making his eyes even more stunning.

“Fuck, Shane. I’m so close.” Ilya is breathless, his hand grabs a handful of Shane’s hair, keeping his face close to his crotch. Shane does not resist at all. Instead, his body trembles as he forces down the gagging sensation, his throat contracting even more, tightening until everything in Ilya tips over.

Ilya leans back to the lounge chair, looking at Shane through the hazy glow as Shane diligently cleans his cock with that beautiful pink tongue. He then lowers himself to lick on Ilya’s shoes, where a few drops have escaped.

Ilya reaches out then, catching Shane’s shoulder to guide him up. “Come up here, pup.” He maneuvers Shane until he climbs up to his laps, bucketing Ilya’s thighs with his legs spreading wide.

“My pup is so worked up, it’s so cute.” Ilya says fondly, reaching one hand inside the boxer, giving it a good rub, his other hand moves to pull the boxer down until it wraps tightly around his spread thighs.

Shane yelps quietly, his eyes are still misty from that blowjob. His hands grabbing onto each other behind his back as he pleads, “No, sir, please, no.”

“Hands on my shoulder. Pup.” Ilya commands. His own hand now fully holds onto Shane’s cock, tightening his grip as he pumps it rhythmically.

Shane rests his fingers on Ilya’s shoulder and tightens nervously. “Sir, please... I can’t, can’t hold it for longer. Please don’t.” For some reason he is panicky now, the floaty euphoria mostly gone, his head dropping into that familiar gesture of submission as he pinches his eyebrows.

“Shhh, good pup. I want you to come. Can you come for me?” Ilya coos, his free hand brushing strands of hair from Shane’s forehead, revealing those teary eyes.

“‘M, I’m not allowed to, sir... Please. I can’t...”

The next moment, with great effort and a frantic motion, Shane peels his hands off Ilya’s shoulder, moving them around his own base, and *squeezes hard*.

A muffled cry, Shane collapses forward as he buries his forehead on Ilya’s shoulder, body trembling with pain.

Ilya looks down, Shane is squeezing his base tightly between his thumb and index finger, his other hand has moved to the head of his cock, digging in hard near the sensitive slit. His fingers are tightening so much that his knuckles are turning white.

Taking a deep breath, Ilya moves his hands from Shane’s cock to his back now, hugging him in to stop him from slipping off. Shane’s head remains buried on his shoulder, tears now streaming into his shirt as he continues to shake uncontrollably.

“Shhh, Shane. You are okay. Can you let go of your hands? You are hurting yourself.” Ilya soothes gently, his hand rubbing slow circles in Shane’s back.

“‘M so sorry, sir.” Shane sniffles. “I couldn’t... I’m not allowed. Master, he would be so mad...” his voice is getting desperately scared.

“It’s okay, Shane.” Ilya says with his calming voice. “I’m not mad. It’s okay if you didn’t come. Can you take a deep breath?”

Shane nods, wiping away his tears as he snuffles more, and tries his best to take a breath. It comes out shaky, his cheeks still flushed from the rollercoaster of emotions and hormones rushing through his body.

“That’s great, Shane. A few more for me.”

Shane tries it again. The streaming tears are finally slowing down.

“You are doing so well, Shane.” Ilya praises again, he has learned that he can’t praise Shane enough. His body seems to tremble with joy every time he hears one.

Shane shakes his head jerkily, but before he can speak, Ilya wipes the tears from his cheeks with his thumbs, then cups his face, holding him steady.

“You were such a good pup,” he murmurs. “You took your treat so well.” He waits until Shane is looking at him before continuing.

“And you’re a good boy now. Trying to please both me and your master.” His grip softens, but doesn’t let go. “That’s not something you can fix. It’s not your fault we want different things. You didn’t do anything wrong, Shane.”

Shane stills in Ilya’s hands, his eyes searching Ilya’s face, uncertain, like he’s waiting for the correction that doesn’t come. When it finally sinks in, his shoulders loosen as he leans slightly into the touch.

He snuffles quietly, finally giving a small, careful nod, more for himself than for Ilya, as if he wants to believe it.

“I’m going to keep holding you like this for a while,” Ilya embraces Shane fully into his arm now, pressing lightly behind his neck to have him lean on his shoulder again. “Do you like it?”

“If it pleases you, sir,” Shane answers at once, voice small, automatic.

“It does please me,” Ilya says, just as softly. Then, he gently corrects, “But that’s not what I asked. I want to know if *you* like it.”

When nothing comes, Ilya tries again. “You’re allowed to like something, Shane. And you’re allowed not to. When you’re with me.”

Silence fills the room. Then, slowly, Shane nods against his shoulder.

“...I like you holding me, sir,” he says, almost uncertain. He pauses before he adds gingerly, “I like it a lot, sir.”

“Good,” Ilya smiles, “That’s very good.”

His hand comes up to the back of Shane’s head now, gently patting his silky hair. “After this, I’ll get you some water. We will take a warm bath. And then I want you to warm my bed again tonight.”

Ilya lets the request sink in before asking again, “Do you think you’ll like that?”

Shane doesn’t answer right away, but this time the hesitation feels different. He leans closer instead, nodding eventually.

“Yes, sir,” he says, steadier this time. “I would like that.”

“You’re learning so well,” Ilya says, and even he hears the disbelief in his own voice.

It hasn’t been long. Not long ago, Shane couldn’t accept a single piece of reward without collapsing into self-denial. Now he’s pliant under it, taking instruction and approval as if his body has already learned a new language.

Ilya guides Shane through the rest of the evening carefully, showing him all the aspects of aftercare he has been brutally deprived of.

When they get into bed, Shane is glowing in a way Ilya has not seen before. There’s no flinch in him anymore. He simply is present in a way that feels almost unfamiliar compared to the fragmented, frantically scared version Ilya met earlier.

Ilya has done this before where he controlled, guided, and shaped responses in his subs, but this is different in its speed and its ease.

It is as if Shane’s body has been waiting for someone to finally do it correctly. And with that trust, Ilya feels something crack open in this chest.

He knows what they did was not a proper scene by any means, there was no discussion of boundaries or safety, and Shane doesn’t have any tools in him to say no. But it’s a good step forward, Ilya thinks, something to build on if he takes Shane away.

When he takes Shane away. Ilya catches himself thinking, a decision already forming before he fully realizes he has made it.

“Shane.” Ilya holds him in his arms as they settle comfortably under the blanket. “We are going to talk a bit. What did you like about tonight?”

He always checks in with his subs after, and even though Shane wasn’t in a place to have that discussion before the scene, he wants to believe maybe he is now, after the intimate process of getting him into a safe enough place to think clearly.

Shane blinks. Ilya can see his mind shift, *I’m allowed to like something*.

“I liked everything, sir.” It’s a good enough answer, even though they will obviously have to talk about the orgasm that Shane had so completely denied himself earlier.

Ilya hums. “I need you to tell me more. Be specific.”

Shane shifts slightly, thinking in careful steps. “I liked... staying here. I liked the food, a lot. And the bath.”

He pauses as he looks at Ilya, a blush forming faintly on his cheeks. “I liked... I liked being the pup.”

Ilya smiles at that. The blush is good. It is a step toward self-recognition, and a step further away from self-objectification, even if the distinction is still fragile.

“Yeah? Tell me why,” Ilya encourages.

Shane takes longer this time to respond. “Because... pups get fed, and held.” He hesitates before continuing, as if unsure whether he is allowed to keep speaking. “And... they stay alive because they deserve it.”

Ilya’s chest tightens as he recognizes the familiar logic of survival underneath the words. He doesn’t know how Shane has gone through his life all these years, living in a continuous expectation that even breathing and existing properly could be taken away on someone else’s whim.

“Okay. That’s good. You did good, Shane,” he says softly. “And what do you not like about the night?”

Shane instinctively shakes his head, burying his face into Ilya’s chest. “Nothing, sir.”

That was expected. So Ilya nudges him gently, “Well, for me, I didn’t like you hurting yourself trying not to come.”

The reaction is immediate, a tremble running through Shane, voice shaking. “I’m sorry, sir. I really am.”

Ilya’s arms are already bracing him so he doesn’t slip out to go kneeling on the floor. “Shane, listen. I told you, it was impossible for you to please both me and your master, and that is not your fault.”

“What I wish you had done though,” he continues, slower now, letting each word land with Shane, “is told me about it, so you didn’t have to push yourself so far that you ended up hurting yourself. Do you understand the difference?”

He can tell Shane is trying hard, but the logic doesn’t fully connect, and after a while he mumbles, “I don’t get to live if I am not good. Sir. I only want to be good.”

Right. Everything is still anchored in uncertainty around survival. Something to work on later, but not here, not now. Shane has already done remarkably well for a first day with him; he has voiced likes and dislikes, and he is fighting the instinct to kneel for punishment at the first sign of correction.

“I know, Shane. You are very good like that,” Ilya assures him. “I want you to sleep now, okay? You are safe with me.”

Shane nods, nudging into Ilya’s neck lightly, staying close.

Ilya sighs as Shane melts into his arms. *I can keep you safe.*

Ilya: I am going to do this properly. With structure. With boundaries. With informed consent. Like a responsible adult.

Shane: Boundaries what? I'm pup.

Ilya: We will discuss limits and create a framework of trust.

Shane: what if I just... sit here and be good instead

Ilya: That is not a framework, that is a coping mechanism.

Shane: it's a very effective coping mechanism, sir

Ilya: ...we are circling back to this conversation tomorrow.

Shane: will there be head pats

Ilya: yes

Shane: then I am emotionally prepared to heal

Thank you for all your comments and love for this fic so far! Pop discussion question: what do we think Shane actually liked vs what he thinks he's allowed to like 🙄🙄

Chapter 4: What you want

Chapter Notes

Happy early birthday to me (this week) and Ilya (next week) - go geminis! Updates will be slower this week as I participate in various celebrations 🥳 And my gift to Ilya can be found in this chapter 📁

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

Shane blinks into the darkness of the room. Mr. Rozanov's breath is even behind him, brushing faintly against the back of his neck, and there is an unfamiliar warmth pressed along his spine, the steady weight of an arm draped over him.

It feels wrong to stay here, to sleep in a soft bed and in a warm embrace. This is only the second night of this, and already he is almost certain that if he lets himself lean into that warmth even a little more, it will ruin him when the guest leaves.

Guests always leave. They have life beyond this mansion. His life remains here.

Mr. Rozanov has ordered him to warm the bed, so he cannot slip away to sleep on the floor. Maybe he can stay awake through the night, keep himself from getting too comfortable. He usually has no trouble going without sleep, his body long accustomed to snatching a few fractured hours during the day between training sessions.

But staying awake is harder like this, when he is warm, when he feels safe. He has stayed up through endless nights before, watching the sky fade into that dull grey-blue of morning while his body stopped feeling like his own, but tonight his thoughts keep drifting somewhere soft and indistinct, and he has to drag himself back before he sinks too deeply into it.

The arm around him shifts, and a low voice murmurs from behind him. "Can't sleep?"

Shane trembles. He thought the guest had been asleep for a while. "Sorry, Sir."

The hand at his waist tightens, and another rises to his jaw, fingers brushing along his cheek. Shane's breath stutters, his body trembling under the touch. There is something about Mr. Rozanov's hands that does not frighten him, and that absence of fear feels more dangerous than anything else. When it is pain, he knows how to brace his body to minimize the damage. But now, every part of him aches to lean closer instead.

A thumb presses gently against his lips, and Shane opens for it without hesitation. His tongue curls around it, slow and careful, his eyes slipping shut as the solid weight fills his mouth.

"Suck," the low voice instructs.

Shane obeys immediately, closing his lips around it, the soft warmth of his mouth yielding as he takes it in.

“Just like that. Keep sucking. Stop thinking.”

As though pulled under, Shane drifts further into that soft, indistinct place. His body loosens, the tension bleeding out of his limbs, and for once his mind goes quiet, no longer circling itself in sharp, punishing thoughts.

*

Shane wakes to the faint warmth of Mr. Rozanov's breath in his hair. At some point during the night, he has turned to face the guest. Now with one arm wrapped around that muscular body, he has tucked in his face close enough that his lashes nearly brush the sharp line of Rozanov's jaw.

Startled, Shane pulls his hand back carefully, tucking it against his side as heat rises along his cheeks.

“So pretty like that.”

The deep voice stirs something unsteady in his chest, and Shane can only duck his head, pressing his face further down as though he can hide it. He hears a chuckle, followed by a gentle pat of his hair.

“Shane, I have things I need to attend to this morning. I want you to stay here. Troy will bring you breakfast, and later he'll take you to me, alright?”

Shane blinks, still slow with sleep. “Sir, I have training sessions this morning.”

“No. That's been handled. No one is taking you to training today.”

If that is the plan, then it is the plan. Shane knows that if any staff come to the door with chains in their hands, he will go with them regardless, because Master's orders come before anything else. Still, he nods. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy.” The guest's hand passes through his hair, the touch so, so good. “Stay in bed for now. You should rest more.”

Shane remains where he is, silent, watching as the guest moves around the room, dressing in clothes that sit on him too well. Shane does not move. He should not move. But the urge rises anyway, to get up, to be useful, to be good... to touch him once more before he leaves.

He stops himself there, the thought turning sour even as it forms. Dangerous. Wrong.

Quietly, he pinches the inside of his thigh with two fingers, hard enough to sting, grounding himself in the pain, reminding himself of what he is.

No one comes that morning except Troy. The first time, he delivers a tray of food just like yesterday. The second time, he stands at the door, gaze carefully averted as always, and says, “Please follow me.”

It feels strange, that word “please”, the absence of degrading names, the simple act of being led down the hallway without a chain clipped to his collar. Shane recognizes the room they stop in front of: the Master's sitting room, where guests are entertained. He has been brought here before, to serve while they talk, or to be arranged as decoration, or set out like a pleasant thing that made difficult conversations easier to have.

Troy knocks, and the moment the double doors open inward, Shane drops to his knees. The movement is so quick that Troy startles, his one hand reaching inside of his jacket, the other hand lifting instinctively as if to catch him before he falls.

Shane steals a brief glance upward, offering a small, apologetic smile, then lowers his gaze again, fixing it firmly on the floor.

“Ah, the lucky boy is here.” Manny’s voice carries easily across the room. “Come over, pet.”

He starts to crawl. Part of the house rule is that he isn’t allowed to stand in front of the master, and Manny for sure likes to showcase his well-behaved crawling slave in front of his guests.

He can feel it before he sees it, there is more than one pair of eyes tracking the movement of his back. He has learned, over years, how to make this feel like nothing. But it doesn’t work today. By the time he reaches Manny, his mind is clouded in shame and something else. He settles back onto his heels, gaze fixed on the patterned carpet, as if stillness might make him smaller, less noticed.

Across from Manny, another pair of polished shoes gleams. The same ones he kissed last night. A strange, tight sensation blooms in his chest. He wants to look up, to meet those sharp green eyes one more time, knowing the guest can leave anytime, now that the Master’s big party is over.

But he does not dare. Instead, he leans closer to Manny’s leg, pressing his temple lightly against his thigh.

A large hand cups his face, squeezing his cheeks with casual familiarity. “Haven’t seen you in a while, pet.”

“I’ve missed you, Master,” Shane replies evenly, his eyes still locked on the small diamond pattern in the carpet.

“Aw,” Manny says, amusement threading his voice. “I know you love it here.”

Shane nods faintly, allowing the fingers to brush across his lips. The touch feels wrong. Not like the steady, grounding pressure of Mr. Rozanov’s thumb the night before, which had quieted something deep inside him in a way he still cannot understand.

He feels himself drifting again and jerks back just as Manny speaks.

“Now, pet. Mr. Rozanov likes you very much,” Manny said, like he was humoring a child. “He insists on something I don’t particularly see the point of asking, but here we are.” The fingers on his face still.

“Do you want to go with him?”

Shane’s head snaps up before he can stop himself, his eyes searching his master’s face for the trap, before dropping immediately back down. Tears burn behind his eyes, and he blinks rapidly to force them away.

What a cruel question.

He does not know what they want, but he knows there is no safe answer. No matter what he says, it will be wrong.

He hates questions like this. Questions designed to make him fail. *Does the pain feel good? Have you earned a break? Are you hungry?*

“Don’t keep our guest waiting, Shane.”

He trembles at the sound of his name. Nothing good follows when the Master uses it.

He squeezes his eyes shut, as if that can hold everything in place, then opens them again and fixes his gaze forward.

“No, Sir. May I please stay?” He does not know if that is what loyalty sounds like, or if it only sounds like fear that has learned manners.

A soft chuckle. “Roz, I told you,” Manny says, “it’s a terrible idea to ask for his opinion. He’s a slave.”

The polished shoes shift, stepping closer until they occupy the little diamond shape on the carpet that Shane has been staring at. So Shane stares at the shoes instead.

“Shane. Look at me.” Mr. Rozanov’s voice.

Shane lifts his gaze, and only then realizes he is crying. He thought he had held it back, but something about the way his name is spoken - gentle, without threat - has cracked him open again.

Mr. Rozanov crouches, his fingers tentative as they brush away the tears. “Shane, remember what I told you? You’re allowed to like things. You’re allowed not to like things.”

He looks godly as usual behind Shane's teary eyes, his dark golden curls almost halo-like in the bright morning sun.

“You’re also allowed to want something. Do you want to come with me?”

Shane’s body trembles violently. He does not understand why this is happening. Why would someone so kind ask him something so cruel?

He wants to say yes. He wants to want.

But he also wants to live.

If he says yes, he becomes disloyal. And disloyal slaves do not survive.

He turns instead, pressing his forehead to his master’s shoe, fingers digging into the carpet. “I’ll be good, Master. Please, please let me stay.” His voice shakes, and he quickly wipes his tears against the back of his hand before they can stain the leather, then presses his face back down.

Silence stretches.

Then Manny exhales lightly. “Alright, Roz. You’re not going to like this, but the damage is done. This is how you do it.”

A sharp yank in his hair forces Shane upright, and before he can react, a backhand cracks across his face hard enough to scatter his thoughts into white noise.

The pain clears everything.

“Now listen carefully, Shane,” Manny says. “You are not staying here. You will go with Mr. Rozanov. Do you understand?”

The words reach him, but they do not make sense. His mind feels thick, sluggish, unable to grasp meaning. He knows he is supposed to answer, but -

Another slap lands on the opposite cheek, just as sharp. The grip in his hair keeps him steady, and instinct takes over; he closes his eyes and turns his face, offering the other side for the next strike.

It never comes. He hears some sharp exchanges between the Master and Mr. Rozanov. The hand is gone from his hair now, and moves to his collar. A few metallic clicks, and suddenly, the collar is gone.

Shane gasps.

There is a hollowing sensation at his throat. The absence hits like a rule of the world has been broken and his body is the one paying for it. He has done something wrong. He cannot yet tell what, only that consequences are already looking for him.

But before he can react, before he can beg, Manny is already gone. The collar lies discarded on the couch, as if it means nothing.

Cold floods through him. He curls inward on the floor, arms wrapped around himself, trembling. Without the weight at his throat, he feels unbearably exposed, more naked than ever before.

Distantly, someone calls his name. But the ringing in his ears is too loud, the cold too deep, the exhaustion too heavy.

It doesn't matter. He has been discarded. An abandoned slave has no purpose.

“Sub. On your knees, now.” The low voice finally cuts cleanly through the haze.

It's a formal command.

The instinctive part of Shane's brain finally outruns the confusing swirl in his head, pushing him into position. He brings his trembling arms behind his back, gripping one wrist with the other, and tilts his chin up.

Only then does he realize Mr. Rozanov is sitting on the couch, the abandoned collar in his hand. Shane's attention snaps to it immediately, lips pressed tight as his gaze flickers between those intense eyes and the collar.

“Tell me, what do you want, sub?” His voice is firm but not cruel, strangely grounding even without the gentleness Shane has grown used to.

Shane shakes his head instinctively. He isn't allowed to want.

“Use your words.” Mr. Rozanov's tone sharpens, fully in that dom voice now, stricter than before, and it sends a shiver down Shane's spine.

“Anything you want, sir.” He's too exhausted to reach for anything but the safest answer.

“So, not this.” The collar rattles lightly in Mr. Rozanov’s hand before he tosses it aside; it lands with a dull thud, disappearing out of Shane’s sight.

The reaction is immediate. Tears spill over before Shane can stop them, and the word escapes him, “No - ” before he clamps down hard on it.

He cannot want anything. He isn’t allowed. And yet the loss hits so sharply it aches in his chest, in his head, hitting him like a truck.

“Let’s try again. What do you want?” Mr. Rozanov doesn’t sound angry. He looks serious, patient, like he has already decided he will wait as long as it takes.

“Please, sir.” Shane starts.

“Uh-uh. No begging, little sub. Tell me what you want.”

“I... I want,” He takes a shaky breath. “The collar, sir.” Because that’s all he can think about

“Better. Now tell me, who gets to wear a collar?”

Shane lowers his head immediately. “A good slave, sir.”

He tried. He tried so hard to be good. A wave of hurt and wronged confusion washes over him, that familiar, helpless feeling when the standards shift and he fails anyway.

“No, not just slaves, Shane. Good Subs get to wear collars too. Do you understand?”

Shane thinks of the Subs he has seen before. His master’s guests, the ones who arrive with their Doms. He remembers watching them in quiet awe, how beautiful they looked. They sat in their Doms’ laps and laughed, or knelt elegantly at the dinner table, speaking softly with each other, being fed by hand with delicate bites chosen for them, placed carefully into their mouths.

Shane knelt at that table many times. But he never ate there. His eyes always stayed lowered, his mouth closed, his hands always behind his back. From the corner of his vision, he would catch small moments between the Doms and their Subs, an affectionate pat, a gentle touch to the face, fingers briefly intertwined.

He doesn’t know how to name the tight, clenching feeling in his chest whenever he sees that.

“Sub, are you listening?” Mr. Rozanov’s voice pulls him back.

Right, the collars. He remembers those too. They were nothing like the heavy metal one he wears. They were lighter, prettier, made of soft leather, some in gentle colors, some with delicate patterns that looked almost too fine to touch.

“Yes, sir. I understand. I... I’ve seen them,” Shane answers quietly.

“Now, do you want to wear a collar of mine?”

The question throws him again. Mr. Rozanov keeps asking what he wants, first whether he wants to go with him, now this. Somehow it’s harder than anything else he’s been asked.

His thoughts tangle, lagging behind, and panic starts to creep in again. He feels the pressure building with the certainty that he's about to fail. He shuts his eyes, preparing for another slap across his face.

"Little sub, it's okay. It's too much. I know."

The sudden gentleness in his voice catches him off guard, but Shane aches to lean into it, to show how much he needs it.

As if he can hear every thought, Mr. Rozanov reaches out, cradling his head and guiding it forward until it rests against his thigh. Shane lets himself go, his body yielding as the hand at the back of his neck kneads slowly, steady and grounding.

"I want to give you a collar."

Shane lifts his head at that, searching Mr. Rozanov's face for the meaning behind those words.

"Usually, I only do that when the Sub wants it too. I don't put my collar on someone who doesn't want it." That steady gaze holds his.

"But I know this is a lot for you, little sub." There's a soft smile now, and warmth spreads through Shane, easing the sharp edges inside him.

"And you told me you wanted *a* collar, even if you can't tell me you want *mine*."

Shane wants to explain that he just needs a collar to survive, that wanting one from a specific Master doesn't make sense to him, especially not someone kind and gentle like Mr. Rozanov. But the words won't come. He just stares, caught in those green eyes, listening.

"But I need to make this clear. I don't own slaves. I will never put a slave collar on you." His voice is steady. "I will give you a collar, and you can be my Sub, because you are a sweet little sub. Do you understand the difference?"

This time he waits, hand still in Shane's hair, fingers working gently at the nape of his neck.

"Subs... subs get to eat at the table," Shane says slowly. Then, after a moment, "And they don't get beaten for no reason."

A slight frown flickers - *did he get it wrong?* But it fades quickly into a small nod - *oh thank god*.

"That's right. But most importantly, and I want you to remember this, Subs are protected by their Doms. A Dom may inflict pain, but never harm."

Something stirs in Shane's chest. It sounds... impossibly kind and foreign. It makes him wary.

His lips part slightly, and Mr. Rozanov brushes a thumb across them, smiling.

"Can you repeat that? Say - you will always protect me."

Shane's eyes sting, but he nods faintly, understanding enough, even if he doesn't know why this is being offered to him. He can't lose it. Not something he was never supposed to have in the first place.

“You will always protect me, sir.”

A nod of approval.

“And - You may inflict pain, but never harm.”

His throat feels dry. “You may inflict pain, but never harm, sir.”

This time, the smile is unmistakably genuine.

“Collar position, little sub.”

Relief floods through him at the clear command. He moves quickly, kneeling upright, back straight. His knees spread, chin lifted, throat exposed. His hair isn’t long, but he still lifts it away, hands pressing at the back of his head. The skin on his bare neck is now prickling with anticipation.

“So pretty like that.” The words send a shiver through him.

Mr. Rozanov unwraps a leather bracelet that loops around his wrist in a stack. The material looks soft, supple, and when it comes free, it’s just a thin strip, nothing like the heavy collar Shane is used to.

His breath quickens as fingers brush along his neck, the light touch making his pulse jump beneath the skin. The leather goes around his throat now, light but unmistakable, and a small twist lock secures it in place, resting just above his collarbone.

“All set, little sub. This is yours to wear now.”

Shane’s eyes burn. His hands are still held in place as he blinks hard against the tears.

“Thank you, sir.” Is all he can manage.

“You’re welcome, little sub. You look pretty wearing my collar.”

The words settle over him, almost too much to hold. It’s frightening how much he wants it to be true.

His.

“May I... touch it, sir?” The leather feels so different, so light, and yet more real than anything he’s worn before.

Mr. Rozanov nods, pleased. “Go ahead, little sub.”

Shane lowers his hands, fingers trembling as they brush over the thin band at his throat.

It feels right. Perfect.

He would never want to trade for anything else.

Ilya: A collar is a serious commitment. It should never be given on a whim. It must be wanted freely.

Also Ilya: *carrying one on his wrist like he isn't already looking for a Shane-shaped Sub to keep.*

Shane: I still want it freely, if that matters.

Now I know it doesn't look like the cleanest way to start their relationship, but Ilya is also just flying blind when consent king can't get any consents because Shane's system doesn't allow it 😞

I hope Ilya likes his birthday gift though. Now he is taking Shane back home, I'm open to any play ideas you want to see 👁👁 Please let me know in the comment!

Chapter 5: Journey home

As much as Ilya wants to take Shane home immediately, they have to stay one more night before he can arrange the next flight out. He spends the remainder of the day handling paperwork with Manny, asking Troy to stay close to Shane while he sits in the garden. At the very least, Shane does not seem to hate the outdoors.

He does not want to leave Shane alone in this mansion, but bringing him into the meeting had already proven to be a mistake, and now all he wants is to get through the rest of their stay without anything else escalating.

This mansion, where he once spent many long summer days as a child, now feels foreign, almost sinister, in a way that reminds him uncomfortably of his own home. Something that was once warm and familiar has turned sour, leaving behind only bitterness and stale, suffocating air that he forces himself to endure whenever he steps inside.

For a moment, he wonders if it is him, if he is the one with the tendency to poison everything around him.

But part of him knows that, at the very least, he is doing the right thing for Shane. Or if not the right thing, then something better than what Shane had before.

That night, he holds Shane in his bed again, telling him to sleep, promising that they will leave first thing in the morning. When Shane nods and murmurs, “Yes, sir,” Ilya stops himself from offering reassurances he cannot guarantee. He knows better than to promise that everything will be okay. Too much still needs to be untangled before anything begins to resemble okay.

But it has to be better than this. It has to be.

*

The mansion recedes behind them, manicured lawns giving way quickly to dense lines of trees. Shane stares out the window, eyes wide, as if the endless stretch of green and brown holds something far more fascinating. His expression is open, almost childlike in its curiosity.

“Something interesting?” Ilya asks, a faint note of amusement in his voice.

Shane flinches at the sound, immediately turning his head away to look down at his hands. “Sorry, sir.”

Ilya reaches out toward him, then pauses, his hand suspended midair before he lets it drop. “Shane, there is nothing to apologize for. I was just asking.”

Shane shifts slightly in his seat. “I am usually not allowed to see the outside, sir,” he says evenly, before adding, more carefully, “Thank you for letting me. I like it.”

The words are so earnest that Ilya feels something tight and painful twist in his chest. He notices the small pause before that last sentence, the way Shane adds it as if checking off something he believes Ilya will approve of.

Ilya's eyes meet briefly with Troy's in the mirror, Troy's expression unreadable, and Ilya exhales softly before saying, "Of course, Shane. You can keep looking, if you want."

Shane turns back toward the window, clasping his hands tightly in his lap. His posture remains rigid, like a string pulled too taut, as though relaxing would mean collapsing entirely.

Ilya had not come to this engagement party expecting to take on the responsibility of a full-time sub that lives with him, an idea that would have seemed absurd to him only days ago. He has played with many subs before, some regularly, but always with clear boundaries, always with a play collar that he removes once the mutually beneficial scene ends.

And yet, the decision had come to him with startling ease the moment he saw the fragile trust in those wide brown eyes. Without having to debate much, he had slipped off the bracelet he had worn for years, the one he had never found the right person to give to, and placed it around Shane's neck.

Now, Shane sits beside him in one of Ilya's T-shirts and a pair of slacks that are both slightly too big on him. He owns nothing of his own, no clothes, no keepsakes, nothing that hints at who he might have been before. The only thing handed over by Manny had been a piece of paper, a slave contract marked with basic biological details and a smeared, bloody fingerprint at the bottom.

Ilya had stared at that fingerprint for a long time. He still does not understand how that contract came to exist. But one step at a time.

They reach the airport within the hour. It is small, built for private flights, with only a handful of jets scattered across the tarmac.

Shane's breathing quickens the moment he sees them.

"Shane, it will be a quick flight home, less than two hours. Will you be okay?"

Shane nods too quickly. "Yes, sir," he says, with a tone that Ilya now knows is the closest thing that translates to a "no".

Ilya exhales under his breath. He should have warned him earlier. He knows by now how much predictability matters, how much Shane relies on being told what will happen before it does.

"Hey," Ilya says softly, taking Shane's hand as they step onto the tarmac. "I will be right there with you. Remember what I told you when I gave you this?" His fingers brush lightly against Shane's collar.

Shane nods. "Yes. You will always protect me, sir." The words do not seem to settle him this time.

Inside the plane, Ilya shrugs off his jacket and hands it to the flight attendant, who opens a small closet to hang it. When he turns back, reaching automatically for Shane's hand, he finds him frozen in place in front of it.

Shane swallows once, then again, before slowly turning his head. His eyes are filled with something close to despair.

"Sir," he whispers. "Can I serve you?" He lowers himself to his knees, shoulders curling inward, body folding in a way that makes Ilya's stomach turn.

“I will be good, and useful. I... please don’t put me in here.”

Ilya finds himself wordless. He wants to bend down and take that terrified Sub in his arm, but he is too appalled to do anything.

The nauseating thought hits him all at once. Some monster had done this to him. They had shut the sweetest sub he has ever known in a tiny, dark, and suffocating closet like this, through a turbulent, deafening plane ride, and expected him to endure it.

Someone Ilya once called a friend.

When no answer comes, Shane’s voice drops even softer, his knees are shifting forward, inching towards the closet. “I will go in, sir. I will be quiet.” The voice is so thin, clearly meant more for himself than for anyone else.

The cabin has gone completely silent. The flight attendant freezes with her hand still reaching inside the closet, and Troy frowns with his earphone on his hand, as if that would help him understand the situation better. All attention is fixed on Shane.

“Shane, stop. You are not going in there.” Ilya has to fight to keep his voice controlled.

It would be so easy to drop into his Dom voice, to make it sharp and absolute, in a voice Shane’s body would obey without question. The instinct is right there but he forces it down.

He does not want every moment like this to end in submission born from biological conditioning, absent of any real choice. He wants Shane to understand, not just obey.

But god, it is hard, watching him unravel over something so small, so ordinary. A fucking coat closet on a jet.

“Stand up. And come with me.”

Shane rises, unsteady, confused, and Ilya takes his hand immediately.

He guides him past the seats at the front and toward the couch in the back of the cabin, where they can sit side by side. A light squeeze on Shane’s shoulder keeps him from dropping to his knees again.

“Sit.”

Shane obeys right away.

Ilya settles beside him, one arm resting across his shoulders. “Is this okay?”

Shane nods. “Yes, sir.” Then, quieter, his head ducking, “Thank you for not making me go in, sir.”

Ilya gently lifts his chin, guiding his gaze upward. “Shane. Look at me.” Those brown eyes meet his, still trembling with fear.

“It is okay,” Ilya says softly. “You are safe here. Your Dom is here. Everything will be okay.”

Shane’s lips tremble. “My Dom?”

A small smile touches Ilya's mouth, though his eyes remain intent. "Yes. I think so, Shane." His fingers brush lightly against the thin collar at Shane's throat. "You are wearing my collar."

Shane's fingers come up to touch the collar, he exhales, "Yes, sir."

Ilya guides him closer, letting Shane lean against his shoulder. "There are many things I will never do to you," he says quietly. "We will take time to figure them out properly, and we will write them down."

Shane frowns slightly, confusion flickering across his face, and Ilya tightens his hold just a fraction.

"But you need to know this now. I will never use anything on your 'dislike' list. Those things will never happen to you again. Do you understand?"

This, at least, seems easier for Shane to grasp. He looks up, eyes wide and searching. He nods, hesitant. "But, sir... if I am bad..."

Ilya shakes his head gently. "You are the sweetest little sub I know, Shane."

A brief, unguarded smile flickers across Shane's face, soft and almost shy, gone as quickly as it appears, replaced by an anxious focus as if he is trying to convince himself before he says the next thing.

"But if I am bad..." he says quietly, hesitating just long enough to gather himself. "Please punish me with those." His fingers tighten slightly in the fabric at his knees. "I want to be better, sir. For you."

Ilya feels a sharp, disorienting fracture between anger and something unbearably tender in his chest. Shane is offering himself up to his worst fears, just for the chance to stay.

What kind of life had taught him that this was what it meant to be safe.

Ilya exhales slowly, but it does nothing to steady him. There is a weight to this kind of trust, so fragile and entirely undeserved, and it settles over him silently.

What did he do to deserve this? What has Shane been forced to survive to offer it so freely?

He straightens, letting a firmer edge enter his expression. "Oh, I will correct you if needed," he says evenly. "But never with those."

His fingers tug lightly at the collar. "Remember what this means?"

Shane's eyes are rimmed red. "Yes. You will always protect me, sir."

"That is right. And?" Ilya prompts.

Shane hesitates.

"I may inflict pain," Ilya continues, more firmly now, "but never harm. Everything on your list is harmful, Shane. I will never do those things to you. I will never allow anyone else to do them to you again."

Shane's lips press together. He struggles for a moment before admitting, "I do not think I understand the difference, sir. I am sorry."

"I will decide for you, Shane."

The surprise is immediate, followed just as quickly by visible relief.

"I will decide what is safe, what to give you, and how to give it to you." Ilya continues, his voice certain, "and you will take what I give you."

He pauses, watching the shift happen in real time, the tension easing out of Shane's body, replaced by an expression that's brighter, eager even.

"Yes, sir," Shane says, his eyes bright. "I can do that."

A small smile returns to Ilya's face. "I know you can, little sub. You are very good like that."

To Ilya's relief, Shane doesn't seem anxious about flying, at least not now that he is seated beside him. Good. He really doesn't want to give him a pill. He can already picture it too clearly: Shane going quiet, eyes wide, trying to decide whether it is medicine or something far worse.

The flight attendant arrives with breakfast and arranges it neatly on the table in front of them. Eggs still warm, bacon glistening, toast stacked in a small rack, a basket of pastries lined with crisp white cloth. The smell is soft but rich in the enclosed cabin.

When she asks Shane what he would like to drink, he gives a quick shake of his head. "No, thank you." His gaze drifts past her shoulder, fixing on nothing in particular, careful not to land on her or the food.

"Shane, you should eat. We won't be home until early afternoon," Ilya says.

The response is immediate. Shane reaches for the utensils the moment the words are spoken.

"Shane," Ilya adds, more gently, "you don't need my permission for most things now that you are with me." He pauses, choosing his words. "I know you lived by very strict rules before. But with me, you don't need permission to eat, or sleep, or choose what to wear. Those decisions are yours."

Shane stills.

His grip tightens on the edge of the plate, knuckles paling as if he is holding it in place. He blinks. "But can I still ask? When I'm not sure?"

"Of course you can."

The tension leaves him all at once. "Thank you, sir. I don't want to guess."

Ilya keeps his attention half-turned, watching without making it obvious.

Shane starts with the plain toast. No butter or jam. He finishes both slices before moving on, as if there is an order that must be followed. Then the eggs, taken in small, careful bites. He is slightly clumsy with the fork, but he is so careful. Nothing spills. Nothing is left behind.

After a moment, his eyes lift to the pastry basket. His hand reaches out, then pauses in midair, hovering just above the cloth.

“May I, sir?”

Ilya exhales quietly and lifts the entire basket toward him. “Of course. Take as many as you want.”

Shane studies it with intensity, like there is a right answer he needs to find. After a few seconds, he takes the plain croissant near the rim. “Thank you.”

By the time Ilya finishes his own plate, he is no longer pretending not to watch.

Shane eats as if it matters. Each movement measured, each bite consistent, less like someone having breakfast and more like someone following a pattern he does not dare to break.

When the flight attendant returns to clear the table, only the bacon remains on Shane’s plate, untouched and cooling.

“May I take this for you?” she asks, smiling.

Shane’s hands close around the plate immediately. His shoulders draw in, protective without thinking. He glances at her, quick and uncertain, then turns to Ilya with wide, searching eyes.

“Sir, can I keep it?”

“We can have more at home,” Ilya says. “If you want it later.”

“I can’t eat it later either,” Shane replies, matter-of-factly. “But I don’t want it to go to waste.” He looks down at the plate and frowns, as if just realizing what he is doing isn’t rational.

Ilya tilts his head. “What do you mean?” He offers the attendant a brief apologetic smile and asks her to come back in a moment.

“It’s greasy,” Shane explains, as if reciting a simple fact. “It upsets my stomach. Makes me unfit to serve.”

Oh.

Ilya reaches over and takes the plate and fork from his hands.

Before Shane can react, he eats the bacon in two quick bites. “There. No waste. Easy.”

Shane goes very still, watching him. Then his gaze drops, a faint flush rising along his cheeks. “You don’t have to eat from my plate, sir.”

“I don’t mind.” A small pause, Then, because he can’t resist, “I will be kissing that pretty mouth of yours soon enough. Eating your food is the least of my concerns.”

Shane’s eyes widen further, freckles standing out against the color spreading across his face. Ilya smiles smugly at the sight.

The drive to Mr. Rozanov's house once they landed is shorter than Shane expected, but so much more exciting than the drive to the airport. He stares out the window, taking in the skyline of a city in the distance, buildings rising in no particular order and yet somehow fitting together as if they belong that way. Above them, the summer sky stretches cloudless and endless, offering a surreal expanse of blue that makes everything feel almost dreamlike.

Shane does not remember ever seeing a city before. Which makes him wonder how he even knows the word. He can count on one hand the number of times he has ever left those large mansions, and each time it was only to be transported to yet another one just like it. On those drives, he was always kneeling in the car, or being used in one way or another, never given the chance to look outside.

Now, he stares out hungrily, trying to take in as much as he can, not knowing if he will ever see something like this again. Mr. Rozanov is taking him to his house, and he has been strange about it. There was a whole talk about how Shane would not be a slave in the house, that he would only be his Sub, and that one day, if he ever feels ready to make his own decision, he could tell Mr. Rozanov if he no longer wants to be his Sub at all.

Shane does not understand what that means.

What would he even be, if he is not a slave or a Sub to someone?

The question sits in his mind without an answer, and despite the confusion, he does not ask. Mr. Rozanov has been lenient with him when he pretends to understand and later admits that he does not, so Shane simply nods when he is expected to, storing the questions away until he absolutely has to ask them.

The man driving the car, Troy, as Shane has learned, seems to be in a much better mood now. His expression remains unreadable behind his sunglasses, but he is humming a low tune under his breath as he drives. Mr. Rozanov seems happy too, he gently holds Shane's hand and lets him look outside, without talking much.

Shane likes it when the people around him are happy. They tend to hurt him less when they are in a good mood.

Which reminds him of something else Mr. Rozanov said, that he would never let Shane be hurt again, and that he would be the one to decide how to delineate between pain and hurt. Shane does not understand the difference, but there is a sense of safety in knowing that the decision will not be his to make. If Mr. Rozanov is the one deciding, then Shane cannot choose wrong.

The car does not end up going through the city after all, turning away before they reach it, and Shane finds himself holding onto the image of the skyline as tightly as he can, imprinting it carefully into his mind before it disappears from view. He places it into what he thinks of as his "happy box," a place he has built for himself because he is not allowed to own anything in the world outside his own thoughts.

Over time, he has learned to sort things neatly into these boxes, like organizing an imaginary set of drawers that belong only to him. He revisits the *happy box* from time to time, though it is small,

and despite only knowing Mr. Rozanov for a few days, it already holds more memories of him than anything else. Gentle hands, a steady voice, praise that does not tie to blinding pains.

There are other boxes in his mind as well, heavier ones that he tries not to touch if he can help it. The *pain box*. The *hunger box*. And the *fear box*, which he avoids most of all.

*

The car drives along a tree-lined road before turning toward a heavy gate that slowly swings open. After a few more turns along the winding, uphill driveway, they come to a stop in front of a beautiful, inviting house.

It is smaller than Manny's estate, at least from the front, but it feels... lively. Two large potted flowering plants sit by the main door, while four tall, grand windows line each side of the entrance, symmetrical and bright. The second floor mirrors the same structure, each window accompanied by a small step-out balcony, flowers spilling gently over the edges as if the house itself is alive and tended to.

Just as they begin stepping out of the car, a voice calls out, "Troy!" and Shane watches as Troy's expression shifts into something brighter than he has ever seen before.

Troy does not even bother closing the car door. He jogs a few quick steps across the front of the car and moves toward a medium-built man standing off to the side of the house.

Shane's gaze lifts to him.

The man has blond hair that catches the sunlight, almost shining, and a neatly trimmed beard framing a face that looks open and warm. He is dressed in gardening boots and an overall, which should have made Shane flinch - the gardener from his last house had been a cruel old man who took every chance he could to put his hands on Shane - but this man is younger, so much younger, with a bright, trusting smile that feels entirely different.

And then Shane notices the collar around his neck.

Is he also Mr. Rozanov's sub?

A mix of feelings surges through Shane's chest, too fast and tangled for him to name, and before he can even begin to sort through them, Troy has reached the man, and - *Oh*.

They are hugging.

And then, in the next moment, the man in the overalls drops to his knees, eyes bright, smiling up at Troy as if that position is something chosen rather than required. Troy reaches down, ruffling his hair with fondness, and the way they look at each other is so, so soft, full of something Shane has never quite seen before.

After a moment, Troy bends, helping the man back to his feet, and then they kiss.

Shane watches, unable to look away, as arms tighten around waists, as their heads tilt just slightly, as their lips meet in a way that is seamless and unhurried. It is not just one kiss, but several - one quick, affectionate press, another lingering just a second longer, and then another, as if they simply do not want to stop.

Shane is mesmerized.

His eyes flick again and again to the collar around the man's neck. He has to be Troy's sub.

But he called Troy by his name. Not "Sir," not "Master."

And Troy is looking at him like... like he matters so much, like he is precious and entirely his own.

Shane has never seen a Dom and Sub like this before. He saw paired Dom and Sub at his Masters' parties. There had been affection too, sometimes even laughter, but there was always a line drawn clearly beneath it all, a hierarchy that granted the Dom the unquestioned right to control, to use, to hurt, within the bounds of what was allowed.

That line does not seem to exist here.

Shane startles slightly when the man in the gardening clothes turns and looks in his direction, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed pink like an apple in the sun.

"Ilya! Welcome home."

Shane's eyes widen at the easy use of the first name.

Before he can think more about it, the man is already moving toward him in quick, almost bouncing steps, stopping right in front of him with a smile that crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

"Hey, you must be Shane. I'm Harris."

He extends a hand. Shane hesitates for just a second before offering his own, the gesture feeling strange. No one has ever wanted to shake his hand before - it would be an awkward position as he was kneeling most of the time, but he knows what he is supposed to do.

"Hi," he says quietly.

Harris stares at him for a beat, openly, before his expression lights up even more.

"Wow, you are so beautiful!"

The words should have sent Shane spiraling, should have made his chest tighten with panic, but Harris looks so sincere, so genuinely delighted, and... he is a Sub.

So Shane lets himself blush instead.

Mr. Rozanov is suddenly at his side, stepping half a step in front of him, placing himself between Shane and Harris. "Hey, stop flirting with Shane. Your man is right there."

Harris rolls his eyes immediately.

Then he turns back to Shane, all that bright energy returning at once.

"Hey, as you can probably guess, I'm the groundskeeper here. Do you like apples? Peaches? We have a bunch of fruit trees in the orchard out back. It's peach season right now, so I can take you out and you can pick them straight off the tree. We'll have to wait a bit for the apples though. Oh,

and the garden is beautiful too, I can show you around. What flowers do you like? I can send some up to your room.”

Shane is completely stunned into silence. He cannot answer any of his questions. They are all about what he likes.

Is he allowed to like apples? Or peaches? If he takes something, what does he have to give in return? Picking fruit sounds... good, something he might even enjoy, but is he allowed to go somewhere alone with Harris?

The thoughts begin to tangle, tightening in his mind, but before he can spiral further into them, Mr. Rozanov speaks.

“Alright, Harris. Give Shane a break. He just got here, he needs rest. You can show him around later.”

Then he turns to Troy. “Troy, take your man and keep him occupied for a while, will you?”

Harris lets out a delighted shriek, immediately wrapping an arm around Troy’s waist, and before he turns away, he looks back at Shane with that same bright smile.

“Goodbye, Shane. I’ll see you later! I’ll bring some peaches.”

Shane finds himself smiling back, small and tentative, but it’s a real smile, warmed by the genuine excitement in Harris’s voice at the thought of spending time with Troy.

He lifts his hand in a small wave. “Goodbye, Harris and... Troy.” He hesitates a little before calling Troy by name, mostly because he doesn’t have any good alternatives.

He watches Troy and Harris hop on the golf cart. Troy places an arm around Harris’ back as they drive away, their conversation indistinct but their laughter so real.

Shane lowers his eyes. A sharp feeling is pulling low in his chest. It is something he cannot quite name but understands enough to know he wants it.

He stills. No. That isn’t for him.

Shane folds the feeling away before it can take shape. He will serve well. He will be good.

That is what he is for.

Chapter 6: Rules and kisses

Chapter Notes

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

The heavy-looking front door opens smoothly as Ilya pushes it. Shane lingers at the threshold, looking in without stepping inside.

Ilya moves past him easily, already at home here. “Shoes,” he says, not looking back.

Shane obeys instantly. He sets them neatly beside the door, aligning them without thinking. When he straightens, he keeps his eyes lowered. He wonders if he should go ahead and strip too, but the command was clear. Just shoes. So he keeps his hands by his side.

The foyer is beautiful. A full vase of blooming flowers rests on the center table. Shane wonders if they came from Harris’ garden. A grand spiral staircase curves upward to the second floor, a chandelier hanging above it, catching the light.

The house is just as carefully designed as Manny’s, but where Manny’s had felt cold and stony, this place radiates warmth. The wood floors gleam softly. Shane finds himself thinking that they would hurt his knees less when he is made to kneel for long periods.

Ilya lets him look.

Then he clears his throat. “Okay. House rules.”

Shane immediately lowers his head, hands moving to clasp behind his back. He starts to sink toward the floor, but Ilya catches his arm, stopping him mid-motion, and tugs gently until Shane’s hand is held in his instead.

Shane swallows. He would much rather be on his knees. It would make this easier. His mind would be clearer and more focused. Less... distracting than when he feels the warmth of Ilya’s hand around his.

“One. You move freely in this house. You don’t need my permission to use anything, eat anything, or go anywhere within the premises.”

Shane looks at Ilya, the freedom feels... scary. But he doesn’t say anything.

“You do need my permission to cum. And I will not deny you indefinitely, but you will have to ask.”

Shane whispers a “Yes, sir.”, his face burning a little at that. He hasn’t orgasmed for so long that he doesn’t really have a strong desire anymore, but he likes the part that he can ask for permission.

“Two. You take care of yourself. You don’t hurt yourself intentionally. If something feels off - in your body or in your mind, you tell me.”

“And three, you never lie to me. Whether we are in a scene or not. In return, I will be honest with you as well.”

Shane nods along, committing each rule to memory. They are not what he expected. No crawling unless told. No strict feeding schedules. No keeping a plug in his body for easy use.

They are not necessarily *easier*, because he has to think a lot more about what he can and what he wants and what it means to take care of himself, but definitely less painful.

“Yes, sir,” he says quietly, repeating them again in his head until they begin to lock in place.

“Good. And you can call me Ilya, when we’re not playing.”

Shane looks up before he can stop himself. His mouth parts slightly.

He had never even dared to call his previous masters “sir.” A first name feels dangerous. Intimate in a way he doesn’t understand.

“I... is that a command, sir?” he asks after a moment.

Mr. Rozanov shakes his head. “No. Only when you’re comfortable and ready.” He pauses, then adds softly, “I think I’ll be happier when you do.”

“Okay, sir. When I’m ready.”

He wants to make him happy, but he also needs to understand the rules around this house before he dares to do that. Maybe he can practice it in his head first.

Ilya. Ilya.

The name feels strange, and so warm. Something flutters in his stomach. He finds himself almost smiling.

“Good, Shane. Now let’s go see your room.”

Shane keeps his head down and follows, his eyes tracking the floorboard and the carpet patterns and the number of doors they pass by, making sure he remembers the limited sections of the house he is now seeing so he can navigate his way around without disturbing Mr. Rozanov - Ilya.

He can’t believe it when Ilya leads him upstairs instead of downstairs, and opens the door to a bedroom. A real bedroom.

“This is where you will stay.” Ilya says, “I am two doors down the hall.” He points.

There is a bed, soft-looking, wide. Matching nightstands. A private bathroom just beyond an open door in the corner.

For a moment, Shane doesn’t dare to move. He is used to crawling into his sleeping space after a session and collapsing into the padding barely longer than himself. He had been grateful for it - for the privacy, for the thin barrier between him and wandering hands.

This looks more inviting than most guest rooms he has been in.

And the bathroom... The realization hits him slowly. If he is allowed to use it, he won’t have to be hosed down outside after a session. He can clean himself properly, with warm water and maybe soap. He will probably get sick less often. Shane presses his lips together.

He really doesn't like being sick.

"It's been a long travel day, Shane. I want you to rest in the afternoon, take a shower. And if you rest well, maybe we'll play a bit tonight."

Shane nods quickly at that. Feeling a little dazzled when Ilya smiles at him before he leaves the room, the door softly closing behind.

He likes knowing the schedule, and he wants to do well. He will do well. He will follow every rule Ilya gives him and prove that he is worth keeping, worth collaring.

He will be good. He has to be.

Shane walks around the room that's supposedly his room now like a child exploring a new play castle. Everything feels magical, and pristine, and not something he should deserve. He heads into the bathroom first, his finger gently pushing over the shower door. There is a neat row of cleaning products lined up along the recessed shelf and that makes him so happy. No more begging for a bar of soap so he can quickly scrub himself before they hose him down.

He suddenly can't wait to play with Ilya. The thought startles him, because he almost never thought of the things he has to go through every day as "playing". Sure, biologically he has to submit to a Dom on a regular basis - it's just part of who he is. But all his experiences with Doms were so brutal, that he never really understood why it's called "playing" in the first place.

Until that night with Ilya. When he called him a puppy and offered him a big bone as his reward. When he held him in his strong arms and whispered kind things to him after. He understood then why it's like playing. The pleasure and the thrill and the intense rush of hormones rushing through his body all made sense then.

Shane goes back into the bedroom and sits on the floor with his head against the bed. He doesn't know if the bed is for him. Ilya let him sleep in his bed in the past few nights, but he was warming the bed, and he doesn't want to assume he can just sleep on this bed as well. He has a suspicion that he won't sleep well on it anyway - his body way too used to the thin padding on the ground and the coldness seeping through to his bones.

He does his best to rest up so he can serve well tonight, not napping, but letting his thoughts drift into a nothingness. All of these still feel surreal. Usually at this time of the day he is in a training session, doing everything he can to float up so he can watch his body going through something that he doesn't want to feel acutely. But today he is sitting on a plush rug, resting his head against a fluffy blanket that smells like fresh air after rain.

He watches the sky outside turning from the pure blue to a crimson color with orange hues. It should be evening soon.

Time to get ready.

In the bathroom, his eyes flutter shut the moment the warm water pools in his palm, the sensation feels almost unreal. He takes his time washing, methodical and careful, growing faintly lightheaded from the clean, unfamiliar scent of the soaps as it clings to his skin. When he is done, he steadies himself with one hand braced against the cool tile, while the other reaches back. It isn't graceful, and it certainly isn't efficient, but there had been nothing in the room to help him, no plug, no dildo, so he forces himself to be patient, to go slowly as he works himself open with his fingers.

It takes a while. He breathes through it, adjusting, easing past each flicker of discomfort until it becomes to feel manageable. Eventually, he feels loose enough, his fingers moving in shallow, careful motions, the quiet, wet sounds echoing faintly in the small space. It will have to be enough.

Afterward, he pulls on a pair of boxers from the dresser, pausing when he notices what's in the rest of the drawers: there are neatly folded t-shirts, soft-looking pants, things he never had owned. He hesitates, then leaves them where they are. Just the boxers and his collar feel more... correct.

His fingers drift up, brushing lightly over the collar at his throat, a small, grounding touch. Once he feels sufficiently prepared, he lowers himself to his knees and waits.

A few knocks on the door startles Shane. He doesn't know why whoever is at the door bothers knocking, him being far too used to being dragged out of his sleeping chamber by one of the staff whenever the Master decides to use him. The moment he straightens from his kneeling position to open the door, his mouth falls open. "Mr. Rozanov."

Ilya stands there in soft lounge clothes, his usual sharpness softened. His curls look damp, like he has just showered.

His gaze drops immediately to Shane's position, and he frowns.

Before Shane can adjust, Ilya steps forward and gently pulls him to his feet.

"You don't have to kneel unless I tell you to, Shane. Have you been kneeling long?" His fingers brush lightly over the red marks forming on Shane's knees.

"I - I'm okay, sir," Shane stammers. "I'm used to it."

It was truly nothing compared to what he is used to. Hell, he once knelt an entire night because his master gagged him and forgot about Shane still kneeling quietly in the room before he retired to sleep. He couldn't walk for two days after.

Ilya shakes his head. "No. You don't kneel unless told to. Remember, don't hurt yourself."

Shane stiffens slightly at that. A rule.

"You didn't know," Ilya adds quickly. "So there won't be corrections this time."

Shane exhales quietly. He certainly doesn't want to break a rule before they have even begun to play.

"Now, Shane, did you rest this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir," Shane answers immediately, his eyes lowered to the floor. After only a second, he adds, more carefully, "I didn't use the bed, sir. I wanted to ask for permission first."

Ilya nods. "Everything in this room is for you to use, you don't need my permission for that going forward." His fingers trace lightly across Shane's bare shoulders, drawing a small, involuntary shiver from him. "I see you've showered. Good boy. I want you to clean yourself if you know we are going to play. Now, come here."

He takes Shane's hand and leads him toward the two lounge chairs set beneath the window on the far side of the bedroom.

Shane glances down at their joined hands and feels the now-familiar flush rise to his face. This is still something only Ilya has ever done with him. It unsettles him in a way he cannot quite understand, his stomach fluttering despite himself.

“We should talk before we play.” Ilya sits, guiding Shane into the other chair and stopping him gently when he starts to kneel.

“We will start simple and build on it. Here are a few rules from me.”

Shane straightens at once, leaning forward slightly as he listens, all his attention narrowing in.

“I know it’s hard for you to tell me to stop, so we’re going to use a scale system. I’ll ask you for a number, and you’ll tell me how you feel from one to five. One is easy. Five is the most intense - the most pain, the most of something you don’t want. The other day, when you passed out at training, that was a five. It should have been a five long before you passed out. Do you understand?”

Shane nods slowly, then asks, “Do I get punished when I say five, sir?” and then, as if the question itself might be wrong, he adds quickly, “I don’t mind, sir! I want to be better. I just want to know.”

“No, little sub.” Ilya’s voice softens. “I decide what happens next. We might take a break; we will likely stop altogether. But you will never be punished for saying five.”

The answer sits wrong in Shane’s mind. If there is no punishment, then what is the point of saying it?

“So... when do I get punished?” he asks instead.

“It’s a good question, Shane.” Ilya shifts slightly in his seat, still watching him. “I’ll correct you if you do something wrong unintentionally, and I’ll punish you if you knowingly break a rule.”

He adds, “I’ll show you the difference. Corrections are lighter, because you don’t mean to make the mistake.”

“Okay,” Shane says quietly. “I understand, sir.” And he thinks he does, at least enough to remember it.

“Now, one more thing. I want you to have a safeword. I know it doesn’t mean much to you right now, but if something feels impossible, if you can’t take it anymore, if you are at a five but we are not stopping, you say ‘stop,’ and everything stops. There won’t be any punishment, and I’ll take care of you and make sure you feel better.”

Shane nods again, because that is what is expected, even though the idea itself feels too unreal. He cannot imagine saying it.

“Now I need to ask you again. What are your limits, Shane? You are not a slave. You are my Sub, and I want you to answer honestly. No lying.”

Shane thinks for a long moment, longer than he is used to being allowed, his thoughts moving carefully as if testing each possibility for danger. At last, he bites his lip and says, very quietly, “Sir... would it be okay if I don’t serve another guest while I serve you? I can serve several guests at once, but when I serve you, I want to just be... yours.”

He lowers his head immediately, unable to look at his Dom.

Warm hands cup his face a moment later. He flinches. But the hands just stay there.

Not a slap.

“Shane, I will never share you,” Ilya says. “You will not sub for a guest. You are wearing my collar. You are mine, only.”

Shane nods quickly, blinking hard as he tries to steady the sudden burn behind his eyes.

“What else, little sub?”

“That’s all, sir,” he says softly. “That’s all I can think of right now.”

“That’s a good starting point, then.” He sounds pleased. “This isn’t a one-time thing, we’ll talk often. You did well, Shane.”

Shane cannot quite stop the small smile that forms as he looks up at him.

“Now come with me,” Ilya says, rising. “We’ll play during dinner tonight.”

He follows Ilya downstairs, passing the flower arrangement in the foyer once more before turning left into a formal dining room.

Dinner is already laid out on the table, its gentle, savory warmth filling the air.

Ilya moves to the head of the table and sits. The chair beside him is gone, replaced instead by a kneeling pillow positioned neatly in its place.

“Now, Shane, we are going to play. You remember the numbers?”

Shane nods, though tension coils quietly in his stomach. He has never liked it when food is involved. It raises the stakes in a way that unsettles him, makes every mistake feel heavier, more dangerous.

“I want you to use your words as much as possible, Shane.” Ilya’s tone shifts, not quite a command, but firm enough that Shane’s focus sharpens immediately.

“Yes, sir. I remember.”

“Good. On your knees, little sub.” Ilya gestures toward the pillow.

Shane lowers himself at once, settling onto his knees and clasping his hands behind his back as he tries to ignore the scent of the food and the way it makes his stomach tighten and ache. He has knelt at Manny’s table too many times before, breathing in the rich aroma of a feast while his stomach twisted in fear. It should feel familiar. It never feels easy. He tells himself, as he always has, to ignore it.

“Number?”

“One, sir.” Shane lifts his head enough to meet Ilya’s eyes. It is a simple position, nothing difficult, so it must be a one. He ignores the faint, insistent pulse low in his stomach.

“Good, Shane. Are you allergic to anything?”

The question catches him off guard, but he answers quickly, shaking his head. “No, I don’t think so, sir.”

A hand appears in front of his face, long fingers holding a cube of cheese.

“Open.”

Shane only fully understands what is happening when the cheese is placed into his mouth, and he hears the low chuckle above him. “Eat, little sub. Don’t just stare.”

He is being fed. Just like the Subs he had seen at Manny’s dinner parties.

His pulse quickens at once, warmth rising through his body. It feels intimate and powerful in a way he never experienced.

He chews slowly, careful to savor the rich flavor. When he swallows, he looks up, meeting Ilya’s gaze. “Thank you, sir.” After a moment, he adds, eager to do it correctly, “I’m at one, sir. I like it.”

Ilya seems to soften at that, his posture easing back into the chair as a small smile forms. “Shane, you really are so sweet.”

Shane only realizes after a moment that he is smiling back like a fool, and he quickly lowers his head to hide the flush rising to his cheeks.

The feeding continues, each bite offered between Ilya’s fingers. Shane tilts his head slightly each time to take the food gently with his teeth. Everything has been cut into small pieces, easy to manage, and the flavors are mild, nothing too sharp or overwhelming.

Ilya gives him time between each bite. Enough to chew. Enough to swallow.

Shane doesn’t know if Ilya somehow knows about his stomach issue when he eats too much too fast, but he clearly is pacing him, making sure he has time to take each bite before the next one arrives.

After a while, the restless tension in his mind begins to fade, replaced by a drifting calm that settles over him, until there is no longer anything to anticipate or brace against.

There is no performance to get right, no pain waiting to arrive. There is only the next bite, the gentle motion to take it, and the steady rhythm of chewing and swallowing. His focus narrows until that is all that exists, a soft, suspended space where thought feels distant and unnecessary.

“How are you feeling, little sub?”

The voice reaches him as if from far away. Words feel slow and difficult to gather, so instead Shane lets his tongue linger against Ilya’s fingers when they brush his lips, sucking lightly before the hand withdraws. Before it is gone completely, he nudges his head gently into the palm.

His eyes are half-lidded as he lifts one finger in front of him, a loose, unfocused smile forming.

“Is it hard to talk now, little sub?” Ilya doesn’t push him to speak now. He only watches him, and there is an expression in his gaze that sends a soft flutter through Shane’s chest.

Somewhere in the distance of his thoughts, Shane remembers that's how Troy looked at Harris today. He remembers how it had struck him then, how impossible it had seemed for a Dom to look at his Sub like that.

Now that same look is turned toward him. The realization feels like a dream he has slipped into without noticing.

They continue like that for some time.

Shane no longer feels hungry after the first few bites, but he keeps accepting the food, his body unwilling to refuse it, shaped too deeply by the memory of being willing to trade anything for even the promise of something to eat.

Eventually, the feeding slows, then stops.

"I think you've had enough," Ilya says. "Here's a little dessert for you, little sub."

He lifts half of a poached pear, cut lengthwise, soft and glistening with juice. It is much larger than anything Shane has been given so far.

Two fingers press gently against Shane's teeth, easing his mouth open, and Ilya guides the pear inside carefully, positioning it so that the rounded half rests at the front, held in place between his lips.

"Just like that, little sub." He wipes his fingers on his napkin. "I need to finish my own dinner now. Can you be a good boy and wait for me before we have dessert?"

Shane nods carefully, his thoughts slow and hazy, focusing only on keeping the pear steady in his mouth.

With the feeding stopped, the sensation becomes all-encompassing. His mouth feels full, stretched around the soft fruit, sweetness pooling as juice mixes with his saliva and begins to slip slowly past his lips.

He tries to suck lightly, to control it, but the pear is soft, yielding too easily under pressure, threatening to break apart.

He concentrates on holding it in place.

He knows he can do this. He has been praised for his mouth before. If he can suck cocks for hours, then he can do this well too.

But there is suddenly a sense of loss, despite his focus narrowing in and floating up. The attention is gone. Ilya is still there, close enough to feel, but no longer focused on him.

The thought confuses him. He has always preferred less attention when he served, always tried to make himself small, unnoticed. Now he finds himself wanting to be seen.

Before he can stop himself, he lets out a soft, muffled whine.

Ilya's attention returns to him immediately, a hand coming down to rest in his hair, fingers scratching gently along his scalp. Shane's eyes flutter at the contact.

“Good boy,” Ilya murmurs. “Waiting so patiently for me. Show me your number.”

Shane lifts one finger again. His jaw aches faintly, but not enough to trouble him. He wants to do well, to show it, and he draws his lips tighter around the pear, sucking lightly.

Ilya watches him with soft, pleased eyes, his pupils widening. The thought comes to Shane, slow and distant. *I'm making my Dom happy*. That thought makes his head swim in clouds, he feels lighter than when he visits his *happy box*.

A few moments later, Ilya sets down his fork.

His thumb brushes along the corner of Shane's mouth, wiping away the dripping sweetness. “Look at you,” he says, voice warm with indulgence. “So messy. So cute.”

Shane hums softly.

“Let it out now, little sub.”

Ilya steadies the pear as he removes it, setting it aside, then brings his hands to Shane's jaw, massaging gently along the line of it. “Sore?”

Shane shakes his head faintly, eyes heavy, unable to gather the words to answer.

“Come here,” Ilya says softly. “In my lap.”

Strong hands guide him up and then down again, settling him across Ilya's muscular thighs.

Shane drapes one arm loosely around his neck, the other resting against his chest. He feels light, unguarded, and with a small, tentative motion, he leans forward and brushes his nose along Ilya's jaw.

His heart stutters when he hears the sound of approval.

“Give me a kiss, little sub.”

Shane goes still.

He has never been given that command before.

He cannot remember ever being kissed, not while he was aware of it, not as himself. He doesn't know a lot, but he knows that kissing is for people who like each other, not for a slave drenched in filth.

But he does not want to fail.

He thinks of what he saw earlier, the way Troy and Harris had moved together, and he tries to follow that memory.

Carefully, he tilts his head, fingers tightening slightly against Ilya's shoulder as he leans in. Their noses brush, getting in the way, and he adjusts, angling himself until his lips can meet Ilya's.

He presses a soft, tentative kiss. It feels strange.

He tries again.

When he pulls back, his eyes lift, searching Ilya's face for a reaction.

Ilya is smiling.

Before Shane can retreat further, a hand slides to the back of his head, holding him in place as Ilya's tongue brushes against his lips.

The sensation draws a small sound out of him, his mouth parting instinctively. At that, the tongue slips right in.

Shane forgets to breathe.

"Open." Ilya pulls back just enough to whisper.

He obeys at once, and the light pressure of the tongue returns, unfamiliar and overwhelming as it moves through his mouth, across his teeth, along the inside of his cheeks, tasting the lingering sweetness.

For a moment, everything stops. His heart is pounding so hard that he can hear it.

"Breathe, little sub." Ilya pulls back, watching him closely.

Shane's body jolts, and then he inhales sharply, air rushing back into his lungs as if he has been underwater. His vision swims, his thoughts slow to return.

"Number, Shane."

"I'm okay, sir," he manages after a moment, his breath uneven. "Um... three, but it's not bad, sir. It's very good. It's just... a lot."

His words fade as another kiss follows, gentler this time, just a brush on the lips, brief and soft.

"Better?"

"Yes, sir," Shane murmurs. "Good. I'm sorry."

His mind feels unsteady, overwhelmed in a way he cannot compare to anything else, intense in a direction he has never experienced before.

"It's okay, little sub, good job using your numbers." Ilya says, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Not much experience here, hm?" Ilya's fingers brush over Shane's lips.

Shane shakes his head, then adds quietly, "No, sir. But I will learn."

Carefully, he leans in again, pressing his lips to Ilya's.

This time, he lets his tongue slip forward just slightly, brushing against Ilya's lips in a tentative imitation before pulling back, his face flushed as he looks up through lowered lashes.

"Is that okay, sir?"

Ilya looks at him like he wants to devour him.

And at the same time, like he wants to hold him in his palm and put him away in his pocket, untouched by anything else.

The dessert remains untouched on the table, and for the first time, Shane does not feel the familiar focus to hide food away, to prepare for later, to convince himself he does not need it.

All he can think about is Ilya.

About the kiss, and how it felt, and how it left him wanting more. He wants to try again, to get it right, to show him that he can be good at this too, that he wants to be.

Thank you for reading! A few kink-related notes / thoughts: *(keeping this here since it ties directly into the chapter, but feel free to skip; nothing below is required for the plot!)*

- **Scale system vs. stoplight system:** both are common in kink spaces. Ilya opts for a numeric scale because it encourages Shane to stay aware of his internal state rather than defaulting to what feels “safe” (aka, say “green”). It’s easier for Shane to compare to his previous experiences and increases/decreases his numbers, whereas with a stoplight system he would likely stick to “green” out of habit. Framing it so that even a “5” is still subject to Ilya’s judgment also shifts some of the responsibility off Shane, making it more likely that he’ll report what he actually feels instead of what he thinks he’s supposed to say.
- **Safeword (“stop”):** while “5” technically functions as a limit marker here, Ilya still builds in an explicit safeword. He chooses “stop” because it’s clear, direct, and easy to access under stress. At the same time, it’s not a word Shane is likely to use casually or reflexively, which keeps it distinct. The goal is to give Shane an option that feels both intentional and immediately reachable if he becomes overwhelmed. Once Shane gets more comfortable saying stop in general, they might change the word.
- **Food play:** It is intimate. It establishes trusts. It expresses care and control in a less-invasive way. A few general safety notes: food should not be inserted into the body (with certain exceptions like coconut oils — but using proper lube is always the safer choice). Be mindful of choking hazards, and avoid sticky or sugary substances near genitals, as they can increase the risk of irritation or infection if not cleaned thoroughly. (Yes, honey-infused blowjob sounds fun in theory. In practice... proceed with caution.)

Chapter End Notes

Ilya: You don’t have to give me anything you don’t want to.

Shane: I am very experienced in being touched. I’m fine.

Ilya: Okay, then just give me a kiss.

Shane: *almost safe word out*

Shane: ...

Shane: what just happened.

Shane: I would like that again immediately.

Chapter 7: A lesson

Chapter Notes

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

The night is gentle here. Not just the way he is treated - that's obviously true, but the wind feels mild, the stars clear, and there is a faint hint of sweetness in the air, probably from the blooms in the garden or the fruits from the orchard.

Shane sits curled in a lounge chair beneath the window, his arms wrapped tightly around his legs as he stares out into the open dark. The moon is nowhere to be found tonight, yet the stars burn with striking brightness, and he knows that the brightest stretch across the sky is called the Milky Way.

He remembers looking at it before, in moments that belonged to his darkest times. He remembers being forced into the dirt by more than one set of hands, in the dead of winter, the cold air biting mercilessly into his bare skin. He remembers the tears in his body, deep and helpless, when someone entered him with the bare minimum prep. He remembers the way his head was forced back, his mouth made to take more, his body convulsing at the intrusion while his hair was held so tightly that escape was never an option.

He remembers looking up at the night sky then, seeing the Milky Way stretched above him, its pale, pearly light falling over his body like a fragile blanket. The gentleness of it startled him, as though it did not hesitate to offer kindness to anyone who dared to look up, even someone like him.

Now, Shane lifts his gaze to it again. He wonders, quietly, if it remembers him. If it heard the muffled sobs he swallowed back then, if it can hear the silent gratitude he offers now. *Thank you for showing me kindness when nothing in my life felt kind.*

The irony is that he had not known his life was unkind, until Ilya showed him that something else was possible.

He closes his eyes and leans on the windowsill now, knowing sleep will not find him tonight. The nightmares are too real, and he would rather stay awake than falling into their grips, waking up drenched in cold sweat and gasping a silenced scream, disoriented in the moment on what's real and what's the dream.

He fears that if he returns to those nightmares night after night, they will begin to feel like reality, while this life, this quiet, fragile safety, will feel like a remote dream. That is not a risk he can afford to take.

He can manage the lack of sleep. He used to not sleep at night anyway. During the day, when Ilya disappears into his study, he is left with all the time in the world. There are no training sessions to endure, no need to hide away to recover from injuries, no frantic attempts to scrub himself clean. He finds plenty of opportunities to steal an hour here, a moment there, drifting into shallow, guarded sleep.

He will manage. He has to. Not sleeping is not something to bother his Dom with, not when Ilya is already giving him everything that he still wonders why he deserves. He cannot risk appearing even more lacking than he already feels, always learning, always trying to understand how to exist as a proper sub in a body and mind that have only just begun to recognize kindness.

It becomes harder to stay awake as morning approaches. As the first traces of daylight begin to break through the horizon, his body seems to loosen, as though reassured by the retreat of darkness, and he will finally drift off for an hour or two before rising to join Ilya for breakfast.

Shane sets an alarm for seven, and the soft chime of the clock reliably drags him out of the heavy slumber he had only fallen into not long before. He showers in cold water, letting the sharp chill chase away the lingering haze in his mind.

How he has come to love a morning shower, and the soft clothes he is allowed to wear now. It has only been a week, and already he cannot imagine a life without them. The thought unsettles him more than it comforts.

He comes fully alert at the quiet click of Ilya's door opening. In the next instant, he is already on his feet, moving to open his own door to greet him. "Good morning, sir." He lowers his head, though he cannot help stealing a quick glance upward.

"Morning, Shane." Ilya smiles at him, the warmth of it almost like sunlight. "Did you sleep well?" His gaze lingers on Shane's face before he reaches for his hand like it's an instinct now and leads him downstairs.

"Yes, sir." The same question, the same answer, every day. It's easy to manage. Shane tells himself it is not a lie; he did sleep well, it simply came late, only when the sun began to rise.

"Hmm, same. Maybe we'll have breakfast outside today. It's a nice day."

The morning is gorgeous. The air is not yet warm, and a small table has been set up just behind the house, where grapevines climb over a trellis, casting soft, dappled shade.

Shane sits facing the house, the sun at his back. The breeze brushes warm against his skin, soft and lulling, blurring the edges of things in his mind, almost like a fading memory.

"Shane?"

Ilya is watching him now, something more thoughtful in his gaze.

"Sorry, sir." Shane startles, only then realizing that his eyes had drifted shut. His eyelids feel unbearably heavy. He should focus. He needs to focus.

"I was asking, how do you feel about that?"

"Good, sir. If you want it." The answer comes immediately. He watches Ilya's brow crease, and a thin thread of unease tightens in his chest.

Maybe he had not heard the question properly. But Ilya would not ask for anything extreme, right? And even if he did, Shane does not want to refuse. He has been doing well so far. He cannot afford to falter now.

"Did you sleep well last night?" *Had he not already answered that?*

"Yes, sir."

"When did you go to bed?"

“I slept fine, sir.” The response is automatic, and it is only after the words leave his mouth that Shane realizes, with a quiet drop in his stomach, that Ilya’s expression has hardened, the warmth draining from it.

“How long did you sleep, Shane.”

“I... I slept well, sir.”

“You heard the question.”

“...”

“I won’t ask the third time.” Ilya sets his fork down.

Shane’s throat tightens. “Two or three hours, sir.”

“Which is it?”

“... Two, sir.”

“Look at me.”

He does, and immediately regrets it, because there is nothing in Ilya’s expression that suggests this will end quickly.

“House rules. Little sub. Tell me how many you broke.”

“Please, sir...”

Shane feels the defensive instinct to explain and make it reasonable, but he holds himself still because he is beginning to understand that this is not a moment that will be tolerated. In the end, all that comes out is a quiet murmur.

“I didn’t want to be difficult, sir. I - I feel okay.”

“What are the rules?” He doesn’t sound impatient, but Shane somehow knows time is running out.

“I will take care of myself, sir. I will let you know if something is wrong. And no lying, sir.” His voice trails off quietly, he can’t look into Ilya’s eyes anymore.

“If you are tired, I will know. If you are unwell, I will know. You hiding that is not making it easier.” He sounds so serious now, punctuating every word in the last sentence. “It is disobedience.”

Shane’s hands begin to tremble at that word. That is the last thing he can afford to be. He swallows hard. “I’m so sorry, sir.”

“Kneel.”

Shane drops immediately next to Ilya, the pebbles on the ground digging into his knees but he barely registers the discomfort.

“Adjust your position.”

Shane stills, realizing a beat later that his form isn't the best on the uneven ground. He shifts quickly, rolling his shoulders back further, lifting his chin a fraction, aligning himself more precisely. That puts more pressure on the knees and shins, but he doesn't dare to wince.

"Arms up."

Ilya places a silver tray across Shane's palms. "Higher."

Shane lifts his arms further, until they are held just above his head. Ilya adjusts them precisely, positioning him exactly as he wants before stepping back and sitting down again, close enough that Shane can feel the subtle vibration of his voice through the air between them.

Ilya takes a slow sip of his coffee, then sets the cup down onto the tray Shane is holding. The added weight is slight, but sudden, and Shane's arms shift instinctively to steady it, his muscles tightening to compensate.

"Hold the position. Remain exactly as you are," Ilya continues, "I want you to pay attention to how your body is feeling."

This is different from any of his punishments before. Shane had braced himself for pain - a sharp round of whipping, maybe - something he knows how to endure. But this stretches out instead, uncertain, demanding something he is not used to giving.

"Yes, sir."

"Say it back properly."

"I will hold the position, sir. I will pay attention to how my body feels."

"And you will answer me truthfully."

"I will answer truthfully, sir."

"Good."

Ilya goes back to his breakfast. He lifts the coffee once in a while before setting it down. Shane feels his body forced to catch up to adjust for that constant shift of weight, something that should be easy but somehow throws him off his balance every time. He fights to keep his knees even on the rounded pebbles, tucking in his core to stabilize his upper body, and pressing down the urge to bend the arms just a little further to take some of the strains off.

At first, it is manageable, the kneeling position is familiar enough that his body slips into it. His focus fixed on staying exactly as he has been placed, because that is something he can do correctly.

But stillness, he finds, is not the same as endurance. It demands a sustained awareness, and his fatigued mind keeps drifting, slipping away from him in dangerous increments.

A faint tremor begins at the base of his spine, a subtle tightening spreading through his shoulders as the effort of holding himself perfectly aligned begins to accumulate, and he corrects it immediately, straightening further, locking himself more rigidly into place.

The strain builds. His knees ache where the pebbles press into them. His arms begin to burn with effort.

And beneath it all, more insidious, more difficult to ignore, the heaviness in his head, the one he has been pushing aside for days, begins to press forward, no longer masked by movement or distraction.

“What do you feel?”

The question comes without warning, cutting cleanly through his concentration.

Shane inhales carefully. “I’m feeling okay, sir.”

“Answer again.”

Shane lowers his eyes. He can feel how hard his heart is pounding, can hear it in his ears. Ilya is right there, his voice barely changed, yet carrying a weight that presses against him, that makes his skin prickle with sweat.

“My knees hurt,” Shane says, hoping that is an acceptable answer for keeping a kneeling position. “And my back is tight,” he adds, the words less certain now.

“Keep going.”

Shane hesitates, and that hesitation stretches just a fraction too long.

“Do not make me repeat myself.”

The warning is unmistakable. Shane flinches; a faint rattle runs through the coffee cup resting on the tray, the sound alone nearly brings tears to his eyes. He stills himself again, forcing control back into his body.

“My head hurts,” Shane says, the words coming out before he can filter them. “And I feel... tired.”

“Tired how?”

Shane can feel his arms straining now. The tray is no longer still. His body clearly is not able to handle the thinking, the talking, and the keeping still all at once.

“Heavy, my mind,” he says finally. “It feels... slow.”

“Continue.”

The repetition is relentless, giving him no space to retreat back into safe territory.

“My eyes... they won’t focus properly,” Shane admits, the words are harder to come now. “And my arms keep -” he stops himself before he can move them, and forces them still again. “They don’t feel steady.”

“Continue.”

Shane swallows, his throat dry.

“My heart is going fast. I can feel it in my throat.”

“Position.”

Shane startles slightly at that, only then realizing that his shoulders have dipped, that his spine has softened under the weight of everything he is holding, and he straightens immediately, pulling himself back into alignment with a small, strained inhale.

“Hold it,” Ilya says calmly. “You correct your position when it slips. You do not wait for me to tell you.”

“Yes, sir.” His voice is thinner now.

“What’s your number, Shane.”

The check-in startles Shane. He almost blurts out the one until he remembers how he got into this trouble, and he quietly says, “Two, sir.”

Ilya returns to his breakfast, and the world seems to narrow with him, the soft clink of cutlery and the faint rustle of leaves becoming the only markers of time, which now moves strangely slowly. Each second is stretched, ticking by slowly in full rather than passing through. Shane keeps his gaze lowered, carefully fixed on a pebble he chooses, trying to stay good and useful in the only way he knows how right now, even as his thoughts begin to drift in and out like a loose thread he cannot catch.

He can feel, with an uncomfortable clarity, how often he has ignored his body before this moment, how easily he has overridden it, dismissed it, pushed past its signals until they became too loud to ignore. And that realization makes every tremor feel less like a surprise and more like a consequence he should have seen coming.

Ilya’s attention returns to him in brief intervals, it lands like pressure against his awareness, sharpening his focus just enough that he forces himself back into alignment, swallowing down every instinct to sag or drift, even as fatigue keeps trying to pull him under the surface of the moment. It also steadies him, knowing that he is being watched, not ignored.

“Do you think you are in a good enough state to serve now?”

“I, I can sir. I will be good.” Shane says without thinking, but his words are quickly cut short by something cold.

“Think, before you answer.”

He swallows. He knows the truth. He knows his muffled mind won’t be sharp enough to capture the hints in Ilya’s body and tone, and he knows his body isn’t going to hold the strain that’s required of him.

“No, sir. I’m sorry. I feel tired.” He answers finally, the sentence costing him something, he feels inferior. “My arms feel like they’re... giving out. I can’t keep them steady.”

“And yet you are trying.”

“Yes, sir. Because you told me to, sir.”

“Not enough.” The words press harder than the strain in his body.

Shane swallows, his thoughts scattering, reforming slowly under pressure.

“...Because I need to pay attention to my body, sir,” he says finally, voice unsteady. “Because I ignored it before.”

“Better.” Ilya says. “You will not lie to me again.”

He punctuates every word, making them sharp enough to cut through Shane’s exhausted mind. “You don’t lie about your body, or your mind. If you are tired, you will say that. If you did not sleep, you will say that.”

“Yes, sir.” Shane blinks away the black spots forming at the edges of his vision. His body sways again before he manages to correct it, the adjustment costing so much that the half-empty coffee mug nearly spills.

Ilya watches before his hand comes up, he steadies the tray just enough to take the unpredictable strain out of it. His hand lingers, as if deciding what part of the burden is still safe for Shane to carry.

Shane tries to inhale properly, but the air feels wrong in his chest.

Distantly he hears his name being called, but the rushing in his head is too loud now. He can’t stay like this for much longer. He is going to fail. A sharp panic rises in his chest, he doesn’t want to fail this as well. Remotely, he remembers something else he was told he can do -

“Sir?” Shane whispers, surprising himself with the next thing he says, “M’ sorry. I think I’m at a four now.”

He doesn't have time to think about the consequences of this admission, because in the next moment, the weight of the tray is suddenly gone. The change of it so abrupt that Shane’s whole body jolts with awareness.

“This is it, little sub. We are done. Go sit down.”

Shane tries to stand up and immediately finds his knees weak below him. He stumbles forward, his arms too heavy to catch himself. A pair of strong hands slides under his arms just in time, steadying him and guiding him towards the chair that he had been sitting on earlier.

He blinks hard, trying to clear his vision, to make sense of what is happening, only realizing a beat later that Ilya is already half-kneeling in front of him, rolling up his pant legs with careful, efficient movements, exposing his knees for inspection.

Shane hasn’t dared to shed a tear through any of it, but this attention suddenly threatens to undo him far more than the strain did.

He doesn’t think there are any cuts. The pebbles are all smooth and edgeless. His knees are flushed now, irritated, the heat of it lingering deep in the joint. It feels unbearably good when Ilya presses the heel of his palm gently against them, then lifts slightly to blow cool air across the reddened skin, easing the sting without rushing it away.

Ilya stands up after he rubs both knees, moving to massage Shane’s upper arms now. Shane squirms a little at the tingling sensations building, only earning some hushing from Ilya, like he is comforting a little child.

“Shh - Stay still.”

Shane’s face burns hotter than his knees.

Quietly he mumbles, “I’m okay, sir. Really -” he feels the need to clarify that this isn’t just another deflection, “it will pass soon.”

“Thank you for using your number, Shane. Does anything else hurt?”

Shane quickly shakes his head. “No, sir. I’m good now.” He gingerly adds. “I can kneel longer, if you want.”

“Did you learn your lesson?”

It doesn’t sound like a trick question, so Shane answers honestly. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry I lied, sir.” His eyes suddenly are stinging again, and this time he can’t quite push it back.

“Then I won’t punish you more. You need some proper rest now. Can you walk?”

Shane nods, he slowly stands up, bracing his hand on the table, his eyes locking on the bread and egg that he hasn’t touched yet.

“I’ll have the food sent up later,” Ilya says, following the glance. “You’re not staying up for it.” Ilya’s voice is so gentle now. The sharpness from earlier completely gone.

He steps in close, one arm wrapping around Shane’s waist, guiding Shane’s arm over his shoulder without asking, taking the majority of his weight as they turn to the house.

They move slowly into the house and upstairs. The bed looks so nice and soft in the daylight, no longer that scary vessel holding nightmares when the night falls.

Ilya helps Shane lower onto it carefully. His body trembles as Ilya steps in close and strips his lounge pants away, leaving him in just his T-shirt and boxer briefs. Shane’s breath catches - but he isn’t afraid. There is something else. Nerves. Expectation.

But Ilya only pulls the blanket back and nudges him down, guiding him onto the mattress, then drawing the covers over him, tucking him in with a firmness that leaves no room for misinterpretation.

“Sir.” Shane blurts out, his hand lightly touches Ilya’s hand still holding onto the blanket. “I didn’t want to lie. Sir. I told myself it’s okay, because I can do it. I used to not sleep much either.” His voice gets lower as Ilya’s frown forms on his face.

“I know you are used to a lot of things, little sub.” Ilya finally says, “many of them are not okay. I want to change that.” His eyes look.. painful, it makes Shane’s heart ache. “So I need you to tell me things like this, big or small, so I can help, okay?”

Shane nods. He suddenly can’t find more words at that moment. He wants to say, *you are helping me, you saved me. I don’t know if I will live to see the next summer if you didn’t bring me here.*

But he only nods, because what is the difference if he asks for more help, now that Ilya has given him a whole new world? He will never be able to pay back a fraction anyway.

“I’ll have a doctor come by to check on you,” Ilya says. “Are you all right with that?”

Shane nods automatically, then catches himself. “Yes, sir.”

He is used to that as well, Manny used to have a doctor check on him every month or so. He always felt like a piece of meat being examined, turned this way and that, but it’s fine, the doctor didn’t hurt him.

“Now sleep, little sub. I know it was a lot this morning.” Ilya’s voice is so gentle, he hasn’t been using his Dom voice that much at all, not even when he punished him earlier.

It was a lot, but in such a different way from the punishments Shane received before.

“Yes, sir. And sir, I’m sorry. I really learned.”

That draws a smile on that handsome face, and something in Shane’s chest flutters at the sight of it.

“Good.”

Ilya’s hand lingers for a moment longer at his temple, and then it’s gone.

Shane lets his eyes fall closed. The heaviness comes quickly this time, thick and pulling, and without the sharp edge of dread waiting beneath it.

Sleep finds him before he can think himself out of it.

Chapter End Notes

Our perfect boy got into trouble! What do you all think of this little punishment scene?

Shane: For the record, I can kneel longer than that. That was more like a high three.

Ilya: It’s not a competition.

Shane: Well it is if I can find someone to compete against...

Harris: No, thank you. Not happening.

Troy: Yeah that’s my smart boyfriend.

Chapter 8: Don't look away

Chapter Notes

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

“So you don't know much about his medical history?” Jackie sits on the couch with a notepad propped up on her lap, scribbling down a few things occasionally.

“No.” Ilya says, “He had pretty regular screening, but only for STI.” Ilya's jaw clenches. “His previous... owner didn't care to do much more beyond that.”

“You said he was kept as a slave. If I see anything I don't like, it's not you?” Jackie raises an eyebrow at him.

“No, I would never.” Ilya shakes his head. His eyes darken as he thinks about the brutal bruises that are just starting to lighten on Shane's skin. And along those, scars old and new.

“I know. Ilya. I just had to check.” Jackie circles a few things on a form, “We will do a comprehensive checkup today. For his insomnia, I suspect it's PTSD related. Once I confirm, I can get him some medications that should help.”

Ilya's brows lock, “I don't know how he feels about needles, or pills. He is traumatized about many things.” He looks at Jackie, “That's why I reached out to you - I know it's last minute. Thank you.”

Jackie nods, “Of course. Always happy to help.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a collar made of black ribbon. “They tend to feel safer when I wear this.”

Ilya smiles, “You are the best.” And then, as if he couldn't help it, “I don't know how Hayden trapped you with that.”

“Don't push it, Ilya. He isn't even here!”

The door opens right after Ilya knocks on it, making him wonder if Shane has again been waiting at the door for him.

“Shane, did you nap?” He can't help reaching for Shane's hand as those large brown eyes find him with the mix of relief and shyness, a well of emotion that has replaced the alarm and fear since they came home, to his delight.

“Yes, sir. For two hours.” Shane says, looking up to him expectantly.

“Good boy.” He can't help but smile when Shane beams at that.

He steps into the room and turns halfway to introduce Jackie, “Shane, the doctor is here. This is Dr. Pike. She is here to help you.”

Shane's mouth hangs open. His eyes flick to Jackie's face, her collar, and the medical bag she is carrying, and back up again.

“Just Jackie is fine. It’s good to meet you, Shane.” Jackie smiles that warm, motherly smile that she always wears with her four feral children, and Ilya thanks himself for having her as a friend.

“Let’s go sit down by the window, Shane. Do you need anything before we start?”

Shane quickly shakes his head. His eyes find Ilya, who is standing near the bed now, watching them closely. Ilya gives him a reassuring smile.

He takes a deep breath, extending his arm across the small table, and looks away.

“Thank you, Shane. We will do bloodwork later, I just have a few questions first.”

Ilya walks over to put a hand on Shane’s shoulder, “I will go get you some water before the bloodwork. Shane. Can you take Jackie’s questions?”

“I will try, sir.” Shane says quietly. And then, he blinks his large eyes, “Could you please come back?”

“Of course, Shane. Thank you for asking for it.” He feels his heart swell a little. There is trust. It may still be fragile, but he can feel it growing day by day.

Ilya paces around the kitchen for fifty slow counts, and then another fifty. He fills a glass with water and heads back upstairs.

There is a small chuckle coming from Shane’s room, much to his relief. “That’s how subs should be treated, Shane. Submission is a gift, and it sounds like Ilya is showing appropriate appreciation for it.”

Ilya clears his throat, “Wow, Pike saying good things about me. What a rare treat.”

He walks over with a grin and instead of handing the glass to Shane, he brings the water to his lips and tilts the glass for him. Shane takes a few small sips. “More.” He encourages, only taking the glass away when it’s two thirds empty.

“Okay, we can do bloodwork now, and then talk about the meds.” Jackie turns to Ilya, “Shane wants to ask you about the meds.”

Ilya nods as he takes Shane’s hand, “Sure.”

Shane extends his arm again, his eyes grow wide as Ilya sits down on the floor next to his chair, taking Shane’s other hand in his. “I’m right here, Shane. Squeeze me if you need to.”

Shane smiles faintly, “I’m okay, sir. I used to do this a lot.” And then quietly, “Thank you, sir.”

Ilya presses a kiss on that hand, “Brave little sub. You can pretend you are scared. Makes me feel good. I’m here to protect.”

Shane’s blushing hard, he tries to lower his head to hide it, mumbling a quiet, “Sir.” while glancing at the doctor shyly.

Jackie bites down her smile as she focuses on the task at hand. “All done now.” She announces as she quickly labels the tubes and puts them away.

“Okay, now the med.” she says next. “As I mentioned, there is an option that helps quiet the anxiety loop. It makes it easier for your mind to let go. It’s been around for a long time, widely used for people going through PTSD related insomnia.”

Shane shifts in his seat and looks at Ilya.

“What’s on your mind, Shane?” Ilya asks, “You can ask the doctor.”

Shane bites his lips, then carefully, “Will it make me... not aware?”

“No,” she says, firm but gentle. “You will still be you. You’ll still be able to think, to respond, to stop anything you don’t want. This doesn’t take control away from you. It’s about giving your body a chance to rest.”

He glances at Ilya again. Ilya is still sitting on the ground, he shifts so he can meet Shane’s eyes from below, still holding his hand.

“You don’t have to take anything you don’t want. But,” Ilya adds slowly, “you deserve to sleep.”

Jackie leans forward slightly.

“We can start very low,” she says. “You try it once, on a night where you feel safe. You see how it feels. If you hate it, we stop. If it helps, we keep going.”

Ilya chimes in, “What are the side effects?”

“Some people experience low blood pressure on this, or they can feel lightheaded when standing.” Jackie says, “we can start low and monitor for both regularly, that way we can pivot quickly if needed.”

Shane’s eyes find Ilya again, “Is that okay, sir?”

Ilya squeezes his hand lightly, “This is your decision to make, Shane.” He sees the flicker of uneasiness in Shane’s eyes, “But I will be here, no matter what you decide. If you don’t want it, we’ll figure out something else.”

Shane bites his lips for a long time, eyeing Ilya and Jackie nervously as time ticks by. But both of them just look at him patiently.

“Okay. I will try it, once. And then we can decide?” He carefully asks.

“Of course, Shane.” Ilya says right away, “Good job making a decision. You did so well, Shane.”

Jackie smiles at Shane, “I will send the prescription right away. And besides the medication,” she pauses, “there are other things you can do that help with sleep too. It sounds like you are eating regularly, that’s great, keep it up. Regular workout, exposure to the sun, and routine schedules also help.”

Ilya nods along, making mental notes for these.

“There are a few more things I will check once we get the bloodwork back. I will be in touch.” She says as she starts putting her things away in the medical bag.

“Thanks Jackie. Let me walk you out.” Ilya rises from the floor, giving Shane a light squeeze on the shoulder, “I will be back, okay?”

Shane nods as he stands up as well, “Thank you, Doctor... Jackie.”

Jackie flashes a bright smile, “It’s nice to meet you Shane. Feel free to ask any questions as they come up.”

Jackie leads the way, just as she reaches the front door, she turns around, “I wanted to ask you alone. Are you guys playing regularly?”

Ilya gasps. “Jackie! Did Pike send you here to collect gossip?”

“It’s a totally medically appropriate question.” Jackie rolls her eyes. “Chemicals in his body could be imbalanced, if he changes a play schedule, or a play type significantly. Just like when you start a drastically different diet or workout routine.”

Ilya frowns, “You are saying...”

Jackie nods, “I can’t say for sure until I see the bloodwork results. But I’m getting this sense that... he is repressing his need to play.”

In the back of Ilya’s mind, he knows the answer. Shane’s body used to go through so much, every day. The sudden gentleness must have been a shock.

He notices how needy Shane grows in just this week, following him everywhere when he is not working in his study, looking at him expectantly with those large doe eyes, and seemingly melting into every small touch he offers. He has been intentionally taking things very slow, because of Shane’s trauma. But his protectiveness has been making Shane sick.

It takes him a while to find his words. “I don’t want to hurt him more, before he can recover.”

Jackie gives him an expression that reminds too much of her encouraging look when she wants her kids to do something scary, “But you are one of the best doms I know, Ilya. You sure can figure it out.”

Back in the room, Shane is looking out of the window alone. Ilya finds that he does that a lot, brows knit together, lost in his thoughts.

“Shane.” He calls out to announce himself, watching to his delight that Shane’s expression brightens at his voice. “Come here.”

Shane quickly moves off the lounge chair and walks over, just as he reaches Ilya's radius, Ilya takes him into a hug.

There is an obvious shiver vibrating through Shane’s body at that contact, his body quickly pressing closer, morphing into the hug. His breath quickens, Ilya can feel the heart pounding beneath the fabric.

He is touch starved. Ilya frowns at himself for intentionally keeping the distance with Shane for the past few days, thinking he needs more time to recover.

“My brave little sub. Taking the doctor’s visit so well.” He coos. “I think you deserve a little reward.”

Shane blushes at that. He bats his eyes shyly at Ilya, but it’s obvious that he can’t hide the excitement for a chance to get closer.

“What does my little sub want?” Ilya asks, quickly easing the question into a choice, “You are being so good, so I will let you pick.”

He steps back just a little, still holding onto Shane’s waist as he looks him in the eyes, “We can cuddle and watch a movie until dinner, and I will feed you just like last time. Or, we can go into the playroom, and you let me decide what to do with you.”

He has not shown Shane the playroom yet. And despite knowing Shane’s body probably needs the playroom more, he wants to give him an easier option, in case he isn’t ready to submit more completely.

Shane looks at him with a complicated expression. He is thinking so loudly that Ilya can practically feel his thoughts vibrating. The known vs. the unknown. The need to get closer but the fear of getting hurt. The wants and the repercussions for wanting to want.

He lowers his head then, unable to give an answer.

“Do you want me to pick for you, little sub?” Ilya gives him another way out.

Shane nods carefully, “Yes, please, sir.”

Ilya says thoughtfully, keeping a close eye on Shane, “Ah, maybe my little sub is still tired. And we will just cuddle and have dinner together.”

There, his eyes dim for a second, before he quickly gathers himself. But Ilya doesn’t miss it. Shane is so disappointed that they aren’t going to do more.

“Okay, sir.” He whispers, ever so obediently. And then, he looks at Ilya pleadingly, “Will you show me the playroom, sir? Just for a quick look?”

How can he ever say no to that? He can’t be so mean as to deny his sweetest little sub, right?

Ilya smirks, “Of course. Shane.”

He leads Shane outside of his bedroom, turning down the hall. They don’t walk far at all, before stopping in front of the next door. It’s the room between Shane’s and his bedroom.

“That’s right, Shane. It’s right here next to your room. You don’t ever have to worry about not getting back to your bed - I will carry you the twenty steps if you need me to.”

Shane’s face is burning up. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

“Ready to see it?” Ilya pushes the door open.

The room is painted in navy blue. Not as dark as most dungeons, Ilya allows natural light throughout. The silver metal color of the large equipment laying around the room glistens in the afternoon sunlight against the navy walls. There is a spanking bench, an X-cross bondage frame,

and a large crate in the corner. A few rings are placed strategically on the ceiling and along the wall. Most of the smaller toys and tools are stored away in the closet and chest of drawers in the corner. There is a couch in the far end of the room sitting on a plush rug.

Shane's breath quickens as he takes in the room. His eyes have gone wide.

"Is it what you expected?" Ilya asks smugly.

"It is.. more. Sir." Shane swallows once.

"Oh, so my little sub thought I was... vanilla?" Ilya narrows his eyes, walking into Shane's space and gets closer step by step, until Shane's back is pressed on the door.

Shane quickly shakes his head and lowers his eyes, "No, sir. It's just that..." he cuts it off.

"Hmm, finish your sentence, little sub."

Shane bats his eyes helplessly, before finally whispering, "You are so gentle and kind with me."

"And maybe, my little sub needs something more, something bad. and. mean." Ilya leans closer, dropping the last few words right next to Shane's reddened ears.

Shane's knees buckle.

Ilya catches him by the waist, "Not yet, little sub, you remember your numbers?"

Shane nods, and quickly, "Yes, sir. Five is the most extreme."

Ilya smiles at the eagerness in his voice. "And what is your safe word?"

"Stop. Sir."

"Good boy." Ilya smiles. "Now strip."

Shane quickly gets out of his lounge pants and t-shirt. He kneels by the door to fold them into a neat pile, before rising elegantly with his hands by his side.

"Did I tell you to leave anything on?" Ilya raises an eyebrow at him, eyeing the boxer. He is pleased to see the bulge trapped inside those boxers growing at his words.

Shane quickly strips and folds the boxers too, adding it to the pile.

"Look at you, so pretty." Ilya praises. "Now kneel" Shane drops to the floor with practiced ease, his large eyes looking up to Ilya, filled with emotions that Ilya can't bear looking for much longer.

Ilya turns on his heel and walks towards the wall facing the door, where the large dresser stands. An idea is forming in his mind.

He was considering an impact play, or maybe some light bondage. But he doesn't want to risk it - it's only been a week, and he's mostly flying blind. He wants to do something that's intense so he gets the relief physically, but also psychologically safe for Shane... Maybe even good for him.

“Go to the couch, Shane. Stay with your back to it.” He says without turning, pleased to hear the light shuffling of hands and knees over the room right away.

He pulls the velvet cover draped over the large frame in front of him, revealing a full length rolling mirror. The frame is in the same silver metallic color as the rest of his large equipment. The sunray reflects off the mirror at once, bouncing lights across the room.

Ilya pushes the mirror towards the couch, adjusting it so Shane is right in between the mirror and the couch, and then he stills, allowing himself a moment to take in the full picture of Shane kneeling before it.

Shane’s body is completely bare, every line exposed under the softened light. His dark hair catches the glow, fine strands reflecting it back like silk, and his long lashes cast faint, delicate shadows across his face. He looks serene with his eyes downcasted, patient for whatever Ilya has planned for him.

He is in that perfected kneeling position, thighs spread and resting on his calves, hands drawn behind his back in that instinctive posture of obedience. It straightens his spine, opens his chest, and in doing so reveals more than he likely realizes.

His pecs are not bulky, but there is a fine definition to them, the lines clean and natural, tapering gradually as they narrow into his waist, a transition that feels almost intentional. It’s a body that carries strength, even when it has been worn down and dimmed by everything it has endured.

Lower, his thighs press firmly against his legs, the curve of his quadriceps catching the light that makes them seem almost sculpted, as if carved from marble and then softened by warmth.

“Shane. Eyes on the mirror.”

Shane’s head lifts immediately, the response instinctive, but the moment his gaze lands on his own bare reflection he falters - blinking once, then again, a faint frown pulling at his brows as his lips press together, as if holding that gaze steady takes more effort than he expected.

“Tell me what you see.”

“Just me, sir.” The answer comes quickly, his expression tightening, suspicion flickering through it like he’s trying to anticipate where this is meant to lead.

“That’s not specific enough. Try again, Shane.”

Shane swallows. “I- I see your sub, sir.”

Ilya steps closer slowly, placing a hand on Shane’s shoulder and feeling the immediate tremor it draws from him, subtle but undeniable. He doesn’t look away, instead meeting Shane’s eyes through the mirror, holding him there.

“Yes,” he says quietly, “but right now I want you to see Shane, and everything about him.” His hand moves slowly across the bare shoulder, pausing at the back of his arm where he gives a light, testing squeeze. “Tell me about this.”

“My... arms,” Shane says, the word awkward, uncertain, like it doesn’t quite belong to him. “My shoulders.” His gaze flickers sideways toward Ilya, confusion creeping in, softening into something

closer to defeat. "I don't know what the right thing to say is, sir. I'm sorry."

"I don't want the right thing." There is more weight in Ilya's voice now, something firmer settling beneath it. "I want to hear what you see and what you actually feel."

Shane's gaze drags back to the mirror.

Forces itself to stay.

"My shoulders," he tries again, slower, each word pulled free with effort. "They're... tense."

"Better. Keep going."

"My arms," he continues, eyes fixed as though the reflection might vanish if he lets it, "they're..." He hesitates, frowning slightly, his gaze flicking between himself and Ilya's reflection, searching. "There are scars on the front of them, and marks on my wrists."

Ilya hums softly. "True," he agrees, "but that's not what I see." His hand tightens slightly around Shane's arm. "I see that they are toned with strength. Like they've been shaped carefully."

Shane's fingers curl faintly against his thighs, tension gathering there, and then, almost reluctantly, "Yes, sir."

"Say it back to me."

"My arms are toned, sir." He wets his lips, like he's testing the truth of it, unsure whether it will hold.

Ilya's hand moves from his shoulder to his chest, resting flat over his pec, feeling the rapid beat beneath his palm.

"Tell me about this."

Shane's eyes drop for a moment, his brows drawing together as something more complicated rises up. "They are..." He swallows. "My," The word sticks, his lashes trembling slightly before he forces it out. "My tits, sir."

There's heat in his face now, a flush that spreads too quickly to hide.

"Do you like calling them that?" Ilya asks evenly.

"I..." Shane hesitates, voice weakening. "Others like to call them that, sir."

"Mm." Ilya's gaze sharpens slightly. "Eyes on the mirror, Shane."

He waits until Shane obeys, until his gaze lifts again despite the resistance in it, and when their eyes meet in the reflection, Ilya feels it, that flicker of something small and braced. Fear, and defeat.

"Number, Shane."

"... Two. Sir. I'm sorry." Shane's voice is clouded by shame. "I didn't mean to think about... them."

“You don’t apologize for your numbers. Shane. And you don’t have to use their words for your body.” Ilya says, watching Shane’s body stills at that.

“Now tell me, who do you see there?”

“You. And me, sir.”

“Do you see anyone else?”

“No, sir.” Shane inhales, shaky, his eyes slipping closed for a moment before he forces them open again.

“Then stay here,” Ilya murmurs. “With me. Not with them.”

Shane takes in a shaky breath. “I see my chest, sir.” A small pause. “I see your hand on it. It’s… warm.”

“Good,” Ilya says softly. “Your pecs are so defined, perfect. The roundness here is just right.” He moves his hand across the top of the chest, drawing out a shaky breath from Shane. “I can feel your heart beating strong. Just like you.”

He lets his hand linger for one more beat over Shane’s heart before drawing it away, and Shane’s eyes follow the movement immediately, a flicker of longing surfacing in its wake.

Ilya turns to sit down on the couch. “Come here now, Shane.”

Shane turns his body elegantly, crawling a few short steps before he reaches Ilya’s legs.

“Come up here, sit down in my lap, face the mirror.” Ilya tells him.

Shane rises quickly, and Ilya guides his body to lower down, until his back is pressed firmly against Ilya’s chest.

“Good boy, now hands behind my neck.”

Shane obeys right away, his fingers interlacing behind Ilya’s neck. That movement pulls Shane back further, putting his face resting right next to Ilya’s. Ilya can turn his head and kiss him now, but he resists.

“Spread your legs.”

Shane lets out a soft, involuntary groan at that, already aware of how much it exposes him, how there is nowhere left to hide under Ilya’s gaze or his own. And still, he obeys beautifully, lifting and parting his long legs to either side of Ilya’s, opening himself without hesitation despite the tension that lingers in his breath.

For a moment, Ilya is lost looking in the mirror.

He is caught off guard by the sight of Shane, laid open in perfect, unguarded display, every line of his body visible, offered without reservation. There is something almost reverent in it, as if he has been handed something fragile and sacred all at once, something he hadn’t expected to see so clearly.

“Look at you... Shane,” he murmurs, almost in awe. “Prettiest sub I’ve ever seen.”

He leans in as he says it, mouth brushing against Shane’s ear, lips grazing, then the faintest flick of his tongue at the tip, already flushed a deep red beneath his touch.

“I want you to keep your eyes on the mirror,” Ilya continues, voice low and steady now, grounding again, “and tell me what you see. What you feel.” A pause, gentler, but no less firm. “Can you tell me your number, little sub?”

“One, sir,” Shane whispers.

Ilya’s hand settles across Shane’s abdomen, warm and steady, while the other rises to his face, fingertips brushing lightly over the scatter of freckles beneath his eyes.

“You are touching my face, sir,” Shane exhales, his lips moving softly against Ilya’s palm, leaving a faint wetness beneath his thumb. “Your thumb is brushing under my eye.”

“Yes,” Ilya murmurs, watching him through the mirror. “I love your freckles. They look like...” He pauses, his touch lingering. “Like sunlight scattered through leaves. Soft.”

Shane stares at his own reflection, dazed, as though he’s seeing a version of himself he didn’t know existed, didn’t know he was allowed to notice.

Ilya feels it before he fully sees it - the slight change in his breathing, the way he stills - and when his hand moves, he catches the faint sheen gathering in Shane’s eyes.

“You are massaging my... chest now, sir,” Shane says, slower this time, the words less forced. He wets his lips. “It feels warm. The pressure is... nice.”

“You like it?” Ilya asks quietly.

“Yes, sir.” A small breath. “I like it.”

That draws a soft smile from Ilya. “So good for me, Shane.”

Shane lets out a small yelp the next second. “Sir. That feels sore. Hmm... sensitive.” He throws his head back to rest it on Ilya’s shoulder, his lips parted as he tries to breath through the sudden movement of Ilya’s fingers, now twisting and playing with his left nipple.

“What feels sore?” Ilya smirks, leaning his head against Shane’s now to press him firmer onto his shoulder.

“My nipple, sir.” Shane’s voice is breaking a little as his breath quickens. “Please, sir.”

“Please what? More?” He doesn’t wait for the answer before he adds more pressure, pinching the nipple until it goes pale on the tip.

“Sir.. A-ah!” Shane’s breath stutters, a soft, broken sound escaping him as the intensity builds. He turns his head slightly, as if to hide, his breath warm against Ilya’s neck.

“Eyes on the mirror, Shane, I won’t ask again.” Ilya reminds him. “And tell me what you feel.”

It takes effort, visible effort, but Shane obeys. His gaze drags back up, fixing on his reflection, eyes glassy now, unfocused at the edges.

“Feels intense, sir. Feels good. It hurts, but good. Ahh... thank you, sir.”

His whole body trembles, and Ilya tightens his arm across Shane’s middle, holding him closer, keeping him grounded against him. “What do you want next?” Ilya asks.

“S-sir...” Shane pants softly, biting his lip, his eyes still locked on the mirror like he’s holding himself there by sheer will.

Ilya’s hand stills.

“Tell me, or we stop, little sub.”

Shane’s arms are shaking with effort to keep wrapping around Ilya’s neck. His eyes are locking with Ilya’s in the mirror now, a floaty euphoria rising behind those glassy eyes, “Please, sir. More... there. Please - emm.”

Both of Ilya’s hands come up, closing over Shane’s chest, his grip firm and unrelenting as he works in an increasingly intense rhythm on both nipples now.

Shane’s body reacts instantly.

“A-ah... thank you, thank you, sir!” His voice breaks apart between breaths, his eyes half-lidded, unfocused as they stare into the mirror without really seeing it anymore. “Feels -s good when you, oh...”

Heat floods through him, visible now, his skin flushed, his body restless in Ilya’s hold. He shifts and twists, small, helpless movements, struggling to keep himself upright, to keep his gaze where he’s been told.

Ilya doesn’t let him drift.

His arm tightens around Shane’s middle, strong and immovable, holding him exactly where he wants him. The rhythm of his hands sharpens, more insistent, and he watches closely as Shane comes apart under it, as control slips from him piece by piece.

Sweat gathers along Shane’s brow, his breath uneven, his core tightening in visible pulses, each one pulling tighter than the last.

“Sir,” Shane gasps, the words catching, fragile. “I- I want, can I please, can I come today, sir? Please.”

Ilya rewards him with a sharper pinch, enough to pull a broken cry from him, unmistakably commanding his attention back.

“Good boy,” he murmurs. “Asking so nicely.”

“Not yet,” he adds, “But I will let you today. Can you be good for me and hold on a little longer?”

Shane nods quickly, almost frantically, tears finally spilling over as they track down his flushed cheeks. “Yes, sir, yes, I’ll be good, for you. Aah -”

Ilya eases his hands away, giving him space, letting the intensity ebb instead of driving it further. Shane folds in on himself, eyes squeezed shut, his entire face tightening as he fights to steady his breathing, to come back down from the edge he'd been pushed so close to.

Ilya's heart is melting at the sight. He lets Shane take the moment to recover, not forcing him to look at the mirror right away. It flickers through his mind, almost distantly: when did I start going soft like this?

He finds his answer the next second.

Shane opens his eyes again, searching, and finds Ilya in the mirror without being told to. There's a deep flush high on his face, his lips parted, but it's his eyes that catch - Ilya stills at the sight of them, wide and shining and so unbearably open that it shakes him.

He has gone soft because he met this little sub that submits so perfectly, presenting himself so openly despite the darkest time he had treaded through.

Ilya wants to indulge him. Wants to give, to spoil, to see just how far that openness can go - what Shane might become if he's allowed to want, to choose, to speak. If he can feel safe enough to even brat.

"Sir?" Shane's voice is soft, hoarse, but so sweet. "I - I'm good now, sir. Thank you for the break." A small, shy smile touches his mouth. He adjusts himself on Ilya's body, letting out a soft whimper when Ilya's hands come back to his torso, starting slow but with firm pinches again.

He tilts his head slightly, never breaking eye contact in the mirror. "Sir...?" The curve of his lips deepens, the cupid's bow melting into a smile that's almost playful, "Can I have a kiss, please?"

Ilya devours him.

Firm and immediate, he pulls him into it with a kind of hunger he hadn't meant to show. Shane responds just as quickly, melting into him, his arms tightening where they lock behind Ilya's neck, drawing him closer.

Ilya's hands start moving again, lower this time, letting the hot cock bounce in his palm. His one hand holds onto the heavy shaft, the other strokes it with increasing urgency, finger smearing the tip where precums pool.

Time stretches out. Ilya feels lost in the sweet kiss, where Shane tries to flick his tongue out a little more, giving him kitten-like licks inside his mouth. He suckles on that sweet tongue, letting Shane know how much he likes this.

"Sir -" Shane breaks the kiss finally for air, his breath hitching, "C-can I stop myself? Please - please 'm too close... can't hold."

His eyes shine with tears now, his lips pressed together so tightly they've gone pale with the strain.

"Look at the mirror, Shane. Look at how perfect you are." Ilya nimbles at his ear.

Shane inhales sharply, dragging his eyes to the mirror, and tries to squeeze it shut right away. But somehow he manages to keep it half-open, looking at himself through the glassy eyes.

The view is obscene. Ilya's cock is throbbing in his own pants just looking at it. The head of Shane's cock is an angry red now, leaking steadily onto Ilya's hand. Shane's whole body is so taut that it's shaking uncontrollably, yet he fights to keep it open like an offering, showing every line of his lean muscles to both of them.

"Sir. Please - too much. Please." He is begging with full tears now, his hands still locking together behind Ilya's neck, but clearly it's costing him so much to keep them there, he is fighting every instinct to move them down to deny himself.

Ilya stops his hand. Shane's cock bounces fugitively twice before it stills, erecting fully and still leaking uncontrollably.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir." He pants heavily. "Thank you for helping me." He sniffles, his face red and ruined by his tears.

"Good boy. Waiting for your permission so patiently. Tell me your number, Shane."

Shane sniffles lightly, and then looks at Ilya in the mirror - "Two, sir. I was - was at three. But I'm better now. Thank you - emmf!"

"My perfect boy. That's it, you earned it. Come." Ilya's hands wrap onto Shane's cock tightly again, pumping at a speed faster than before, his arm bracing Shane's body as it inches dangerously close to its release.

Shane looks at Ilya in disbelief, as if he can't trust that he gets to come just like that. He stills for just a second, before his whole body shakes violently as he erupts in Ilya's hand. Ilya holds onto him, hugging him through his orgasm, eyes locking on Shane as he comes so hard that it almost looks like it hurts.

"Good boy. My perfect boy," Ilya murmurs, the words low and warm, sending a faint shiver through Shane's still-sensitive body.

It's going to take him time to come back down.

Ilya exhales quietly, wiping his hand absently on the washcloth he set aside before shifting his focus back to Shane. He guides him carefully, easing him upright onto the couch, one arm braced securely across his shoulders to keep him steady.

But the moment slips.

The warm weight in his hold slides before he can fully catch it, and Shane ends up kneeling between Ilya's legs instead, looking up at him through heavy lashes.

He nudges his forehead lightly against Ilya's thigh. "May I serve you, sir?"

His voice is soft, still breath-worn. His face remains flushed, his breathing not quite even yet - but there's that same eagerness, that instinctive pull to give, when his body is still loose and spent from his first orgasm in forever.

"Shane. Come up here." Ilya's tone shifts, still gentle but firmer, as he reaches down, hands steady as he draws Shane back up onto the couch.

“I don’t need to be served right now,” he says, “I just want to hold you. Make sure you come down safely. I’m right here.”

“Oh.” Shane hesitates, blinking up at him, searching his face. “But sir... I- I won’t drop. I’m okay.”

Ilya shakes his head once, calm but unyielding. “No, Shane. That’s not how we do this.” His arm tightens slightly around him. “Stay with me. Let me take care of you. Clean you up, feed you dinner. Alright?”

Shane nods hesitantly. His gaze drifts, catching their reflection in the mirror, and something in him shifts. His awareness is creeping back in now that the haze has lifted. The flush on his face deepens, a hint of self-consciousness settling in as he looks at himself.

“Okay, sir,” he says softly. Then, after a pause, more tentatively, “I just... want to do something for you too.”

Ilya smiles. “Little sub.” His fingers move through Shane’s hair, slow and soothing. “This is for me. You, like this, with me, that’s the gift. Do you understand?”

Shane frowns slightly, confusion softening his features as he curls closer into Ilya’s side. “I don’t know, sir.”

“That’s alright.” Ilya’s voice drops, gentler still. “You will.”

He presses a kiss to the top of Shane’s head, lingering there for a moment as he feels him relax further into his arms.

“Thank you for telling me what you want,” he murmurs. “You’re doing so well.”

Shane lets out a small breath, his hand curling lightly into Ilya’s shirt like he wants to stay but he’s not entirely sure whether it’s allowed.

His gaze flickers once more to the mirror. This time, he doesn’t look away. His eyes meet with Ilya’s in the mirror. Ilya sees it - the small, startled flicker of being caught, and the wanting to just be held.

Author’s notes on kink-related stuff in this chapter (feel free to skip as usual, not required for plot!)

This chapter ended up being a lot more psychological than physical, and that was very intentional.

Ilya doesn’t go for a more physically intense play here for a couple reasons. Shane has already been punished earlier that day, and physically he just wouldn’t be able to hold something like a kneeling position for long. But more importantly, Ilya doesn’t actually know yet how Shane responds to pain in a controlled, consensual setting. He’s being careful. He’s not going to introduce something like that until he’s sure it won’t do more harm than good.

So instead, the intensity shifts inward.

A lot of what's happening in this scene draws from real-life BDSM practices around grounding and presence. Shane isn't allowed to dissociate or disappear - he's asked to keep his eyes on himself, to name what he's feeling, to stay in his body. When he defaults to language shaped by past humiliation, Ilya gently redirects him. That kind of guided awareness and reframing is something that shows up in dynamics where trust is still being built, especially when one partner has a complicated history with control or shame.

The orgasm at the end is also meant to carry weight beyond just release. In some dynamics, pleasure can be used intentionally as a way to build new associations with the body, something that feels safe, allowed, even cared for. Shane comes from a place where he wasn't allowed that at all, where his body didn't belong to him in that way. So this moment is a kind of reset and a first step toward something different.

That doesn't mean everything is suddenly easy or fully safe, though.

They're still at the beginning of this. And especially on Ilya's side, there's a lot of caution about not moving too fast. More explicitly sexual things (like oral or penetration) aren't something he's ready to introduce yet, not until there's a much stronger sense of trust, safety, and understanding between them. In real-world terms, this is the kind of pacing that often falls under "aftercare-focused" or "trauma-informed" play, where emotional safety matters just as much as physical boundaries.

For now, this is about small shifts. Staying present. Being seen. And starting, very slowly, to rewrite what Shane's body is allowed to feel.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya: *Shows playroom*

Shane: Wait, you're not vanilla?

Shane: Hell yeah

Ilya: Now tell me how you feel

Shane: Do you always do therapy in this fancy playroom?

Ilya: Shut up and be a good boy

Shane: Okay *getting ready to suck dick*

Ilya: No, just let me hold you

Shane: Oh. so you are vanilla.

Shane: I was promised crimes :(

Ilya: You want to just watch a movie next time?

Shane: No sir sorry sir I'll behave

Happy pride!! Bonus chapter today for the last day of Pride Month 

Chapter 9: The contract

Chapter Notes

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

Harris takes the long way on purpose. He needs to inspect his garden like a king inspects his army.

The utility cart bumps lightly as he steers it down the winding path that cuts through the outer gardens, one hand loose on the wheel, the other draped over the side like he has nowhere else to be and all the time in the world to get there. The morning air is still cool, and the sunlight filters clean and gold through the trees, catching on the edges of leaves and the neat lines of hedges trimmed within an inch of their lives.

It looks good.

The gravel paths are freshly raked, not a stray leaf out of place. The rose beds are in full bloom, disciplined into perfect arcs of color that somehow still manage to look effortless. Even the damn orchard off to the side is behaving, rows straight, branches heavy but contained, like it understands it's part of something curated.

Harris grins to himself, a slow, satisfied thing.

People think this kind of order just... happens. Like you plant a few things, water them occasionally, and the rest sorts itself out. They don't see the hours. The pruning, the planning, the constant low-level interference required to keep things from turning wild again.

Harris taps his fingers lightly against the wheel, still grinning. He is in a great mood today.

Not just because Troy has been ~~a beast in the bedroom~~ so attentive to his needs after the short trip with Ilya. That certainly helps too.

But he is on a mission. Because his boss needs him. And he loves helping, he is practically a walking ball of helpful energy.

"He needs some air and sunlight. And to hear about being a human from someone that's not me." Ilya had said. Leaving so much out of it.

He needs to see something that isn't a room.

He needs to experience kindness that doesn't tie to anything.

He needs to learn about a safe play relationship from someone who is not his Dom.

Yeah.

Harris had gotten the message.

The cart bumps lightly as he takes the final turn up toward the mansion, the gardens giving way to the wide, open approach.

He hasn't decided exactly how he's going to pitch it yet. Probably won't, if he's being honest. Better to just show up, make it sound like the most obvious thing in the world, and let Shane trip over the idea of wanting something for himself.

That'll be interesting to watch.

Harris eases the cart to a stop near the backdoor of the house. In the well-manicured patio, those two sit under the grapevines-covered trellis for breakfast. Ilya sits with his usual impossible composure, a cup in hand, while Shane is across from him, shoulders still hunched in slightly but more at ease than the first time Harris saw him.

Just as he gets out of the cart, Ilya pulls out a single rose and holds it in front of him, saying something that makes Shane blush. Oh, Ilya the lover boy.

He walks over briskly, calling out "good morning" as he approaches. He points at the rose, bright and entirely too pleased with himself, "Tell me you used scissors for that, and didn't just snap it off like a savage."

Harris knows better. With most Doms - especially with *him* - his tone would be more measured and respectful. His boss, in particular, has little patience for anything that even hints at carelessness or poor manners.

But this is his garden. These are his roses. And even the strictest Dom he knows has never once mistaken where Harris's authority lies in his garden.

Shane is looking at him with those large doe eyes that always look a little startled. His hand reaching for the rose freezes mid-air, as if he isn't sure whether accepting a rose from a savage is acceptable.

"It's okay, Shane. You can take it. The rose won't hold a grudge against you." Harris says as he looks at Ilya disapprovingly.

"Good morning to you too, Harris." Ilya chimes in, not too bothered - he is the one asking Harris for a favor anyway. "What brought you here? You are driving the heavy utility cart today. Are you planning to go somewhere? Do you need a helper?"

Harris rolls his eyes. Can his boss be more obvious? There goes his plan to just show up and make it look casual.

"Yeah, actually yes. I need to - " Harris pauses just enough to pretend he's thinking, "Check on the peach rows. We've got a few branches getting too heavy, and if I don't thin them out they're going to start splitting."

He jerks a thumb back toward the cart. "Also need to pull a couple of crates, pick anything that's ready, toss the ones that are starting to go. Usual glamorous stuff."

Ilya hums into his cup while sneaking a peek at Shane.

Harris pointedly ignores him. He shifts his attention to Shane instead, tone easing just a fraction.

"It's not complicated," he adds. "But I could use another pair of hands. If you are free today. Plus, you get first pick of anything we harvest. Perks of the job."

Shane blinks, clearly unsure what to do with that.

“You want to go, Shane?” Ilya asks while he chews. So much manners for a man of status. And just before Shane can ask for permission, he adds, “Your call. You can decide how to spend your day.”

“I... can help.” Shane says, slightly startled by the sudden grins on Ilya and Harris’ faces. “Can I finish my breakfast first?” He asks carefully.

“Oh definitely. I will be in the cart. Enjoy your breakfast with your lover boy, no rush at all.” Harris bounces away, feeling Ilya’s glare on his back. Shoot, did he say that out loud?

A few minutes later, Shane is sitting stiffly in the passenger seat of the cart.

Harris doesn’t look back when he starts the engine, just lifts a hand out to the side in a loose wave as they pull away, knowing without checking that Ilya is still standing there, watching them go.

The gravel crunches under the tires as they leave the mansion behind.

The orchard opens up ahead of them in neat rows, branches bowed with the weight of ripening fruit. The air shifts as they approach. It’s warmer, sweeter, carrying that soft, almost syrupy scent of peaches just past perfect.

Harris parks at the edge and kills the engine.

“Alright,” he says, hopping down. “Field trip rules. Always wear these.”

He moves to the back of the cart, pulling out a pair of gloves and a lightweight protective jacket, shrugging it on with ease.

“It’s annoying to wear in the summer, but it’s in my contract to take care of my body - easier said than done for my job. Troy gets so mad when I get even a small cut.” He sighs but can’t hide the pleasant look on his face.

Shane blinks. “Your contract?”

“Yeah.” Harris tugs the gloves snug over his hands, flexing his fingers. “Troy and I have been living together for two years now. It’s not casual play anymore. So when I moved in, we made a TPE contract.” He glances over, measuring how much to say. “That’s Total Power Exchange. Means we don’t switch it off just because we’re not in a scene.”

He grabs another pair of gloves and a jacket and tosses them lightly toward Shane. “Did Ilya mention a contract to you?”

Shane catches them with ease. “He did. But he said it will take time for us to figure out.”

Harris lights up immediately, clasping his hands together once, sharp and excited. “That’s great. This is the part where you make him promise you things. Start it right, yeah? We always review and modify - but some things are important from the get go.”

They start down the first row together, branches brushing lightly against Harris’s shoulder as he reaches up, testing the weight of one heavy limb.

“You have to put things you don’t want in there from the beginning,” he adds, as he twists a peach free and drops it into the crate.

Shane swallows. “Yeah, Sir asked me several times about... limits.”

“Ilya is great,” Harris says easily, stepping up onto a low support to reach higher branches. “I know he’ll do things right. He may seem strict and scary, but he cares a lot about keeping things fair. More than most.”

Shane looks at Harris, confused. “He is the kindest Dom I know.”

Harris almost drops the peach in his hand. He turns, staring. “Ilya Rozanov?”

The same Ilya with the reputation, the presence, the way even the most experienced Subs straighten when he walks into a room?

Harris huffs out a disbelieving laugh and shakes his head, turning back to the tree. “I’m glad that’s the version you get.”

There’s a small pause, filled with the soft thud of fruit landing in the crate and the faint rustle of leaves.

“Can I really put anything as a limit?” Shane asks.

“Yeah. Absolutely.” Harris crouches to check a lower branch, fingers quick and efficient as he snips a weak offshoot. “One of mine is that Troy can never call me degrading names in front of other people. Bedroom? Love it. Public? Not happening.”

Shane goes very still.

Harris notices immediately. “Sorry. Too much information?”

“No - no.” Shane shakes his head quickly, eyes dropping to the peach in his hands. “I was just thinking along the lines of... maybe don’t cut my fingers off, or burn my eyes, when I’m bad. That makes me really scared.”

Harris freezes this time.

“So maybe,” Shane eyes him nervously, testing, “he can say he will do it, but not really. Or only cut a little and let it bleed. So I can learn my lesson.”

There’s a long, heavy silence.

“No,” Harris says finally, very firmly. “Shane, no. That’s not play. That’s torture. It’s illegal.”

He takes a step closer without thinking, eyes scanning Shane’s hands, counting - one, two, three... Ten. Only when he finishes does he breathe again.

“Did someone try to do that to you?”

Shane lowers his head, thumb brushing absently over the fuzzy skin of the peach. “No,” he says after a moment. “But I have seen it done.”

The orchard feels different now. Too quiet.

“I was careful,” Shane adds. “I tried to be very good.”

A flurry of tightness and anger settles in Harris’s chest. “Oh, Shane,” he says, softer. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Shane smiles, small and practiced. “It’s been a while - my last house was actually not bad. And sir... no one has ever treated me so well before.”

“You know Ilya would never do anything remotely like that,” Harris says, turning back to inspect the peach tree, fingers brushing over a branch before he glances at Shane again. “You know that, right?”

Shane nods, but it’s not as firm as Harris would like. Harris’s expression shifts immediately, almost alarmed.

“Sir has been so kind,” Shane adds quickly, the words rushing out. He swallows. “I... I know it’s stupid. But -” He trails off, looking away.

Harris turns to face him fully now, stance settling, attention locked in. The look he gives him is patient but unyielding - *we’re not moving on until you say it*.

Shane’s gaze drops to the dirt.

“But before I was... sold,” he says quietly. “When I was in the ring, there was this Dom. He was so nice to me.” His voice softens, pulled backward. “He would patch up my wounds. Hold me when I thought I wouldn’t make it. He told me how good I was... and he promised he’d take me away. That I’d be a proper sub, if I just survived everything they did to me. So I could learn and be the best.” He lets out a small breath. “He said he only buys the best.”

A faint, brittle smile touches Shane’s lips. “I thought he was a buyer. I didn’t even question why he was there all the time.” His voice tightens. “I just... wanted to leave. I didn’t want to stay in the ring and...” He cuts himself off, jaw tightening. “and lose my fingers, or something else.”

Harris goes very still. There’s a branch in his hands. He doesn’t remember picking it up. It snaps. Once. Then again. By the time he realizes what he’s doing, it’s already in pieces. He tosses it aside.

“And the bastard was lying,” he says flatly.

“Yeah.” Shane’s smile flickers, fragile. “The week before I was sold, they put me on a stage. To show how good I was.” He takes a shaky breath. “I was so hopeful when he walked onto the stage. I thought that was it - that he’d collar me, take me away.”

“But... that didn’t happen.” His eyes close briefly. “Something a lot worse did.”

The orchard falls quiet around them, leaves shifting softly in the breeze.

After a long moment, Shane lowers his head. “Sorry, Harris. I know that’s... definitely too much. I just...” He hesitates. “I couldn’t tell sir this. But sometimes when he’s kind to me, I think of that Dom instead.” His voice drops, ashamed. “And I hate that. I hate myself for it.”

He doesn’t see Harris move. He just suddenly finds himself pulled into a hug.

It's different from Ilya's hold, less commanding, less possessive. Harris's arms are steady, grounding, gentle without hesitation. Solid in a way that asks for nothing back. He smells like sun-warmed leaves and fruit, like the orchard itself.

"You don't get to hate yourself for wanting to survive, Shane." Harris murmurs, voice low and firm near his ear.

"You can tell me anything, Shane," he adds more lightly after a moment. "I know life can be lonely in a big mansion like this. You can always come find me in the orchard or the garden." He shifts back a bit, just to look him in the eyes, "I talk a lot, if you haven't noticed."

Shane smiles, and then he continues, "I just figured... if I am allowed to set limits, I just want to feel safe, even though I know sir won't be like that Dom, or any of the Masters I had, I still want to have some assurance. But I - I wasn't sure what I'm allowed to say no to."

Harris's expression shifts, looking more serious. "Everything," he says simply. "You're allowed to say no to everything."

"That's the baseline," Harris continues. "Then you decide what becomes a yes. Not the other way around."

He reaches up, snapping off another peach with more force than necessary, then drops it into the crate.

Shane nods again, slower this time. "Sir said something like that."

Harris glances back at him, then reaches up to adjust a branch, testing its weight before cutting it clean. "Being a sub doesn't mean you are forced to do anything. Ilya will never do that." He tosses the branch away.

"You're there to participate. And the point of the contract? If the terms are broken, you can walk away."

Shane's hand freezes mid-air as he reaches for a peach, "But where would I go?"

"I know that feeling," Harris says after a moment. "When I left my last contract - it was also a TPE, I thought I had nothing. I left my parents house to go live with my first Dom, and I didn't know how to live a life on my own. It felt like the ground disappeared under me."

He nudges a fallen branch aside with his boot.

"But it didn't," he continues. "I found work here. Built something again. Met Troy." A small, fond smile flickers. "Turns out I'm still... me, even without a shitty Dom or a contract."

Shane looks at Harris with awe in his eyes, and Harris blushes at that. "I know it's probably a lot, Shane. But you are in very good hands. You will get to decide what matters."

Once they reach the edge of the orchard, Harris pulls out a blanket from the bottom of a crate to set on the ground. "Let's sit here for a bit. I have water we can use to wash the peaches. Do you like them on the softer side or the firmer side?"

When no response comes, he looks into their full crate, turning a few peaches over and holds out a big one, plump and fuzzy with the most beautiful shade of pink. "This one is probably right in the

middle, if you can't decide."

Shane accepts it gratefully, "Sorry. I didn't eat many peaches before." He quietly says.

"Oh, don't worry. We will fix that." Harris says cheerfully. "Plus, it is nice to have things decided for you, right? Perks of being Subs."

Shane smiles. "What are the other perks to you?" He takes the one Harris is holding and washes it carefully, before giving it back and moving on to wash the one that Harris picked out for him. "I didn't know there are nice things that come with being a Sub." His voice trails off.

Harris watches him for a moment, his expression soft.

"Well, I know, sometimes it seems so unfair, how the Doms just have everything because of their designation, right?" he says slowly, stretching his legs out on the blanket, "But there are some good things about being Subs. for starters? Not having to carry everything alone."

Shane glances up at that.

Harris rolls the peach between his palms before taking a bite, thoughtful. "A good Dom doesn't just take. They *notice* things. Before you even think to ask." He shrugs lightly. "Troy used to - " He pauses, correcting himself with a faint smile. "Still does, actually."

Shane shifts a little closer without meaning to.

"If I worked too long out here, he'd show up with water before I realized I was thirsty." Harris smiles. "He keeps a spare jacket in his car because I *always* underestimate the weather. Says it's easier than arguing with me about it."

Shane's lips twitch.

"And when I push myself too hard," Harris continues, voice steady but quieter now, "he reins me in. Like very firmly - it's hot. Says it matters that I don't burn myself out." He looks at Shane, meeting his eyes. "Because it *does* matter to him."

Shane's fingers tighten slightly around his peach.

"That's the thing," Harris says. "Being a Sub doesn't mean you don't get anything. It means you're trusting someone to take care of parts of you that you shouldn't have to guard alone all the time."

Shane hesitates. "But... isn't that selfish? To just... take that?"

Harris shakes his head immediately. "No. It's only selfish if you stop holding up your end." He leans forward slightly, tone sharpening just enough to be clear. "You still submit. You still communicate. You still take responsibility for yourself where it counts. You don't just... disappear into it."

Shane nods slowly.

"But accepting kindness?" Harris adds, gentler again. "Letting someone take care of you when they've *earned* that trust?" He nudges Shane lightly with his shoulder. "That's the whole point of that relationship."

Shane looks down at the peach in his hands, thumb brushing over the pink skin.

“...Sir brought me tea last night,” he admits quietly. “I didn’t ask. I didn’t even realize I wanted it until it was there.”

Harris smiles, small and knowing. “Wow, Ilya Rozanov making tea instead of cracking a whip. That’s something I would love to see.”

“I didn’t know what to do with it,” Shane says. “It felt... like I was taking something I shouldn’t. I felt that way for everything he gives me, actually.”

Harris’s voice softens. “Then here’s your answer.” He tilts his head, making sure Shane is really listening. “You say thank you. You drink the tea. And you let him know how you appreciate the care. Doms eat up an appreciation like that.”

Shane swallows.

“As long as you’re being a responsible sub,” Harris continues, “as long as you’re honest and trying and not taking advantage of that care, then you’re *allowed* to have it.” A small pause. “You’re supposed to.”

The breeze shifts through the orchard, carrying the warm scent of fruit and leaves.

Shane takes a bite of the peach, slower this time.

“...It’s good,” he says, a small smile appearing on his face.

Harris grins. “Told you. We’ll fix that ‘never had peaches’ problem in no time.”

Shane is quiet for a moment after that, gaze lingering somewhere past Harris’s shoulder, thoughtful.

“...Can I ask you something?” he says finally, voice careful again. Polite.

Harris glances at him, immediately attentive. “Of course.”

Shane hesitates, turning the peach slowly in his hands. “Have you... seen how Sir is, before? With his subs, I mean.” A small pause. “Like this.”

“I’ve known Ilya a long time,” Harris says slowly. He exhales through his nose, thoughtful. “But... no. Not like this.”

Shane looks up, something flickering in his eyes.

“I’ve seen him with subs, sure,” Harris continues. “Short-term contracts. Events. He hosts a party every year and he frequents this club in the city before... you got here.” He shrugs lightly. “He’s always been controlled and respectful. He does things right.” A beat. “But I’ve never seen him take in a long-term, live-in sub before.”

Shane goes very still.

“...He’s picky,” he says quietly, more to himself than to Harris.

Harris nods like it’s the most obvious thing. “Yeah. He is. He gets to be.”

Shane's grip tightens around the peach, thumb pressing into the soft skin. "Then... that means he knows exactly what he wants." His voice dips, uncertainty creeping in. "And I," He stops, swallowing. "I don't know if I'm good enough to be that."

Harris studies him, the shift immediate and clear now.

"Hey," he says, a little firmer.

Shane shakes his head quickly, like he's already trying to backtrack. "I just mean... if he's never kept someone before, then there's probably a reason." His gaze drops. "And I... I don't even know how to be a proper sub most of the time."

Harris leans forward slightly, voice steady and grounded. "Ilya isn't inexperienced," Harris says. "He's the opposite. He's been doing this a long time. He knows exactly what works for him and what doesn't."

Shane's fingers curl tighter.

"So if he's doing something different now?" Harris adds, holding his gaze. "That's his choice. Not an accident."

Shane falters a little at that.

"He didn't just suddenly forget how to vet his Sub," Harris goes on. "Or how to set boundaries. Or how to walk away if something isn't right." A small pause. "If you're here, Shane, it's because he decided you were worth trying this with."

Shane exhales, but it's shaky.

"...What if I'm not enough for that?" he asks, barely above a whisper.

Harris nudges his knee lightly. "You're thinking about this like you slipped past him somehow. Like he made a mistake picking you." He shakes his head. "That man doesn't make those kinds of mistakes."

Shane huffs a faint, uncertain breath.

"And if something needs adjusting?" Harris adds, gentler now. "Then you adjust. You communicate. You learn each other." A small, reassuring shrug. "That's the part you're responsible for. Not being perfect. Just... showing up honestly."

Shane's shoulders ease, just slightly.

Harris bumps him again, lighter this time. "And for the record? If Ilya didn't want this - didn't want *you* here," He gestures vaguely toward the mansion beyond the trees. "You wouldn't be sitting in my orchard, eating my peaches and overthinking it."

That earns a quiet, reluctant huff of laughter.

"...Your peaches?" Shane echoes.

Harris grins immediately, some of his usual brightness slipping back in. "Absolutely. Don't let him hear you say otherwise."

A few hours later, with four large crates of peaches stacked carefully in the back, they make their way back in the utility cart.

The orchard gives way to the open grounds again, and then the mansion rises into view.

“Hey, Shane,” Harris says, easy, like the thought just occurred to him. “This was good today. Orchard gets a little lonely, even if I like it.”

He glances over briefly, then back to the path. “If you’re free, you could come out with me again sometime.”

“Oh.” Shane turns to him, and the smile that breaks across his face is bright, unexpectedly so. His eyes catch the light, and for a second it almost knocks the breath out of Harris.

Ah. Harris suddenly knows why Ilya Rozanov is becoming the “kindest Dom ever”.

“I’d like that,” Shane says, then hesitates. “I should check with -” He stops himself, recalibrates. “I mean... I’m usually free in the mornings. Maybe we could make a schedule?” He fidgets slightly with his sleeve. “I like knowing things ahead of time.”

“Perfect,” Harris says immediately, warm, encouraging. “That’s good. Tell him that, put that in your contract.”

Shane blinks. “I can?”

“Yeah, of course.” Harris slows the cart as they near the entrance. “That’s the kind of thing that goes in a contract. Boundaries, control over your schedule, what you need to feel settled.”

He glances at him again, tone softer. “Especially in a TPE.”

Shane nods slowly, turning that over.

“Thanks, Harris,” he says after a moment, more quietly now. “I was feeling a little... lost. Since I got here.”

His gaze drifts back to the mansion as they pull up. “Everything is so nice. Everyone is kind. I just... didn’t know what I was supposed to be.”

Harris’s expression softens. “You don’t have to figure that out all at once,” he says. “You’re doing fine.” *More than fine for someone who went through all of that.*

He bumps the cart lightly to a stop and looks over with an easy grin. “And for what it’s worth? You’re great company. So I’m claiming you for orchard and garden duty when you’re available.”

Shane smiles shyly, shoulders loosening. “Okay,” he says.

Harris hums under his breath as he hands over the basket of peaches that Shane handpicked from the crates.

“Don’t worry,” he adds over his shoulder, lighter again. “Your world’s only going to get bigger from here. We’ll take it one peach at a time.”

Shane steps into the mansion and closes the heavy front door behind him, the solid click echoing softly in the quiet entryway. Just as he bends to slip off his shoes, setting them neatly side by side, footsteps sound from the floor above.

He glances up, and he can't help the smile that spreads across his face when he sees Ilya descending the stairs.

Shane moves without thinking, drawn forward. He kneels fluidly at the base of the stairs, eyes lowering, spine straight.

He waits. The gentle touch comes, fingers brushing through his hair, warm and familiar.

Shane leans into it before he can stop himself, eyes lifting as he does. There's a softness in his expression, open and trusting in a way that still feels new. Ilya smiles down at him, fond and unmistakably pleased, and reaches out with his warm hands to help him back to his feet.

It's become their greeting.

Simple and quiet. The same every time they find each other again after being apart.

And yet it never feels routine.

If anything, it settles deeper each time, intimate and grounding, slowly wiping away the shame and pain that comes with the thousands of times before when he kneels and braces for pain.

"How was the orchard?" Ilya asks, voice warm.

"It was so great, sir," Shane answers immediately, his eyes bright, the words spilling out before he can temper them. "Do you know you're supposed to twist peaches off the branch, not pull them? If you pull, you can damage next year's buds. Harris said the tree remembers."

Ilya hums softly, a small smile tugging at his lips as Shane practically glows in front of him. A sight he wouldn't have imagined just a few weeks ago.

"Oh, sir." Shane's expression shifts, lighting up further as he suddenly remembers. "I brought you some peaches. Harris taught me how to pick the best ones."

He drops back down briefly, lifting the basket carefully and holding it out in both hands like an offering.

Ilya lets out a soft laugh. "I'm sure he knows a lot about peaches."

Then his tone shifts just slightly as he meets Shane's eyes. "Thank you, little sub, for the gift."

Shane's cheeks flush immediately. "I mean, sir, they are your peaches. I just brought them to you." He apologizes quietly to Harris in his mind, he can't work up the courage to tell Ilya they are *Harris'* peaches after all.

"And I like that you were thinking of me while you were away. What did you like about the orchard?"

The flush deepens. Shane hesitates. Because the truth sits right there - Ilya was all he can think about when he was out there.

He looks down, gathering himself.

“The air smells nice,” he says instead, softer. “It’s so fresh and sweet. And Harris is really kind. He taught me a lot.”

“Oh?” Ilya asks, easy, as he takes Shane’s hand and starts guiding him toward the kitchen. “Like what?”

Shane’s fingers curl slightly in his grasp. His stomach tightens nervously. The talk about contracts, needs, and limits had been easy with Harris. He felt safe talking about it with another Sub.

Saying it here feels... bigger.

He takes a small breath.

“Harris mentioned his contract with Troy,” Shane says carefully. “So we talked about that.”

A hint of a smile curls at the corner of Ilya’s mouth.

“Yeah?” he says, tone light, but his attention sharpens. “What do you think?”

Shane’s eyes flash up to Ilya, and then he slowly nods, “I think it’s nice, sir,” he says. “I know a few things I want now.” He swallows, then steadies. “And... I want to have a contract. With you, sir, if you still want that.”

His face is flushed, but his voice holds. His thought flashes back to when Harris told him that a contract is a commitment - it’s a promise for the Sub to provide the gift of submission, and for the Dom to protect that trust. It sounds so nice, and Shane felt a feeling so close to want when he heard that.

Ilya’s smile widens into something openly pleased. “Of course, little sub, I want that too.” he says warmly. “We can work on it today.”

*

Shane gets the folder after dinner that night. A heavy leather one with silver metallic framing, somehow reminding him of the silver furniture in Ilya’s playroom.

“This is the first draft from what we discussed today, little sub.” Ilya says. “Take your time to read it, we will discuss it again and revise, once you are ready.”

And then, as if he sees the anxiety buzzing from Shane, he adds, “Shane. There is no wrong answer, and we can always revisit.”

Shane nods, murmuring a quiet, “Thank you, sir.” before he hugs that folder in front of his chest and gets back into his room.

He curls on the lounge chair by the window, his favorite spot in his room, takes a deep breath, and opens the heavy folder. Three pages are stacked neatly inside.

Agreement of Authority

This document outlines the understanding between the Dominant ("Sir") and the submissive ("the Sub"). It is a mutual agreement built on trust, consent, and ongoing communication.

Entering into this agreement is voluntary. Either party may step away at any time, subject to the terms outlined below.

— This includes me.
If I fail in that,
you are not
obligated to stay.

I. Authority

The Sub chooses to place themselves under Sir's authority within the scope described here.

That authority is not assumed. It is given, and it continues only through care, consistency, and mutual respect.

If it is not upheld, it does not continue.

II. Scope

Sir's authority may extend to the Sub's daily structure, conduct, presentation, and assigned responsibilities.

This authority is not absolute. The following always remain in place:

- The Sub retains full legal autonomy
- The Sub's physical and psychological safety are non-negotiable
- Outside obligations such as employment, legal matters, and health remain respected unless explicitly discussed and agreed upon

Specific expectations will be discussed and adjusted together as needed.

We will discuss specifics together before anything changes.

III. Responsibility of Sir

Sir accepts responsibility for:

- The Sub's well-being while under his care
- Providing clear expectations and consistent structure
- Applying discipline with intention, never in anger
- Providing aftercare and maintaining awareness of the Sub's condition

→ *This is not optional.*

*You will not be
left to manage
things alone.*

Failure to uphold these responsibilities constitutes a failure of this agreement.

IV. Responsibility of the Sub

The Sub agrees to:

- Act within the agreed scope of authority
- Communicate honestly regarding physical and emotional state
- Maintain personal health and hygiene
- Make a genuine effort to meet expectations set by Sir

Perfection is not required. Honesty is.

I mean this.

V. Limits and Boundaries

The following are hard limits and are not open to negotiation.

Physical Safety

No actions that cause lasting or permanent harm. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Cutting or breaking of body parts
- Burns intended to scar or disfigure
- Any injury that risks permanent loss of function, mobility, or sensation
- Any act resulting in irreversible physical damage

HARD Limits.

*Thank you for
suggesting these.
They're staying
as written.*

Psychological Safety

The Sub's psychological well-being is to be protected with the same seriousness as physical safety. The following are not permitted under any circumstances:

- Solitary confinement or enforced isolation used as punishment
- Food-related punishments, including restriction, deprivation, or starvation
- Degrading or dehumanizing language intended to strip identity, such as "slave"

Any form of psychological harm, coercion, or degradation that undermines the Sub's sense of self is considered a violation of this agreement.

*If something
else comes up,
we add it.
No hesitation.*

Exclusivity

The Sub will not be shared. While under this agreement:

- The Sub will not be expected or required to submit to another Dominant
- No aspect of the Sub's role will be delegated to another party without explicit prior discussion and consent

VI. Correction

Discipline, if required, will be:

- Proportionate
- Clearly connected to behavior
- Delivered with the intent to guide, not harm

The Sub retains the right to stop any interaction at any time.

VII. Safeguards

A safeword and/or non-verbal signal will be established and respected immediately.

No authority granted within this agreement overrides the Sub's right to withdraw consent.

There are no exceptions to this.

VIII. Duration, Review, and Continuation

This agreement begins with a trial period of 30 days.

During this time:

- Either party may end the agreement without penalty
- Regular check-ins will be held to review expectations, well-being, and compatibility

Continuation beyond the trial period must be explicitly agreed upon by both parties.

After the Trial Period

Once the agreement continues beyond the trial phase, the following terms apply:

- If either party breaks the agreed terms or violates established boundaries, the other party may end the agreement immediately, without penalty
- If the Sub chooses to end the agreement without any breach of terms by Sir, they may do so freely and without penalty
- If Sir chooses to end the agreement without cause or without breach by the Sub, he accepts responsibility for that decision and will provide financial severance, as well as a defined period of continued care to ensure the Sub's stability and well-being during the transition

— We talked about making this equal. I don't think it should be.

During this period:

- The Sub will not be left without structure or support abruptly
- Living arrangements will be maintained or responsibly transitioned
- Care, communication, and oversight will continue until the Sub is in a stable position

— You take on more risk here. This is meant to account for that.

This responsibility is not symbolic. It is to be carried out with the same seriousness as the agreement itself.

Please consider this and we can discuss more.

— If I end this, I do not disappear.

Shane reads it slower than he expected to.

The first thing that strikes him is just the weight of it - the paper, the structure, the fact that Ilya took the time to write something like this for him. He has never had one before. He knows there was a Slave Contract from his previous life, but all he'd been allowed to do was press his thumbprint to it. He never had the chance to process what was on the page.

He goes back to the beginning twice. The handwritten note in the margin catches him off guard. *This includes me. If I fail in that, you are not obligated to stay.*

A voice inside him screams *But I will never want to leave.* He pushes it down and keeps reading.

By the time he reaches the section on hard limits, his throat feels tight. They're all there - his worst fears, the things that still haunt him, the terrible things he'd trade almost anything to avoid.

The language isn't softened or negotiated down. Just accepted at face value.

They're staying as written.

Shane exhales. His heart feels lighter suddenly, like a cloud that's shrouded his mind for ages has finally lifted. Maybe he really will be safe here. Maybe the horrible things won't happen again, not if they're written down like this.

He traces the edge of the page with his thumb, a nervous habit, eyes flicking between the printed text and Ilya's notes. The tone of them is firm, but never dismissive.

You will not be left to manage things alone.

It's a promise. *My Dom is making me a promise.* And it isn't just something said in the moment to get him to behave, to cry less, to take more.

It's written down. A protection that will always be there.

He swallows, then keeps going.

When he reaches the final sections of the contract, unease creeps in as his eyes catch on the clause about ending the agreement. He reads it once, then again, slower this time, as if the meaning might shift if he gives it enough attention.

The logic makes sense - it really does - and even Ilya's note beside it, *You take on more risk here,* feels so fair, so carefully considered, that it almost makes it worse. There's nothing hidden in it, nothing he can point to and say *this is wrong.*

And Ilya has already explained it, told him it's standard, told him he'd never make that decision lightly.

Shane believes him. But belief does nothing to quiet the small, ingrained part of him that keeps circling back to the same thought, turning it over and over until it wears smooth and sharp at once:

He might disown me.

His grip tightens on the page without him realizing it, the paper bending slightly under his fingers as a familiar dread rises in his chest. The memory of what it feels like to have something taken

without warning.

For a moment, Harris's voice slips back into his head, talking about the end of his last contract. *"I thought I had nothing... it felt like the ground disappeared under me."*

Shane's mouth presses into a thin line, because Harris had somewhere to fall back to, people who would take him in, a life that still existed outside of what he'd lost.

Shane does not.

The realization doesn't come suddenly. He has always known that. But now it's materialized on a page, sharpening into something he can't look away from, so heavy and undeniable.

If this ends, there is nothing waiting for him on the other side.

And worse than that, shame rises in him, because the thought that follows feels too honest, too dangerous to hold onto comfortably... He doesn't want there to be anything else. He wants to just be here.

He's getting too comfortable with a life he did nothing to earn.

Or maybe it isn't comfort at all. Maybe it's just what it feels like to be given something that he doesn't deserve, and realize, too late, how much it would cost to lose it.

Shane lets his grip loosen, carefully flattening the page again, and when he finally closes the folder, he does it gently, like the three pages carry the weight of his life.

All of this is so new to him; not just the structure or the words on the page, but the way Ilya has taken what he says and treated it like it matters, like it deserves to be written down, annotated, returned to him as something solid instead of something conditional.

Shane draws a slow breath and lets it out again.

"...Okay," he murmurs under his breath, the word tentative at first, because he isn't entirely sure he believes it.

He pauses, then says it again, steadier. "Yeah. Okay."

Because even with the risk, even knowing exactly what he stands to lose, this is still more than he's ever been given before - more than he ever expected to have.

Don't mess it up, Shane, he tells himself. This is something he can do. Be good. Follow the rules. And maybe, maybe, Ilya will let him stay.

Author's notes on kink-related stuff

In real-world BDSM practice, a Total Power Exchange (TPE) is less about "giving away control" and more about clearly defining how power is negotiated and continuously consented to. Most agreements include things like negotiated limits (hard and soft), safeword systems or non-verbal signals, consent boundaries that can be revisited at any time, aftercare expectations, check-in

schedules, and day-to-day structure (what authority actually looks like in practice). They also usually spell out confidentiality and a clear termination clause - because even in very intense dynamics, either person needs to be able to step away safely and without justification.

In this story, that same clause becomes the emotional pressure point for Shane. Ilya and Shane's contract includes all the standard protections, but the idea of a termination clause hits Shane in a very specific way. For him, leaving isn't just a neutral option. It reads as abandonment, because that's how his past experiences have trained him to interpret separation. So when the contract explicitly states that either of them can walk away, it doesn't feel like safety, it feels like instability.

The irony is that the clause is actually what makes the dynamic safe. But for Shane, learning that "you are allowed to leave" doesn't automatically mean "you will be left" is uncomfortable and slow. It forces him to separate independence from rejection, which is new and honestly a bit frightening for him.

Chapter End Notes

Harris: Ilya making tea! I could blackmail him for a raise

Troy: you could also be made to disappear

Harris: that's right. who'd he send after me?

Harris: oh, it's you, dangerous, bad, sexy sir. what would I have to do for you to spare my life?

Troy: ... you won't survive me you little freak

Chapter 10: A better kind of hurt

Chapter Notes

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

Shane jolts awake early in the morning.

The medication has helped. It knocks him out soon after he takes it, pulls him under fast and deep. For a few hours, there is nothing - no dreams, no fear, just a heavy, blank sleep. Eventually, though, something usually slips through. A fragment of nightmare catches hold of him and drags him back up, heart racing, lungs tight, the echoes of it still clinging to his skin.

He hasn't been hiding the nightmares from Ilya anymore. Not after the last time when he was made to hold position, to stay still and *pay attention* to his body. The lesson had carved itself in too deep to ignore.

The pain and the exhaustion during that lesson had been bearable. He had endured far worse. He might have passed out if Ilya had made him kneel longer, but it hadn't been *scary*. There were no threats waiting at the edge of failure - no snapping chains, no barking dogs thrown too close to his face, no blade pressed just out of sight to remind him what disobedience cost. It was just a boundary and something to learn.

It had been so fair. And in those minutes, Shane had learned more about what it meant to listen to his own body than he had in his entire life.

The nightmares now feel less like dreams and more like memories. His suffering loops in vivid, brutal detail - fear sharp and immediate, pain bright and inescapable - until something in his mind snaps tight and forces him awake.

But he always wakes up *here*. In his soft, warm bed. In clean sheets that carry the faint, familiar scent of detergent. His eyes adjust, reaching automatically for the small clock on the wall - Ilya had taken away the one with an alarm by his bedside, after catching him forcing himself awake just to be up in time for breakfast.

So now Shane just looks and counts the hours he was able to sleep. Five hours, sometimes six. It's more sleep than he's had in years. More consistent, too. His body is starting to trust it, little by little.

But tonight is different.

The dream dissolves slowly as pain lingers. It threads through him, under his skin, humming in a way that makes his breath hitch even as sleep loosens its hold. It feels familiar.

Shane wakes with a strangled inhale, the last echo of it still ringing in his ears, and for one disorienting second he doesn't know where he is, only that his thighs are tense, his back arched slightly off the mattress, his body caught in the aftermath of something it should not have wanted.

Heat pools low in his stomach. Sticky. A faint smell of something way too familiar.

Oh. Oh. No.

His breath stutters. He curls in on himself instinctively, one hand fisting in the sheets. The room is all the same - dark and quiet, safe with the scent of summer nights.

But his body had answered.

A dream. It had just been a regular nightmare where he braces through pain and fear. But there was a voice in the end, calm and measured like always, asking him, "Shane, what is your number?"

It hits him like a huge wave over his overwhelmed body, dragging him down and snapping everything he held up until that point.

Shane takes a shaky breath. He has come, from a dream of pain, without permission.

He swallows hard, throat dry, pulse starting to climb.

He should have stopped it. He should have woken up sooner. He should have...

A tremor runs through him. He presses his forehead briefly into the pillow, shame burning hot and sharp now, cutting through the lingering haze of the dream.

Shane pushes himself upright before he can think too much about it, movements small and careful, as if he might somehow be less of a problem if he moves quietly enough. The air outside the covers is cool against his skin.

He needs to fix this.

Shane stops just short of Ilya's door, breath catching again, uncertainty flickering. It's too early in the morning.

But the thought of going back to bed, of lying there with this in his body, this wrongness, this *disobedience*...

Slowly, Shane lowers himself to his knees.

The hardwood floor is cool beneath them, a dull, grounding pressure that he welcomes without thinking. He straightens his back automatically, hands settling on his back, fingers curling into each other as he forces himself into stillness.

Waiting. It feels... right. At least he knows how to do this, kneeling while waiting for his punishments, turning what he did wrong in his head over and over until it becomes instinct to repeat them when asked.

He fixes his gaze on the grain of the wood in front of him, breathing carefully, counting each inhale, each exhale, like it might keep him from unraveling.

Time stretches. It always goes by slowly in positions like this. Each second lengthens until he can feel it passing over him slowly, painfully. His knees start to ache. His back tenses as he tries to hold himself perfectly still, correcting the smallest shifts before they can become noticeable.

Good. He should feel it. He deserves it.

He doesn't know how long he's there before he hears it.

There is muffled movement through the door. The soft shift of fabric, the creak of the bed. A pause.

Shane's spine goes even straighter.

Footsteps, closer now. The handle turns, the door opens.

"Shane?"

Shane swallows, throat tight, and lowers his head just a fraction more.

"I'm sorry, sir," he says, voice thin but steady. "I need to be punished."

"How long have you been kneeling here?" Ilya's eyes are on him, the attention suddenly unbearable after hours alone in the dark.

"I, I deserve this, sir," Shane says. And then, when nothing comes from above, he adds quietly, "Since about four in the morning, sir."

A hand threads through his hair. Shane flinches instinctively, but then stills as the touch softens, fingers sliding down, tracing his jaw, tilting his head up slightly.

"Count for me."

Before Shane can process the command, a slap lands across his face, jolting his whole body sideways. He loses his balance for half a second, then corrects quickly. This is familiar territory now. Heat blooms sharp across his cheek.

He deserves this.

He looks up through his lashes, lips parting.

"One, sir."

"Close your mouth."

The second strike lands immediately on the other side, sharper, like the first had only been a measure. Shane steadies himself again, turning his face slightly, offering the other side without being told.

"Two, sir." He shuts his mouth quickly.

The sting lingers on both sides now. But he doesn't feel the ringing in his ears, yet, and Ilya lands both strikes with his fingers, so there were no knuckles connecting his bones.

Shane blinks up at him, searching those hazel-green eyes. Is he angry? Disappointed? The realization comes a beat too late that his own eyes are starting to sting, but he forces it down. He can't cry when he is punished for doing something so wrong.

The third strike lands just as hard as the second, and his left cheek immediately flares hot.

"Three, sir." Shane exhales, eyes closing briefly before he tilts his face again, offering the next side obediently.

“That’s one for each hour you kneeled without my permission,” Ilya says evenly. “Now thank me.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shane answers automatically, then falters, a small crease forming between his brows. *What...?*

“Stand up, Shane. Go sit in that chair.” Ilya steps away from the doorway, gesturing toward the lounge chair by the window. His room mirrors Shane’s in layout, just larger, more lived-in.

Shane pushes himself to his feet, legs stiff, and walks slowly toward the chair. It hits him a moment too late that he’s still in his soiled boxers, bare otherwise. He glances nervously at Ilya but sits without lingering. Better to obey before he makes things worse.

He settles into the chair, back straight, hands folded tightly in his lap, watching as Ilya disappears into the bathroom.

When he comes back, there’s a soothing balm and an ice pack in his hand.

Shane’s composure cracks. The heat behind his eyes surges again. He doesn’t mind the pain, and he usually does a good job not crying until it becomes absolutely unbearable. But Ilya taking care of him breaks him every single time.

“I’m okay, sir. I’m sorry,” he mumbles, holding up the ice pack to his face, as Ilya half kneels in front of him, applying the cream to his knees - new bruises already forming on top of the faint ones from the uneven pebbles a while ago.

“You don’t kneel unless I tell you to,” Ilya says, voice calm, focused on the task. “If you keep damaging your knees like this, you’re going to injure yourself, Shane.”

“I know now, sir.” His voice dips. “I was scared... I, I wanted to punish myself because I did something bad.”

He’s sure that once he explains, this - three hours, three slaps - will be nothing compared to what’s coming.

“You don’t punish yourself, little sub. That’s my responsibility,” Ilya says patiently, setting the balm aside once he finishes the second knee.

“Now tell me, how did this happen?”

He stands, his gaze dropping briefly to the ruined fabric of Shane’s boxers.

Shane takes a breath, steadying himself, and starts the explanation he’s been rehearsing since early morning.

“I had a dream again, sir. A nightmare. I was in pain, so much pain. I was scared. But... at the end I heard a voice. Your voice. You asked me what my number was.” His voice softens. “And I wasn’t scared anymore.”

He swallows.

“I woke up and realized... I already came.”

The last words come out quieter.

Shane forces himself to hold Ilya's gaze. He knows better than to look away.

"And you think you broke a rule." It isn't a question.

Shane swallows. "Yes, sir. I didn't have your permission."

A small exhale leaves Ilya, almost soundless. "No," Ilya says simply. "That is your body responding. Not you choosing to break a rule."

Shane's breath comes in shallow, uneven pulls now. "But the house rule - I didn't have permission..."

"You were asleep." The interruption is gentle, but it cuts cleanly through the spiral.

Shane blinks, confusion trapped in his brain with nowhere to go.

"I should have woken up," he insists, still desperate. "I should have..."

"Shane."

Ilya takes a step closer. "Answer me something," he says, voice low and even. "Did you choose it?"

Shane's chest tightens. "No, sir."

"Did you decide you were going to ignore my rules?"

"No."

"Did you make a conscious choice to disobey me?"

Shane shakes his head, small but immediate. "No, sir. I will never."

"Then you did not do anything wrong."

The conclusion settles between them. Shane just stares at Ilya.

"But," His voice cracks slightly. "It felt..."

He doesn't finish.

Ilya tilts his head just slightly, studying him.

"It felt like what?"

Shane's gaze drops again, shame flaring hot under his skin. "Like I, no - my body shouldn't want it, the pain," he says, barely audible.

There it is. Ilya goes still.

"You had a dream," he says slowly, each word chosen with care. "About pain."

Shane nods once.

"And your body responded to it."

Another nod. Smaller this time.

Ilya lets out a quiet breath.

“Shane, look at me again.”

Shane obeys.

“You do not get punished for what your body needs. And you do not get punished for something you did not choose.”

Shane’s lips part slightly, like he wants to test that again, but nothing comes out. Because he doesn’t know how.

Ilya takes one more step forward, closing the distance enough that Shane needs to tilt his head up to look at him now.

“We are not going to fix this with punishment,” he continues, quieter. “But we are going to figure out what you actually need. I would like you to go clean up now, then go wait for me in the playroom. You will sit on the couch while you wait, no kneeling.”

Shane swallows the sudden desire surging in his chest, then carefully nods, “Yes, sir.”

Shane sits gingerly on the couch, a position that still feels unnatural compared to kneeling, so he shifts from time to time to settle his body in a new form.

This playroom is so airy and bright compared to the dungeon that defined his previous life. He doesn’t really fear the dungeons, dungeons to him are like the kitchen to a cook, or a playing field to an athlete. It’s where he shows what he is worth of.

What he fears are the people with him in the dungeons, always coming up ways for him to fail. It’s like playing a sport where the goal post keeps shifting, rules keep changing, and the judges get to whip out something on a whim that might cost him his life.

He remembers going to a horse racing with his master, and remembers longing for the life of the horses where they could just polish their game, perform well, and win a prize. That was never in the book for him.

He was told very early on that the current day will always be the day when he’s valued the most. Every day going forward for a slave is a day that his value decreases, heading for an inevitable fate of being decommissioned eventually. He always tried his best to drag that day out. He hopes Ilya won’t get rid of him anytime soon. With how gentle Ilya is, he hopes that he will last a long time.

The door of the playroom opens and Shane’s body jolts with it. He sits up straight, hands covering his knees. He didn’t bother putting on anything else besides a new pair of boxer and this position somehow makes him feel more exposed than when he kneels.

Ilya walks in carrying a small tray in his hand. Shane’s eyes follow it nervously, then widens as he realizes it’s just breakfast. Two hard boiled eggs, two plain toasts, and a glass of water.

Ilya sets it down over Shane’s thighs. “Eat. And we talk.”

Shane moves on the cue. It's his favorite food. Not messy to eat, easy to digest. His heart flutters as he realizes Ilya must have been watching him when he chooses his food every morning.

When he is mostly done, Ilya says, "Shane. I want you to tell me about the nightmares. Starting with the one last night."

Shane takes the last few bites to formulate what he feels safe to say. He sets down the plate on the small table in front carefully, sitting up straight.

"They are mostly memories of what the masters and their guests did to me. Last night it was when Master Manny had me... sit on a plug, it's large, and sharp." Shane swallows the tightness in his throat. "I was holding onto this loop above me but my arms were giving out and the thing was only maybe half way in." Shane stops a second, breathing shakily.

Ilya reaches one hand to rest on top of Shane's lap.

"So there was so much pain in my... body, and so much straining in my arms too. I know I couldn't hold on for much longer, and I would get hurt so much when I let go. I was really, really scared. There was no way out."

Shane stares at his hands, and Ilya's hand on top of his thigh. "And then I heard your voice asking me the number, sir. It opened a door for me to stop it. Then I woke up."

Shane suddenly found himself in an embrace. The arms around him are so warm, the heartbeat pressed to his ears so strong. He snuffles.

"Thank you for telling me, little sub. So brave." Ilya's voice is straining, shaky, so unlike him. Shane realizes he has learned to take comments like this at ease now. He used to dread hearing about how brave he was, or how well he recovered, because that just meant there was more to endure.

"I wasn't, sir. I was really scared. I just didn't have a way out." He quietly says.

Ilya's hands are in his hair now, gently combing through. Shane leans into it.

"Are all your dreams like this?" Ilya asks.

"They are about different things, sir. Last night was the first time I dreamed about... you." His voice trails off. Then nervously, he adds, "I'm sorry." He doesn't quite understand what he's apologizing for, but his mind dragging Ilya into the filthy world of his seems bad.

"I'm glad I was there for you last night, little sub." Shane's eyes sting immediately. He still doesn't know how he ended up with Sir being his Dom, but if the universe made him go through all he went through to get here, he would do it all over again, ten times more.

"So you were scared, because there was a lot of pain, and no way out of it." Ilya repeats. "Did other things you fear also appear in your dreams?"

As Shane takes his time to carefully think through his recurring nightmares, Ilya supplies, "Things about being confined alone? Or food related?"

Shane gently shakes his head, "No sir. I think they were mostly about pain."

Ilya nods, “And how do you feel about pain when you are with me? When you kneeled outside the other day, and earlier this morning.” His hands come up to Shane’s face, his finger tracing the swollen cheek so gently that it barely touches.

“I- I wasn’t scared, sir. Because I know you won’t hurt me.” Shane says shyly.

“So good for me, Shane.” Ilya looks like he is melting at that.

“Shane. I have a feeling that maybe if we play with pain a little more, in our way, it might help.” Ilya says next. His eyes are fixed on Shane. “It’s not a command at all. But I have a feeling that, your body may need some pain, very controlled ones, to forget about the pain you weren’t able to escape.”

Shane frowns. “But I shouldn’t... want that, right?” It feels wrong to be craving for pain when all Ilya did was showing him how gentle he can be treated. However, his heart flutters at the thought of Ilya inflicting pain on him, a small fire burning in his body right away.

“Well, Shane. Wanting something is different for everyone. And sometimes what’s good for your body isn’t the most obvious thing.”

“Do you want that, sir?” He finally asks.

The question clearly surprises Ilya. “Look at this room.” He says after a while, a smirk on his face.

Shane flushes right away.

“But in all seriousness, Shane, I enjoy seeing my work of pain, but the more important thing is that I enjoy knowing that one would trust me enough to give me the control and let me inflict the pain. That’s a powerful trust. That’s the gift of submission.”

There it is again, the gift. Something Shane still couldn’t think of as is. He nods anyway.

“Sir, can we try it?” Shane finally says. If sir wants it, he will do it. But he can’t say that. Because he already knows what sir is going to say. So he adds, “I want to try it, maybe just once first?”

Ilya brightens up. “Of course, little sub. And we can stop anytime, we will talk after as always.”

Ilya stands up and begins to pace the room.

His gaze drifts over the equipment with quiet consideration, lingering on the spanking bench for a moment, then flicking briefly to Shane’s knees before moving on. Shane follows that glance instinctively.

He almost speaks. Wants to say that he can kneel longer, that the padding on the bench looks soft, that he *won’t* pass out this time.

But the words catch somewhere in his throat.

Instead, something unfamiliar settles in his chest - it feels warm, tight, almost fragile. Shyness.

It’s so new it startles him. Usually, when someone was choosing what to do with him next, all he felt was dread. A slow, sinking certainty that whatever came would be something to survive.

This... isn't that.

Ilya stops in front of the X-shaped cross and gives a small, decisive nod.

"Shane. Strip and come here."

Shane's heart leaps.

The cross is not a stranger. It exposes him completely, with no way to curl in, no way to hide his face or muffle his sounds. He would rather take a whip on his back while kneeling, where he can press his forehead down and swallow his cries into something soft.

Still, he obeys.

He swallows, pushes his boxers down quickly, folding them before placing them neatly on the couch. Then he walks over, head lowered, hands resting by his sides.

"Get up here, little sub," Ilya says, voice low, almost pleased. "I'm going to tie you up and just look at how pretty you are."

Heat rushes to Shane's face. He climbs into position, raising his arms diagonally, spreading his legs to match the shape of the frame.

Ilya's hands close around his wrist.

The restraint is thick, padded, nothing like the cold metal rings that used to bite into his skin. Shane's mind narrows to the sensation: the warmth of Ilya's hands, the careful way he secures each cuff, the gentle pressure as he tests the fit, two fingers sliding in to make sure it isn't too tight.

Wrists first. Then ankles. Each touch feels deliberate and measured. It feels *safe*.

When Ilya steps back, the absence of contact is immediate. Shane shifts slightly, a small, unconscious squirm. Ilya stands in front of him, eyes fixed on his body, something almost mesmerized in his expression.

And suddenly, Shane is aware of everything.

The scars. Every line, every mark laid bare in the bright, natural light flooding the room. There is nowhere to hide them here.

Ilya steps closer again. His hands land on Shane's pecs, squeezing firmly.

Shane inhales sharply, his body going taut as those strong hands move, fingers brushing over his nipples, already tightening under the attention.

"So sensitive here," Ilya murmurs. "I think they want more attention."

Shane's breath stutters.

Ilya steps away, moving to the chest of drawers. A drawer slides open. Something inside rattles softly.

Shane can't see.

He stays very still, trying to listen, to guess. His body braces instinctively, half-expecting the sharp bite of a whip across his back. Even now, the waiting is its own kind of tension.

Ilya returns a moment later. A pair of nipple clamps dangles from his hand, linked by a fine chain to a small ring.

Shane's body tightens immediately. Memory flashes of the clover clamps, of their teeth digging in too hard, too sudden, of his skin splitting and blood seeping through, the slow ache afterward that never seemed to end.

The one Ilya is holding are different. They look less sharp with rubber tips, and adjustable. Ilya turns the screws slightly, testing the tension.

"I will put these on you now, little sub. Number?"

"One, sir," Shane answers.

Even with the memory, the nipple clamps are nothing compared to what he has endured. He grounds himself in that.

The first clamp closes over his right nipple.

A sharp pinch, clean and immediate. Shane draws in a breath, then lets it out slowly, forcing his body to follow. He keeps his eyes open this time, watching as Ilya places the second clamp.

When both are secured, he says quietly, "Thank you, sir."

The pressure settles into something steady. It is present but not overwhelming. Not tearing like the ones that drew blood from him.

"Good little sub. So polite." Ilya smirks.

His hand slides lower, guiding a ring over Shane's still-soft cock.

"I haven't decided if you can come again today," Ilya adds, tone casual, almost thoughtful. "If you beg pretty enough, maybe I will let you." The ring presses snugly at the base.

Shane lets out a soft sound as Ilya lifts the chain and hooks it onto the ring below, connecting it to the clamps. The pull is immediate.

It hurts a little, but not like before. It sharpens his awareness, anchors him inside his own body, a steady thread tying two of the most sensitive parts of him together.

A reminder that he is here.

And he is being held there on purpose, with care.

Ilya steps away again, and when he returns, there is a flogger in his hand.

He gives it a few light swings through the air, testing the weight and reach, the soft tresses cutting through the space with a low, rhythmic swoosh. Shane watches without moving, his body settling into stillness automatically.

A flogger always looks worse than it feels. Unless it comes down hard and again and again, it rarely does real damage.

His eyes fix on Ilya, tracking the movement of his arm, bracing for the familiar pattern - the lift, the arc, the landing.

The first strike lands from shoulder to chest, the impact spreading wide, the tresses wrapping slightly around his side and tugging sharply at the clamp. Shane yelps at the sudden pull, the sensation sharper than the strike itself, but his body remains perfectly still, not even a flinch escaping him.

Flinching wouldn't help. It never has. And he has learned better than to show pain too early.

"One, thank you, sir," he says automatically.

Ilya hums, something approving in the sound. "No need to count this one." A small smile follows. "I have a feeling you can probably take quite a lot."

Shane manages the faintest curl of his lips. "I can take more than two hundred, sir." More than that, really. At some point, the numbers stop meaning anything.

But the answer doesn't seem to please Ilya the way he expects.

The next strike lands on the opposite side, again sweeping from shoulder downward. The chain at his chest gives a faint rattle.

And then they keep coming. The strike are measured and even. Alternating on both sides of this body.

The rhythm builds gradually, until warmth spreads across his upper body, his skin flushing pink beneath the repeated impact.

The strikes themselves are not the worst of it. It's the pull. Each time, the clamps bite down harder, the pressure sharpening as the skin beneath them grows more sensitive.

Still, Shane holds himself steady.

He tips his head back slightly, breath coming faster now, a quiet pant slipping free as one heavier strike lands and the chain gives a sharper jingle.

"Number, Shane."

He wets his lips, grounding himself.

"One, sir."

The pain is intense, but not even bad enough for him to try to float beyond his body yet. And beneath it, the controlled pulling of the clamps is doing something to him... he feels the warmth spreading from his torso down to his belly, coiling low. His cock is erecting forward now, pulling the chain tauter.

Ilya nudges Shane's swollen cock with the handle of his flogger, drawing out a whimper. "Is my little sub liking it that much?"

Shane's face flushes red. Liking the pain still feels wrong, but his cock is mocking his instinct to deny. Plus, he isn't allowed to lie.

"Thank you, sir," he says instead.

"Hmm. Tell me, do you like it?"

Shane hesitates, then forces the words out. "Yes, sir. I like it."

The admission costs him something. His head lowers slightly, a flicker of shame tightening his chest.

"So beautiful like this, Shane."

That's not what he expects.

He braces for something harsher. He is ready to be called a slut, get more intense pain immediately as a "reward", and be used roughly to let him show how much he likes it. But instead, Ilya steps in close.

A hand slides over his flushed skin, tracing across the warmth left behind by the flogger, fingers brushing lightly over the chain, giving it a small, deliberate tug.

Shane's whole body leans instinctively into the touch.

It's so unexpected - gentleness in the middle of impact - that something inside him reaches for it without thinking.

Please. More.

But Ilya steps away.

The loss is immediate. Shane's body shifts, a restrained, helpless movement before the cuffs pull him back into place. He blinks hard, trying to clear the unfamiliar longing in his head. *Get it together, Shane.* He tells himself.

When Ilya returns again, there is a wooden cane in his hand.

Shane's eyes widen despite himself.

"I know," Ilya says, almost amused. "This one stings."

He runs a finger lightly along its length, as if demonstrating the path it will take.

"But you've been taking the pain so well," he continues, voice calm. "And I don't think the flogger is quite enough for my little sub."

"Count this one for me. I will give you ten. Five on each thigh."

The first strike lands without warning, about a palm up from his left knee. Shane inhales sharply, his body tightening as the sting follows a heartbeat later, bright and precise.

"One, sir." He says evenly as he rides out the wave.

Ilya has been precise. It's not a gentle hit but very controlled, a flick of his wrist instead of a wild swing.

Ilya walks a few steps to the right side, and without much ceremony, the second strike lands at the same height on Shane's right thigh. It feels even now, both of his thighs stinging and warm, a numbness radiating from the two perfectly level strikes.

"Two, sir." Shane says. The controlled, even pain chases some of the confusion in his brain away, allowing him to focus on the next ones to come.

The rhythm shifts.

The next three come in quicker succession, all on the same side, each placed slightly higher than the last, building upward.

Shane squeezes his eyes shut, breath catching in short pulls as the sensations layer, stacking into something heavier, harder to separate.

When the strikes stop, he forces himself to speak.

"Three, four... and five, sir."

The pain lingers, spreading outward, a deep, stinging warmth that doesn't fade. Only then does he realize tears have slipped free, tracking down his face.

"What's your number, Shane?"

The voice cuts through clearly. Something in it echoes the dream, the memory of being trapped, of being called, of being seen.

Shane's cock bounces at that.

"One, sir. Thank you, sir."

And the words are true. The pain is intense, but it isn't something to escape. It lifts something inside him instead, loosens the tight knot that has always bound pain to fear.

The next three land on the other thigh, just as precise, just as controlled. The sensation climbs suddenly, tipping past a threshold he can't contain. Shane throws his head back, his eyes squeezing shut. He doesn't bother to struggle, knowing the restraints won't give.

When he comes back from it, Ilya is looking at him intently. Shane gets lost in those intense eyes for a moment.

"Count, little sub." Ilya reminds him.

"Six, seven, and eight, sir. Sorry." His voice breaks as he tries to ride out the increasingly intense heat in his thigh.

"And what's your number now?"

Shane closes his eyes, listening inward.

“Two, sir. I can take more.” He curls his lips into a smile as he looks at Ilya. It’s an invitation to hurt, when he is in the most exposed position, riding out pain that is climbing no longer linearly. Shane doesn’t understand why he gives the invitation, only that he wants to be good for Sir, and take all he says he will give him.

Ilya’s expression is serious, not tempted by the seducing smile that Shane is trying to form. He steps in, placing two fingers on top of the last strike, eyeing the location where the last ones should land.

It’s going to be high up on the thigh, which means it will hurt a lot. Shane finds himself flexing his legs to prepare for it.

Crack.

A blinding whiteness flashes across Shane’s mind. His body goes taut with strain, and he shuts his eyes to swallow the scream in his mouth. He hears light jingling of the metal parts on the restraints as his body trembles.

“Nine. Sir.” He says as evenly as possible after a while. He feels the sweat beading on his forehead sliding down his face.

Another crack on the other side follows immediately. “... Mmgh. Ten, sir.”

His mind is so blank now. The pain washes away every ounce of thought like waves erasing prints in sand, leaving nothing stable enough to hold on to. There is a pause in the air, a suspended stillness, and he lets himself breathe through the pain, through the emptiness around it.

Then he feels a hand in his hair, firm but not violent, tugging just enough to straighten his head.

“Still with me, little sub?”

Shane pants, “Yes. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Ilya’s face is so close now that Shane could lean forward and nuzzle his nose against his chin. But his head is held in place, and Ilya’s other hand is already moving down his thigh, pressing deliberately into the freshly formed marks.

Shane whines at the added sensation. Tears continue to slide down his cheeks, but his mind stays strangely quiet, emptied out by the intensity of it.

The large hand moves slowly, methodically, traveling up his thigh, passing over each of the five marks as if Ilya is studying the shape of his work, confirming it, understanding it. Then it shifts higher still, fingers brushing the inner thigh.

Shane tenses.

Ilya’s hand rests there now, and Shane knows - he must feel them too. The two rows of burn marks hidden in a place that is never exposed, never spoken of. This is the first time Ilya has felt them.

The wager comes back in fragments, disjointed and sharp. His master and the guests, laughing over him like a game. Cigarettes pressed into skin, bets made over how many he could take before he made a sound.

Eight. His master had said. *Take that and I will give you a treat, Shane.*

He had bitten down on his lip until it split, forcing himself through six slow, deliberate burns, holding on to the idea that if he could just endure a little longer, it would stop.

He had been so close, so close to being allowed to break, when another cigarette was placed into his hand. *It wouldn't be fun if it's that easy, would it, slut?* The master had said. *You will do the last two for us. Be a good boy and keep quiet.*

He couldn't help but cry then - still silently, careful not to let a sound out, because too much was at stake. He was shaking his head and begging with his eyes, trying to say that he will be good, please please just finish it. But the master had wiped his tears and asked him again. *Don't keep our guests waiting, Shane. It's your turn to finish now.*

Shane realizes, belatedly, that he is trembling under Ilya's hand. That warm, steady palm is still covering the old burns as if it can measure them through time.

His throat tightens. The smell, imagined or remembered, of burned skin seems to crawl back into his senses, faint but undeniable.

He hears Ilya's breathing shift, heavier now, the silence stretching between them.

Then the hand moves on, crossing to the other side, tracing over the fresh welts there with the same slow attention.

Shane exhales, shaky.

"You took the pain so well, Shane. Can you tell me how you feel?"

Shane draws in a careful breath, forcing his expression into something that resembles calm and gratitude. A practiced smile settles on his face.

"Good, sir. So good."

Thank you for not asking about the marks.

"Good, little sub. I'm going to take these off now."

Ilya gestures to the clamps.

Shane braces instinctively, because he knows the sting when blood rushes back can be sharper than the pull itself. But more than that, he feels a strange relief - his mind finally allowed to shift its focus away from the intensity of memory holding him too tightly in place.

He bites his lip, eyes tracking nervously as Ilya moves to loosen the clamps. The sting comes exactly as expected, sharp and immediate, but he still lets out a surprised whimper when Ilya leans in and presses his tongue to one nipple right after it is freed.

It is soft at first, almost testing, a slow flick of warmth that circles the sensitive skin where the clamp had been.

Shane's whole body jolts.

A tremor runs through him far stronger than the flogging or the cane had drawn out. “Ha-ah, sir,” he gasps, trying faintly to shift away, only to feel Ilya follow immediately, turning his attention to the other side with the same deliberate care.

Shane looks down through blurred, teary vision and squeezes his eyes shut at once.

Seeing Ilya this close, gentle and focused to give him pleasure instead of pain, is harder to endure than anything else so far.

“Please, sir,” he breathes, voice breaking. “I, I can’t come again today.” He is grateful for the cock ring now, at least he doesn’t have to rely on his sheer willpower to stop the tidal waves of pleasure surging in his body.

Ilya pauses immediately.

The loss of sensation makes Shane whimper, the absence almost louder than the touch had been.

Ilya’s expression shifts in a way Shane cannot quite read, there is an emotion between focus and restraint, as if he is pulling himself back from a line he had not intended to cross.

Then, unexpectedly, a gentle kiss lands on Shane’s forehead. Ilya steps back.

“My good boy,” he says softly. “Do you not need to come?”

Shane shakes his head quickly.

“No, sir. The pain was already so good.” His voice falters slightly, then steadies again. “Thank you, sir.”

He means it. Or at least, he means what he is allowed to mean.

He is rationing pleasure the way he used to ration food, carefully, instinctively, as if there is a limited supply of safety in the world and too much enjoyment might deplete it. It feels dangerous to let himself get used to this, to let his body learn softness without consequence.

Because all it takes to lose all of that is for Ilya to lose his interests, to step out of their contract, and all the safety, kindness, and pleasure that comes with this life will come to an end.

A few moments later, he finds himself seated on the couch, wrapped in a light blanket, there is ointment freshly smoothed over the welts. Ilya sits beside him with an arm around his shoulders, grounding him without pressure, and Shane leans into him carefully, breathing in the familiar scent of him as if it is the only stable thing left in the room.

Ilya seems distant, thoughtful, his attention still half on Shane’s body, still quietly assessing.

Shane feels the last of the adrenaline drain out of him all at once. He has been awake since four. He has taken pain after pain, sensation after sensation, and now his body is finally catching up.

Distantly, he remembers something that makes his chest tighten.

He hasn’t taken care of Ilya properly today, or ever, really, since they came home.

Ilya always brings him back, always holds him afterward, always makes sure Shane is put back together before anything else matters. But Ilya never takes anything for himself from Shane.

Shane's hand moves slowly, hesitantly, sliding across Ilya's thigh. It comes to rest just beside the shape of him beneath the fabric.

He looks up. Ilya's eyes meet his. His pupils are still a little wide. And his eyes are softer, yet carrying that same restrained attention.

There is definitely want there. Shane can see it clearly, because it is something so familiar that he can tell even in a dimly-lit dungeon or through his teary eyes, but there is also something else underneath it.

Control. Boundaries.

Almost immediately, his thoughts catch on something else. The burn marks. Ilya saw them. Ilya felt them. The permanent marks screaming how imperfect this body is.

His chest tightens at the thought. He feels a quiet, reflexive collapse inward. The familiar shame curling back into place.

Shane's hand lingers on Ilya's thigh for a moment longer. Then he withdraws carefully.

Inferiority, returning like muscle memory.

"Sir, could I take a nap now?" He asks quietly, looking up to the sharp lines of Ilya's face.

"Of course, little sub. You did so well." Ilya says. His fingers hover over his face hesitantly before moving away. "You can nap here on my lap." Ilya shifts to make room for Shane to lie across the couch.

Shane's heart leaps at that. But the voice inside him is getting louder - stop being clingy, ration your happiness before it's too late.

"Sir, would it be okay if I go back to my room instead?" He asks again. He's sure Ilya needs to be somewhere now - it's a weekday morning, a time that he usually is busy in his study.

"Sure, little sub." Ilya smiles faintly. He stands up, "hold on to me." And without much fanfare, he lowers to keep Shane in his arms before lifting him and carrying him out of the playroom. All Shane can hear is his own heart beat and Ilya's heart beat just a thin layer of cloth away. He leans in, fingers curling on the fabric carefully, allowing himself to indulge in this moment before he closes his eyes.

Kind-related notes

- **Slapping safely:** Keep the jaw clenched (Ilya's "close your mouth"). Avoid sensitive areas like ears, mouth, and eyes, and aim for the safer zone between cheekbone and jaw. Palm strikes are generally preferred over backhands because the palm distributes force better and lowers the risk of bone-on-bone impact. This is also where the contrast comes in with Manny

earlier in the fic - his backhands are a lot more careless and punitive compared to Ilya's more controlled approach.

- **Punishments:** Ilya doesn't fully land this one as cleanly as he did during the sleep-deprivation incident earlier in the story. The punishment is a bit more emotionally driven than "corrective," and it's not perfectly matched to the behavior that he wants to correct. Ilya is usually careful, but he's not a robot, and this time he's reacting a bit more instinctively because he's starting to care more than he probably wants to admit. 🧐🧐
- **Flogger vs cane (why they feel so different):** A flogger spreads impact across multiple softer tresses, so it tends to build warmth and sensation over a wider area rather than focusing everything in one spot. It's more about layering sensation than pinpoint sting. A cane is the opposite - it's very focused, very precise, and much sharper because all the force is concentrated into a narrow point. In this chapter, the flogger is doing the "build and overwhelm" job, while the cane is the "clean structure, clean count" tool, which also helps ground Shane when his head becomes too flooded.

Chapter End Notes

Shane: I would like to be normal, you know, not craving for pain so much that I have wet dreams about them

Ilya: Noted, anyway here is emotional regulation via some controlled suffering

Shane: I think I need more regulation please, sir

Chapter 11: Drop and recovery

Chapter Notes

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

The air of the study feels stale today. Ilya has been in here the entire day, he has cracked the window open, and the warm summer breeze has shifted into a cool drift as night falls.

He can't take his mind off last morning, the first pain scene he did with Shane. It mostly went as he expected, Shane taking the impacts beautifully, but something is stirring in his mind, unsettling him since then.

Some Subs show their pains outward. They burst into tears and scream so loudly that each following act ignites a new combustion from all the build up before.

Shane is the opposite. He is so quiet and controlled when it comes to taking pain, hissing quietly and biting his lips, careful to not let a sound out. His muscles contract and relax in a practiced rhythm to ride out waves of sensations until they ebb. Ilya remembers that time when he saw Shane at training, his face was pale as a sheet of paper, tears flowing freely, but the only sound he let out was a quiet "sorry, sir."

His body has learned pain the way an athlete learns strain: he absorbs it, regulates it internally, with the ultimate goal to endure inward and show as little as possible outward. And he wears that skill as a badge of honor. When he beams proudly telling Ilya that he can take hundreds of flogging, Ilya's heart clenches.

He wants Shane to enjoy the pain - he has a hunch that he probably does to some extent. He does not want him to use it as a way to show his loyalty.

What's worse is that, despite Shane's unusual tolerance for pain, it is so easy to undo him with the simplest act of teasing. His body gives up all at once, squirming and twitching, eager to show how much he likes the gentle touches, the soft kisses, and the simplest praises of how good he is.

It will be so easy to take advantage of him.

To take and take and take until he has absolutely nothing to give, and then show him a scrape of kindness to wipe out all the harm. He knows for a fact that Shane wouldn't have one word of complaint even at that point, that he would still crawl to him and kiss his feet and thank him like Ilya is the best thing that ever happened to him.

Because he probably is.

That thought scares Ilya. He wonders if he is inevitably becoming that type of Dom. The ones that society approves because they act with the sense of privilege that comes with their biological designation. The ones like his father and brother, who think they are great Doms because they provide protections for their Subs against the outside, and in return they take everything their Subs can give until they are depleted and used up.

He never had a long term sub that lived with him for that reason. The power imbalance derived from biological submission could accumulate over time. And Shane's situation is the most extreme

of that. Shane has nothing. Everything he has today is from Ilya.

There is no clean way to separate choice from dependence in that equation. No reliable way to confirm that Shane's "yes" is not simply survival shaped into agreement. Every scene feels like navigating without instruments.

It would be easier if it's just playing. But Ilya finds, to his frustration, that his control seems to slip when he is around Shane. He can already count several lines he crossed yesterday.

When Shane knelt without permission, his fury was so intense that he slapped him almost without thinking first. The worry about Shane's health and the anger about his failure to take care of his body - a seemingly easy ask - drove him into a frantic territory where his instinct was to inflict pain to fix the behavior.

He should have explained before he carried out the punishment. He should have given Shane an opportunity to explain. Punishing someone when he is already so scared and confused is never a good idea, yet all Shane did was apologizing profusely to him after. His tears are held back until the moment Ilya offered the bare minimum of care, and then they had fallen like something finally permitted.

He doesn't deserve that kind of easy forgiveness.

And if that mistake was a play hygiene thing, what he did after the pain play was inching towards a dangerous territory of selfish desire.

When he took off Shane's nipple clamps, the heat in his own body had not faded with the scene. It sharpened instead.

He leaned in to tease those reddened, bruised nipples because he couldn't help himself. Feeling Shane squirming and moaning by his touch was intoxicating, and totally wrong. The play was full of adrenaline and endorphin, and taking advantage of someone so flushed with chemicals in his brain is an absolute act of selfishness. He knows how easy Shane goes under. He knows how much he longs for physical touch. And Shane, restrained, overwhelmed, still learning - had so little language to refuse even under normal circumstances.

Ilya knew that.

And he still pushed.

He knew he would have gone all the way if Shane wasn't so controlled about chasing his own pleasure. If Shane had wanted to come, if he had begged, Ilya would have teased him more and probably... raped him.

Ilya shivers at that thought. He would have never forgiven himself if that had happened. How would that make him any different from those monsters that haunt Shane in his sleep night after night?

The ones that burned him with so many cigarettes, just to see how tragically and beautifully he would break down.

Deep down Ilya knows he has earned Shane's trust because he *feels* different. Shane follows him like a lost puppy who found home because no one had ever shown him what a proper home looks

like.

But is he really that different? He knows he's a sadist after all. He feeds on pain just like those monsters, and when he sees Shane quietly taking the pain he gave him, sweat beading slowly on his forehead, his muscles tensing and relaxing as waves of sensation flood through his beautiful body, Ilya feels his attention sharpen, his mind becoming clearer than anything.

He may be slightly better than those monsters because he wraps Shane up after and treats his wounds and carries him to bed. But it's like throwing a treat at the lost puppy after he thoroughly kicked and beat him. Does that make him better, or more cruel because now the puppy trusts him with everything he has?

Ilya opens a drawer to take out a pack of cigarettes from deep inside. He doesn't smoke much these days, but today he needs something to quiet his chaotic mind. The moment his finger touches one, though, the unwelcomed image shows up in his mind - Shane crying quietly, under strong hands that held his thighs open, someone pressing one after another burning tips onto his smooth skin.

He suddenly wants to throw up. He throws the drawer close with a loud bang.

The air in the room feels so wrong.

There are three knocks on his door. It's too late to be Troy looking for him for business matters. It's too soft to be Marta, his trustworthy and fiercely loyal housekeeper, who definitely scared Shane with her dominance when he first got here, but seems to soften towards him nowadays as they get used to each other's presence more - something Ilya didn't know was possible.

There is only one person left that would knock at the hour. And Ilya doesn't know if he's in the right mindset to see him now.

"Yes, come in." He says.

The door opens inward smoothly. Shane's shoulder comes in first, his back pushing against the door to hold it open, a tray in his hands.

"Sir. I hope I'm not interrupting." He says quietly.

"No, come on in, Shane." Ilya suddenly realizes how much he wanted to see Shane. The short check-in after their session was too quick, and he needed Shane's quiet presence more.

"I brought you dinner, sir. You haven't eaten today." Shane sets the tray on Ilya's desk, his eyes lifting to the papers stacked on his desk. "Are you very busy?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No, just..." He doesn't finish it. "Thank you Shane. You can leave it there. I will eat in a bit."

Shane stands in front of the desk now. Ilya wants him to stay, but he isn't sure where the evening might go if he does ask him. Will Shane think that Ilya expects him to do more than just staying?

"Sir." Shane's fingers are twisting the fabric of his shirt now. "Could I.." he says, "would you mind if I stay?" He adds quickly, "I will be quiet."

Ilya can't help but smile. Shane almost never asks for anything - and this one time he does it is to be with him.

“Yes, of course, Shane.” He says immediately, worried that any hesitation would put the wrong idea in Shane’s mind. He points to the daybed along one side of the room, “You can sit there. Do you want a book?” Shane has been using his library in his free time, which is most of his days now.

Shane smiles shyly as he walks around the desk, and sits down on the floor next to Ilya’s chair. “Can I just sit here, sir?” His eyes are shining bright as he looks up.

Shane looks so open and innocent like this. Looking up to him with his big brown eyes, his face glows warm in the evening light.

Ilya reaches out before he can stop himself, fingers brushing through Shane’s hair, soft and silky under his hand.

“Sit on something at least,” he murmurs, standing to grab a cushion.

Shane settles onto it obediently, leaning lightly against Ilya’s leg.

“Thank you, sir.”

“For what?” Ilya looks at him.

“For the scene yesterday, sir.” He says as he nudges his head lightly against Ilya. “It felt good. I woke up today feeling lighter.”

Something in Ilya’s chest loosens. A wave of relief washes over him. It has been good for Shane. And he is coming in to tell him that. This is the Shane just a few weeks ago couldn’t gasp the idea of liking something.

Maybe he has done something right after all.

“How are the wounds, Shane?”

“Not bad, sir.” Shane extends his legs forward and pulls up his loose pants to show Ilya, the welts are dark red, five parallel stripes on each side, but no bleeding. “I can take a lot more, sir.” He says next.

Ilya frowns.

Shane lowers his eyes immediately, “sorry, sir. I won’t talk about that anymore.”

“Shane.” Ilya reaches a hand down to tilt his face up, “I don’t mind you telling me about the past. It could help me.. understand better. What I don’t want is for you to feel like you have to survive the same way now you are with me.”

He looks at Shane intently to make sure the next part lands, “I won’t reward you for taking more pain than what’s good for you.”

Shane nods carefully, “Yes sir.” He adds after a while, “The pain you gave me was good, sir. It’s... within my limits.”

Ilya grins. The first night when he saw Shane flashes back, the proud, ‘there are no limits, sir.’ that broke his heart. “You are the sweetest little sub.” Ilya praises, “learning so well.”

Shane beams on cue. “Sir. I learned more things today when I read. Do you want to hear about them?”

Ilya nods. He is happy that Shane finds peace in reading. He seems to appreciate the remote worlds he finds in books and spends hours in them a day.

“I could tell you while you eat?” Shane carefully asks.

Ilya can’t hide his grin, “Are you giving me a command, little sub?” And just as Shane pales at that, Ilya says, “I’m messing with you, Shane. Thanks for looking after me.”

Ilya watches as the color returns to Shane’s face, a small pout appearing there. He has to suppress the urge to kiss those sweet lips, to devour the perfect curve of that pout that Shane never dared to wear before tonight.

He reaches for the plate, content as Shane settles on the floor next to him, leaning his head on his leg.

“So tell me, little sub, what were you reading?”

Shane shifts slightly beside him, as if organizing his thoughts.

“I was reading this book called *Safe Hands*?” he starts carefully. “It’s a practical manual on power exchange, but also kind of... philosophical?”

Ilya hums, lifting his fork. “Ah, so, it’s boring.” His heart flutters despite the teasing, he knows that book very well.

“It’s in *your* library, sir!” Shane exclaims. He looks up to Ilya’s grin, sighs slightly, and continues, “there was this section about pain.”

Ilya’s hand pauses for a fraction of a second before continuing.

Shane doesn’t seem to notice.

“It said that for some people, pain is not... just something to endure,” he says, frowning slightly as he tries to recall the phrasing. “It can feel grounding. Or calming. Or...” He glances up at Ilya, searching. “Like it organizes things inside.”

“I didn’t know that before,” Shane admits quietly. “I thought it just meant I was... used to it. But it said it’s normal. That some bodies respond that way. That it’s not wrong to... want it.”

The last words come out softer. As if he is careful about admitting that.

Ilya sets his fork down.

“And you think that might be how your body react?” he says.

Shane nods, more firmly than before. “Yes, sir. I think that’s true. Because last morning felt right.”

Ilya’s gaze sharpens slightly.

Shane continues, encouraged by the lack of interruption.

“It didn’t feel like before,” he says. “It didn’t feel like I had to get through it.” His fingers curl lightly against the fabric of his pants. “It felt... good. And after, I didn’t feel empty. I felt...” he searches again, then settles on, “lighter, my mind clearer.”

The word hangs there. Ilya leans back slightly in his chair, studying him.

“And you don’t feel hurt?” he asks.

Shane looks almost surprised by the question. “No, sir. You treated me so well.” There is no hesitation.

“Shane, these are still new concepts for you,” he says after a moment. “I’m the only Dom you have been with that...” He doesn’t finish it. He doesn’t need to remind Shane about those monsters who harmed him over and over again until he’s too bruised to know what it is like to have limits.

“I know,” Shane says softly. “But I can still tell the difference,” he adds. “Between being harmed... and being taken care of.”

Ilya reaches for his glass, more to occupy his hands than anything else.

“When I punished you before the scene” Ilya’s voice lowers slightly, the words more difficult now, “I was acting out of anger, Shane. It shouldn’t have happened. It won’t happen again.”

Shane’s brows draw together, like the idea itself doesn’t quite make sense.

“I’m okay, sir.” He tilts his head, looking up at Ilya with that same open, searching expression. “I didn’t take care of myself. You cared about me, and that’s why you were angry.” he says simply.

Ilya studies him for a long moment, as if trying to point out the flaw in the logic. The gap. The part Shane cannot see.

“...You trust me,” he says instead.

Shane’s answer comes without hesitation. “Yes, sir. You would never harm me.”

Shane leans his head lightly against his leg, content, as if the matter is settled. As if it is that simple.

Ilya lets his hand rest, briefly, against Shane’s hair. He does not say what he is still thinking. He does not say that Shane is placing his trust too easily and he is not sure if he deserves it. He does not say trust like this can be dangerous when given to the wrong hands.

He wants to believe it as well. The loud accusing voice in his mind has quieted, but still lingering somewhere deep.

Shane has settled down quietly by his leg. He looks just like a big puppy like this. Trusting, patient, guarding his owner like he’s the only thing that matters in the world.

Ilya wants to give him more. More care, more protection, more anything he needs to heal. To be worthy of this trust that Shane is giving him so freely. He finishes his dinner in silence, his mind feeling more stable now that there is food and water in his system.

Shane is providing care for him. Something that’s supposed to be his job.

Ilya realizes, the next moment, that Shane hasn't been as relaxed as he looked. He's been watching. Waiting. Once Ilya sets down his utensils, the shift in Shane's posture is subtle but immediate, like he's been holding himself in place until the exact right moment.

A soft shuffle on the floor draws Ilya's gaze down. Shane has already moved, settling between his legs.

"Shane, what are you...?"

Shane's nose nudges against the linen fabric of Ilya's pants, his eyes half closed, and he reaches one hand up to take Ilya's hand, tugging it until it reaches his face.

There's warmth in his expression, making him look soft and pliant, and... seductive.

He flicks his tongue out, slow and deliberate, licking across Ilya's fingers.

A ripple runs through Ilya despite himself. His finger brushes Shane's lips, and Shane opens immediately, taking it in, mouth warm, tongue moving with careful intent.

Shane shuffles closer now. His eyes never leave Ilya's, and his face is getting dangerously close to his crotch. His nose is almost brushing against the hardening cock trapped in Ilya's pants. Ilya growls low under his breath.

"What are you doing? Little sub." Ilya's voice is still controlled, but he knows he won't be able to hold it for long. Not with Shane practically seducing him like this, kneeling in between his legs, looking up through his lashes with those big puppy eyes.

"Please sir." Shane's lips are parted as he nudges in between Ilya's crotch more, "wanna serve you." His fingers come up, resting on both of Ilya's thighs, lightly and methodically massaging them, working their way towards the center.

Shane spreads his own thighs as he inches closer, rocking his hip in the air with small, groaning sounds spilling out of his mouth.

The sounds are soft. His eyes are dreamy. Everything about it is perfect. But something in it feels wrong.

It feels rehearsed.

Ilya's body responds anyway - heat coiling low, sharp and immediate. He hasn't allowed himself to let Shane get him off since bringing him home. He'd decided it was too soon. That Shane needed time.

He hasn't realized how much he wanted it until now. When Shane is presenting himself in between his legs like an offering. Twitching and moaning before Ilya even touches him.

It's really hot, but it also feels off. Performative.

Ilya looks into those dark brown eyes and sees desire, but in addition to that, something underneath that he couldn't quite grasp.

"Shane. Wait." Ilya says, threading his fingers through Shane's hairs as Shane leans in even more, pressing his entire face in his thigh.

Shane doesn't stop. The warm air he pants out breaks through the thin linen pants Ilya is wearing, adding to the heat coiling low in his spine.

"Stop, Shane." Ilya is more firm now, and when Shane nudges in one more time, Ilya holds his hair and keeps him back from his legs, his voice firmer, "I said stop."

Shane's eyes rim red the moment he is pushed away. His hands slowly retract from where they are on Ilya's legs, falling besides his body limply. He lets out a low whimper as his eyebrows crease together.

Ilya is shocked. He looks so *hurt*.

"'M sorry, sir." Shane mumbles. And then he raises his eyes again, as if determined to try one more time, "I have a good mouth, sir. And I... I already prepped my hole." He adds finally, his last words come out very quiet, "You can fuck me dry. We won't need lube. I can take it. I can take a lot."

"Shane. No. I don't want to..." He stops himself.

But it's too late. The words have already landed.

Shane goes still. Blood drained from his face as if he was kicked right in the gut.

"Sir, please," he says, voice unsteady now. "I can be useful. Just... give me a chance?"

His eyes are filled with tears, but he doesn't let them fall. Ilya can't look at those eyes much longer.

"I cleaned myself," he rushes on. "I know - I know you saw the marks, sir. I know I'm dirty. But I cleaned myself. Many times. Just, just use me once? I can be good."

Shane says everything all at once.

Then when Ilya doesn't move, something in him gives. He sinks back onto his heels, gaze unfocused, like he's already bracing for the answer.

Ilya is shocked. His mind can't process the words he hears. All he feels is a strong clench in his heart as Shane slowly breaks down in front of him.

"Get up, Shane." Ilya says eventually. He suddenly feels exhausted and defeated. He thought the evening was taking a better turn when Shane showed up, when he was sweet and said the right things and leaned against him.

But then Shane slipped right back into his survival mode. Ilya would be too naive to think that the dark past is behind them, but Shane has to have learned something, made some progress, right? It's been a few weeks. They have played safely every week. They have shared a seemingly normal, even sweet, life under the same roof. They have a damn contract now.

Shane doesn't move. His eyes are empty and his body limp, reminding Ilya of an abandoned doll. He is still gorgeous like this. Ilya still wants to take him apart and see how he will react, maybe he wants it more now that the pretend sweetness is torn off his face.

Ilya immediately hates himself for that thought.

“I said get up, Shane.” His voice is inching colder. He wants to be patient, he knows Shane deserves more patience. But he feels depleted, and so angry. Not towards Shane, but towards whoever made him like this, and maybe a little towards himself for not being able to fix it.

Shane stands up quietly. His head remains lowered, his fingers twitching by his side. Ilya looks at that beautiful face in front of him, those lips butchered red by his own teeth.

“I had to try, sir. To offer it.” Shane finally says. The words are quiet, but they land so heavily in the room of stale air.

“Those marks on my thigh you saw earlier?” His eyes are empty as the words come out, “I burned some of them on myself. My then master made a deal with me, and he said if I could take all the burns without making a sound, he would not throw me to the hounds that night.”

Shane swallows, “He would let people fuck me, not dogs.” As if he needs to clarify that for Ilya. “So I burned myself and kept quiet. That’s what I offered to get something... nice.” He smiles at that, the irony of that word ringing so loudly in the room.

“Shane.” Ilya knows where this is going. He wants Shane to stop spiraling, but he wants more to just hold him. Tell him it’s okay. It will never happen to him again. That he’s safe here.

“There was a time when I had to get fucked in exchange for food.” Shane continues. “I wanted it so much - getting fucked, because that meant I get to eat after. I wanted it so much that I stopped dreaming about food. I only dreamed about getting fucked.”

“Sir. You don’t let me hurt myself. You give me three meals, the bed, the shower, the library - everyday, for thirty days now - thirty three if we count the days we were at Master Manny’s house. But I haven’t given you anything in return. Sir, I know nothing runs on for free. I have paid so much before for a lot less.”

“And I know this is nothing to you.” His fingers brushing the side of his body defeatedly, Shane frowns as he looks down at himself, as if looking at something inferior. “Because you don’t allow me to serve you after we... play. But this is all I have, and all I know, sir. And I had to try, sir. I had to try, before I owe you so much that I can never offer you enough back.”

Words have escaped Ilya. As eloquent as he usually is, he can’t find the right things to comfort this beautiful and devastatingly candid Shane in front of him now. But his body reacts before he thinks, he stands up, closing the gap between him and Shane, until his arms are wrapped tightly around those shoulders that carry so much that it now seems like a miracle that they are still holding straight.

They fall silent just standing there and hugging for a while.

“Sir. Thank you for hugging me. I like it.” Shane says gingerly. His little routine of telling Ilya diligently everything he likes about this life is so endearing. Ilya would have smiled if he wasn’t still so heartbroken by the things Shane said just now.

“Of course, Shane. And I will hug you more. You don’t have to give me back anything for it.” Ilya says. He knows it gives Shane little comfort, but he has to say it. “Can we go sit down there?”

Shane nods, and then quietly, “Sir, could I have some water?”

Ilya grabs the glass from his dinner tray. It's half empty, but he doesn't want to leave Shane alone in the room. "Here, little sub." He holds out the glass.

"Could you feed it to me, sir?" Shane's eyes are shining innocently as he looks up. His face so open like he hasn't just told the most painful story Ilya has ever heard, a story that was his own life not long ago.

Something loosens in Ilya's chest at that request. He does truly enjoy caring for his little sub. And the way Shane asks just melts his heart. He tilts the glass for Shane, who doesn't break eye contact the entire time he takes the water.

"Thank you, sir."

"Of course, little sub." He sets the glass down.

Ilya takes Shane's hand. "Shane, do you like how I take care of you?"

He gets some eager nods right away.

"And I like that too. To take care of you. I like that you trust me to take care of you. That trust is something you give to me." Ilya says slowly.

The word hangs between them. Shane's eyes flicker, just slightly.

"You don't earn food here," Ilya says, slower now, forcing each word to be steady. "You don't earn a bed. You don't earn the right to stay by letting me use you."

"You already have those things," Ilya adds. "You had them the first time you walked through that door. The moment you accepted my collar."

Shane stares at him, like he doesn't quite understand the language being spoken. "And all I give you... is my trust." He tests it carefully, frowning slightly at that logic.

There's nothing guarded in his expression now. No performance left.

Just that empty, waiting stillness.

It makes something in Ilya's chest twist.

"You think this -" Ilya gestures once, sharp, to Shane's body, to the space between them, to everything he just offered "is all you have."

Shane doesn't answer. He doesn't need to. Ilya's grip tightens just slightly.

"Just last morning you gave me permission to inflict pain on you. Do you think that trust comes free? Because I don't."

Shane looks at him wide-eyed, as if he doesn't see the connection behind those two things.

"I didn't want you to serve me after we played," Ilya continues, quieter now, "because I wasn't sure you wanted it. Not like this."

Shane's brows draw together faintly.

“Not because I didn’t want you.” Ilya says it carefully, every word deliberate.

“I can - I do want it,” Shane says quickly. “I said I do. I can want it, sir, I just, maybe I said it wrong, but I can fix it...”

“Hey.” Ilya’s voice sharpens slightly. His hand tightens just slightly, keeping Shane from pulling away. “Stop.”

Shane goes still again. Breathing shallow. Waiting.

“You’re not saying it wrong,” Ilya says, more carefully now. “You’re... you’re telling me what you think I want to hear.”

“I’m not lying, sir. I won’t lie to you.” Shane insists, but it comes out thin.

“Shane,” Ilya says, softer now, “if we do anything like that... it’s because you want it too. Not because you think I do. Not because you’re trying to be good.”

Shane’s brow furrows. That same confusion again, but deeper this time.

“I said I want it,” he repeats, quieter now. “Isn’t that... the same thing?”

“No.” Ilya exhales, scrubbing a hand over his face briefly before looking back at him. “No, it’s not the same.”

He hesitates. This part feels harder than it should.

“Shane, tell me this. When - if we get intimate, what do *you* get out of it?” he asks finally.

Shane freezes. Not the same way as before, not startled into stillness, but... blank.

“I...” Shane falters. His mouth opens, then closes again. “I get to make you feel good,” he says after a moment, uncertain now. “Because I’m good at it, sir.”

Something in Ilya’s chest twists sharply. “That’s not what I asked. I’m asking about you, Shane.”

Shane’s hands curl slightly in his lap. He looks down.

“I don’t know,” he admits, so quietly it barely carries. “It doesn’t matter to me, sir. I just want to make you feel good.”

The words settle heavy between them. Shane is offering something he’s not even inside of.

Ilya’s hand shifts again, gentler now as it cups his jaw, guiding his face up just enough to meet his eyes.

“It matters,” Ilya says, low and steady. “You matter in it. When two people get intimate. Both of them matter.” Shane’s expression flickers. Like he wants to understand. But he doesn’t know how.

"Even if I'm dirty?" Shane finally asks.

"Who told you that?" Ilya's voice inches cold again, and before Shane can withdraw from that cold gaze, he reaches forward, offering his shoulder for Shane to lean on. He feels the body in his arm

nudge up against him almost instinctively, like he doesn't know how to refuse the warmth.

"You saw everything, sir," Shane says eventually, eyes lowered, unable to look at Ilya.

"Yes. I saw how much you've been through. But all it tells me is how strong you are - to still trust me like this, to still submit so beautifully. That's your gift to me."

Shane's eyelashes tremble. He looks down and blinks quickly.

"Sir." Shane looks at Ilya with those puppy eyes again. "So you still... want me?" he asks carefully, as if testing dangerous territory.

"Shane. I wanted you the first time I saw you. Remember?" Ilya smiles at the memory. It feels like a long time ago, yet so vivid it could've been yesterday. "I should have waited then, done things properly. But I wanted you so much, from the very first time."

Shane finally looks up, a shy smile forming on his lips. He looks so cute like that. "I... I liked that a lot too, sir."

Ilya presses a kiss to Shane's forehead. "Good, little sub."

An idea forms as they revisit the first time they met - strangers from two worlds, both stunned by how each other functioned, tangled up since the first night, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Now, little sub, I'm going to tell you what I want, and I want you to tell me honestly if it would feel good to you. Okay?"

Shane nods eagerly. Ilya looks at those eyes and feels his heart clench again. He already knows the answer - he knows Shane will say yes to anything now, no matter what it costs him.

"I want you a lot, Shane. I'd love to have you warm my bed again, just like when we first met. Maybe a few times a week. That would be a gift from you to me."

Shane looks at him expectantly, as if waiting for the catch, ready to accept whatever's asked of him.

"Are you okay with that?" Ilya raises an eyebrow, signaling the end of his ask. He watches Shane's expression shift from expectation to confusion, then disbelief, then an embarrassed sadness.

"That, that won't be enough, sir. Not for everything you gave me." His voice is low, shaky with self-abasement.

"Do you get to decide how much I want you in my bed now, little sub?" Ilya asks.

Shane quickly shakes his head and raises his eyes to meet Ilya's. "I can do that, sir. No, no, sir, I *want* that." He punctuates the sentence as he corrects himself. "I've been wanting that every night, sir. When I woke up from my nightmares. I've wanted... you."

His admission comes quietly, but it hits Ilya like a truck. Shane has been wanting him. Needing him, when he woke up confused, disoriented, and scared.

Ilya's inner Dom leaps at that. His little sub needs him. His sweetness isn't just biological, an instinct for survival.

Ilya sends Shane back to his own room to wash up for bed. "Wear your lounge clothes, Shane." One day he'll ask Shane to wear something slutty for him, but today isn't that day. He's going to be patient - so patient - because Shane needs time to rewrite those painful memories from his mind and his body.

When Ilya opens the door to his bedroom, Shane practically bounces in, like he's worried Ilya might change his mind if he moves too slow. He smells good, and looks so soft in the evening light.

"May I get in the bed, sir?" Shane asks shyly, his eyes locked on the bed with a longing look Ilya's only ever seen him give food.

"Yes, come here, little sub." Ilya takes his hand and guides him to the bed, gently pressing his shoulders to lower him onto it, then walks around to the other side to get in with him.

Something rattles in Shane's lounge pants. He reaches down and pulls out a bottle of pills. "I brought my meds, sir. But I want to take them later. I fall asleep too fast after. And I... I want to stay awake with you for a bit, if that's okay, sir." He says it shyly, his face inching toward Ilya's shoulder like he can't help himself.

"Of course, my sweet little sub." He reaches out, wrapping an arm around his waist. "Come here."

It surprises Ilya how well Shane's body fits in his arms now, lying together for the first time in a while, the way he snuggles in with certainty, head resting on Ilya's shoulder, one arm tucked against his chest, his top leg wedging between Ilya's while the other bends to fit perfectly beneath, like his body has already memorized this place.

Shane nuzzles in almost instinctively, his hair soft and fuzzy like some small animal, and buries his face in Ilya's neck, breathing in slowly, almost hungrily.

"Sir," Shane whispers, testing the word with his mouth inches from Ilya's skin. "When you let me share your bed last time... at Master Manny's house," he continues, voice soft, "every night felt like a dream to me. I've been thinking about it... a lot."

Ilya pats his hair gently. "You should have told me, little sub. Tell me, what else has been on your mind?"

Shane buries his face deeper into Ilya's chest, shaking his head weakly.

"Remember what we had in the contract?" Ilya says, still gentle. "Honesty is important."

Shane's head lifts at the mention of the contract, a flicker of unease passing through his eyes. "Sir, I will - I *am* honest with you. Please don't be mad. I will be good, sir, please, I will do everything in the contract."

His breath catches as the words rush out, uneven and tight. Ilya places a steady hand against his back.

"Breathe, little sub. I'm not mad."

"Sir... I'm just scared. I don't want to mess up." Shane looks at him now, pulling back slightly, like he needs to see his face to believe it.

And then, after a deep breath, he says it.

“Can we go back to the contract? Can we say that if I mess up, you can punish me, do anything to me - the list doesn’t matter - you can punish me however you want...” His voice trembles as he pauses, gathering himself. “But then after you punish me... maybe you can still let me stay?”

Ilya stares at Shane for a long time. Words have left him for a second time that night.

Of course that has been on his mind. Ilya thinks back to the last few weeks - how Shane handled every scene beautifully, almost too perfectly, every response measured, every reaction controlled. He’d taken it as a skill. As attentiveness. But it wasn’t that. It was restraint. The kind that comes from believing the stakes are too high to fail.

“Has that been on your mind for a long time, little sub?” he asks quietly.

Shane gives a small nod. “I don’t need a bed, sir,” he rushes on. “And you don’t need to feed me. I’ll figure it out. I’ll do anything, I’ll learn to be useful, I promise.”

“If you were so worried, why didn’t you say it when we signed the contract, Shane?”

He doesn’t need the answer. It is already there, in every word Shane has said tonight.

The contract, written to be fair, to give them both structure and choice, must have read to Shane like something else entirely - like a set of conditions he could fail, with consequences worse than anything he has already known.

“Of course you can stay, little sub,” Ilya says after a moment. “I thought that was already clear, but I’m glad you told me.”

Shane’s eyes stay fixed on him, hesitant, searching.

“Even if we end the contract,” Ilya continues, “you’ll still have a place here. Do you remember the living arrangement mentioned in the contract, that you will have that even if I end it?”

“I, I don’t need one, sir. I can figure it out,” Shane says quickly.

“And go sleep under an apple tree? Like some kind of apple fairy?” Ilya says lightly, watching the way Shane lets out a tight smile on that beautiful face that still looks so sad and tense.

“I have a cottage at the edge of the estate,” Ilya continues after a while. “It’s not fancy, but it’s comfortable, and there’s a lake nearby. If - and I’m saying if, because I’m not going to end this carelessly - we ever end the contract, you can live there. And you can work for me to pay the rent. You can stay for as long as you need to. Harris always needs seasonal help, and it would be good to have someone steady.”

He pauses, then adds, softer: “And most importantly, Shane... even if we stop being Dom and Sub, I’m not disappearing on you. We can still be friends in each other’s lives.”

Shane swallows. “Would you... come to the cottage?” he asks quietly. “To visit me?”

“Of course,” Ilya says, smiling. “That’s what friends do. I’d bring you fruit and books, and you’d cook, and we’d eat and talk. Just like that.”

“Oh,” Shane says, the word small but full.

“Does that make you feel better?”

“...Yes, sir,” Shane answers after a moment.

“Good. We’ll put it in the contract tomorrow, make it explicit. That’s how this should work. We talk, we adjust. I’m glad you told me.”

“Okay, sir.” A pause. Then Shane lifts his head again, tentative but a little brighter. “Sir... can I start working for you now? I’m already in the orchards with Harris a lot anyway.”

“Oh?” Ilya raises an eyebrow. “So you can start saving money and run away somewhere better, in case the cottage isn’t good enough?”

Shane opens his mouth to explain, then stops when he catches the teasing in Ilya’s expression. He mumbles something quietly.

“What was that, little sub?” Ilya prompts.

Shane hesitates, then mutters, just barely loud enough: “...I’d probably waste all my money coming back to you anyway.” It’s quiet and careful, but it’s there, a small joke, a small request.

Ilya laughs, pulling him closer again, arms wrapping around his waist.

“Well, lucky for you, I’m not planning on asking you to leave anytime soon,” he says. “I’d much rather have you here in my bed than out in that little cottage.”

His voice softens. “Because I like you, little sub.”

Shane looks up at him, eyes open and warm in a way that feels new.

“I like you too, sir,” he says, almost shyly. “So much.”

Author’s notes on kink-related topics

1. Dom drop:

Like sub drop, dom drop is the emotional/physical crash after an intense scene. Adrenaline wears off, and what’s left can be exhaustion, guilt, or doubt. In this case, it’s worsened by lack of aftercare - they didn’t properly come down together because Shane was actively pulling away from comfort, trying to be “less needy.”

Shane’s caretaking to help Ilya out of the drop is very textbook (because he literally read one lol): food, hydration, reassurance that he got what he wanted out of the scene, and reminding Ilya he’s not a monster.

2. Consent (before vs during):

Consent should always be clearly established before a scene. During a scene, a sub’s mental state is altered - adrenaline heightens intensity, endorphins dull pain and can create a floaty, euphoric feeling (subspace) - so what they say in that space isn’t always grounded, long-term consent.

This matters even more for Shane, whose baseline ability to consent is already complicated. Ilya is very aware of that, which is why he's so shaken by wanting to push things further. Shane consented to pain - not to intimacy after.

3. Why Ilya says no to intimacy tonight:

Even though Shane initiates, Ilya reads it (mostly correctly) as performance - Shane trying to "pay it back" rather than purely wanting it. Combined with dom drop and heightened sensitivity around consent, Ilya shuts it down. That said... it's probably about 50% performance and 50% horniness for Shane lol.

Chapter End Notes

Shane: *reads "How to fix your dom if he drops"*

Shane: *executes Step 1: food. Step 2: ethical validation. Step 3: emotional dependency.*

Ilya: aww I feel better now little sub.

Shane: *continues confidently into 'physical closeness as stabilization technique'*

Ilya: we are not doing that.

Shane: this is literally step four.

Shane: WHY DOESN'T MY BOOK WORK

Chapter 12: Say my name

Chapter Notes

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

Shane has a strange dream that night. It isn't anything like his dreams before. There are no hands tugging at him, no voices telling him to kneel, to smile, to stay still. It isn't one of those dreams that reminds him his body belongs to everyone in the room but him.

Instead, a pair of large hands cup his face. There is a gentle and lingering kiss. Nothing predatory; it's so sweet and patient, soft lips pressing against his, suckling slightly, followed by a gentle swipe of the tongue. He looks up and is immediately captivated by a pair of hazel-green eyes. He moans into the kiss, his heart fluttering as those hands shift lower, behind his neck, down his back, landing just below his waist.

He leans in then, feeling the familiar hard line pressing against his thigh. But he isn't afraid; he isn't dreading the inevitable pain that would usually come with it. Instead, he feels an unfamiliar heat rising in his body, and he wants that hard line to get harder, wants it to grow, to press into his thigh more, and eventually press into his body. He wants to swallow it, to feel it, to let it leave its mark inside him.

He reaches a hand forward. His fingers close over that hard line, pressing down, wrapping around, stroking up and down. He has done these motions so many times they are pure muscle memory, but this time feels different - he feels the heat, the growing weight, and most importantly, the surging feeling in his chest that is so unfamiliar but thrilling. He leans in and darts his tongue out to lick the stretch of skin in front of him, panting when he tastes the musky scent. He presses his body closer, his fingers gripping the growing bulge harder than before, almost melting into it.

The hands behind his back tighten as well. And Shane almost cries at that sensation. He needs it. He needs the firm, grounding touch. He needs to feel wanted, by *him*.

"Shane." His voice, still heavy with sleep.

"Sir." He greets him, a smile forming on his lips. "Want you, please. More, sir."

"Shane. Open your eyes."

What?

Shane blinks his eyes open. He sees the stretch of skin in front of him - Ilya's chest. There is a dark mole right next to where his nose touches. The skin is glistening, it is SO wet from him practically sucking on Ilya's chest in his dream.

Heat rushes to his face.

He tries to lean back, only to realize his fingers are still gripping - hard - onto Ilya's cock over his boxers. It jumps once with Shane's sudden movement.

The hands behind his back tighten instead of pushing him away.

“What were you saying?” A low voice sounds above him.

Oh. So he said it out loud. His needy pleas. Not just in his dream.

Shane’s face burns. He has nowhere to hide, so he leans in again, pressing his face against Ilya’s chest. The black mole looks so soft, he can’t help licking it once, then nudges it with the tip of his nose, giving it an affectionate bump.

“I want, sir. I want more,” he whispers. He raises his eyes to look at Ilya. “And I’m not lying, sir. I want it so much. In my dream, and now.” He uses that voice he knows men can’t resist, thick with emotion and slightly shy, trembling toward the end as if he can’t help it.

Because he can’t. His whole body is vibrating with need.

“What does my needy little sub want?” Ilya asks him.

Oh yes, yes. Ask him more, don’t shut him down, Shane pleads silently.

“Want your cock, sir. Want to suck you so much.” He looks up through his lashes, his tongue licking over his upper lips.

He sees Ilya’s pupils grow, stretching the green rim thin. And he presses in even more, his hand stroking up and down as he rocks his hips forward, letting Ilya feel his own need as well.

“Greedy little sub.” Ilya’s voice is thick with emotion too. His large palm grabs onto Shane’s waist, the strength almost bruising, and Shane’s body trembles at the touch.

“Beg for it.”

Shane shivers. The command is so familiar, yet so foreign. He has heard it all the time; he knows what to do. But it feels different. The command isn’t cold and cruel, it’s thick with want, and there is a hint of warmth in it. And Ilya’s eyes - piercing as usual - lock onto his with intent.

“Please, sir.” He starts as he pulls back from Ilya’s embrace, blinking up at him, his hands moving to rest on Ilya’s chest.

“Could I suck you? Please.” He lets his eyes turn misty, pouting his lips and creasing his brows slightly.

He lets out a few whimpering sounds as he strokes Ilya slowly, feeling the giant thing grow harder and harder in his palm. “I want it so much, I’m starving for it, sir...” He whispers the “sir,” and lets his lips hang open there, breathing through his mouth, his tongue slipping out slightly, waiting.

Ilya curses. His arms tighten behind Shane’s back, and in one smooth motion, he flips Shane to lie flat on the bed, Ilya’s whole body bracketing above him now.

Shane’s heart pounds hard. Ilya is so close, his body radiating heat, and he can feel the hard line pressing against his own more clearly than anything. If he was performing a little just now, his mind is so blank now that he can’t think about anything beyond the sculpted, half-naked body above him, and those hazel-green eyes looking into his soul.

“Tell me again, greedy little sub. Who do you belong to? What do you want?” Ilya says it with such heat that Shane feels a fire light up from where they are pressed together. His cock bounces eagerly.

“M yours, sir. Your greedy little sub.” Shane’s voice trembles; saying it feels so right. He wants to say it again and again. “I want your cock, sir. I need it. Please.” He wiggles beneath Ilya’s body, rubbing his thigh on that hard cock pressing onto him, his eyes filled with the most yearning look he knows.

“Fuck. Shane.” Ilya’s breathing is so rapid the hot air tickles Shane’s face. “Arms above your head. Sub.”

Shane’s arms fly up, wrists crossing automatically. He tilts his body slightly, pushing his chest out more.

Ilya pulls out a black ribbon from the bedside table, looping it around Shane’s wrists to tie a bow in front.

The thin ribbon does nothing to restrain him, a symbol more than anything else. A test of how eagerly obedient Shane is, and how good he can be for his sir. Shane’s heart flutters at that thought.

I will be so good, sir.

Ilya pulls back to look at Shane, still in his lounge clothes, looking so pliant, soft, and pretty. “You want me to use your mouth, little sub?”

Shane nods eagerly. He opens his mouth, showing Ilya his tongue. Ilya draws in a breath at that sight.

Slowly, Ilya gets out of his boxers, his cock fully hard. He brackets Shane’s torso with his knees, shifting forward a little. With one hand braced on the headboard, he gives his cock a few lazy strokes, then taps it against Shane’s tongue. Shane lets out a soft moan, eager to chase the salty tip with his mouth, his body half lifting from the bed.

“Ah-uh. You don’t move. You will be a good mouth and lie still. Let me use you.” He warns him with stern eyes. “Don’t let the ribbon fall.”

Shane bats his eyelashes, falling back against the bed and pressing his arms firmly into the mattress. “Yes, sir. Use me, please.” He opens his mouth again, lying still now.

Ilya takes his time. He lifts his cock slightly, tapping Shane’s cheek. He then smears the precum over those pretty freckles, drawing something obscene across his face. Shane looks up with warm brown eyes, his lashes so long they nearly brush Ilya’s cock when he blinks.

There is saliva pooling at the corner of Shane’s mouth now that he has kept it open for so long. Ilya moves his cock there, dipping it wet, and slowly pushes it in, letting it come out from the other corner of Shane’s mouth. “You drool so much, little sub. What happened?”

Shane can’t answer, not with his mouth open like that, taking the cock sliding in and out from both sides. He mumbles something, and Ilya pushes in deeper, filling his mouth. “Hmm? Say it.”

Shane tries. His mouth moves around the cock, and the vibration sends a pleasurable wave through Ilya’s body. “Ah, because you are too hungry for me, yes?”

Shane nods eagerly.

“What a perfect cockslut.”

Shane's mind blanks at that. And then -

A chain clicked onto his collar, "*crawl, slut.*" A spider gag propped his mouth open, "*take it, slut.*" A puddle on the floor. "*lick, slut.*"

He is leaving his body, going up up up. His mouth is still slack, still wrapping around Ilya skillfully, allowing the movement while giving pressure from all around.

But he isn't looking anymore. His eyes are closed shut. There is a tiny teardrop beading at the corner.

When Ilya looks down, the flushed red has left Shane's face - he looks pale.

Ilya stops at that. Then, carefully, he pulls out.

It takes Shane a moment to come back. He opens his eyes, and Ilya's heart clenches immediately. They look so empty. Just like last night, when Shane stood in front of him, telling Ilya nothing comes for free in his life.

"Shane." Ilya lifts his leg so he no longer brackets Shane's body. He sits down beside him, ignoring his erection that is still painfully hard. When no response comes, he raises a hand and wipes that single teardrop carefully.

Shane looks at him, but Ilya doesn't see the passion anymore. He doesn't see Shane anymore. He looks like an empty doll again, one that someone forgot to wind back up.

"Shane. Talk to me. What's going on?"

Shane lets out a quiet sob and shakes his head.

"Number, Shane. I need you to tell me now." His voice is firmer as he reaches a hand over Shane's chest, pressing lightly, grounding him.

Shane's face crumples at that. His body is still rigid, his wrists still crossed obediently above his head, but his body shakes, and with it, the black ribbon trembles against his wrists.

"Five. 'M sorry, sir. I just need a moment."

And then, quietly, he forces it out. "I'm not... I don't want to be a slut, sir. I only wanted you. I didn't want them."

Ilya feels something break in his chest. He hears it clearly, the sound of him, hurting the sweetest sub that only wants to be good for him. His hands fly up to untie the ribbon, but Shane only presses his arms harder into the mattress, as if to escape Ilya's touch. "No, sir. Please. Don't stop. I still want, sir. I just need a moment."

Slowly, Ilya takes Shane's hands and moves his arms down to rest in front of him. He coos quietly, "I'm not taking it off. I just want you to bring your arms down for me." The ribbon is still there, but this position makes it easier for him to turn Shane sideways, folding him into his arms.

Shane's body shakes more the moment it slides into the embrace. "I am okay, sir. You can call me that. I am okay now." He takes a shaky breath through his mouth.

“Hey. Hey - no.” Ilya’s voice drops immediately, firm but quiet. His hand comes up to Shane’s face, thumb brushing under his eye. “Look at me.”

He waits until Shane’s eyes actually focus on him.

“I shouldn’t have said that.” His jaw tightens slightly. “That word, that was careless. I know better. It was in our contract to not call you degrading things, and I made a mistake.”

His hand slides to the back of Shane’s neck, holding him there. “You’re not that here. Do you understand me?” His voice is low.

He exhales, slower this time, grounding himself as much as Shane.

“It just,” Shane’s brows pinch together. “It sounded like before.” Quieter now. “Like I was just... a slut. Because that’s what most of them called me.”

His eyes flicker, that distant edge threatening again, but he leans forward instead, pressing into Ilya’s chest.

“I don’t want to go there with you, sir.” Shane’s voice breaks a little on the last word. “I don’t want to disappear.”

“I know. Shane. You asked for me.” Ilya’s thumb presses lightly at Shane’s pulse point. “I heard you.”

“Look at me, Shane.” His eyes are full of intent. “You still want?”

“Then you get to choose it. You get to tell me what you need - just like right now. You did so well.” His grip shifts, just slightly warmer.

And then, he adds, “And don’t ever think I want you like they did.” His brows draw together, something sharper under the calm. “I want you because you are Shane, my little sub. That’s the only way this works.”

His thumb brushes once more under Shane’s eye.

“Talk to me.”

Shane snuffles. His hands, still tied up, come up to hold at Ilya’s chest, his eyes landing on the ribbon that symbolizes his submission.

“I want to be here. With you. Sir.”

His breath steadies just a little.

“So...” A small, uncertain exhale. “Use me please, sir.”

And then after a short pause, almost shy despite everything,

“but please call me yours instead?”

“My perfect little sub.” Ilya says. A smile appears on Shane’s face, his nose still a little red from the emotion. “We can take it slow today. I can untie you now.” He presses a kiss on Shane’s cheek.

“No, sir. Want you to use me. Please. Want to forget.” He doesn’t need to say what memories he needs to overwrite, they both know it with painful clarity.

“My greedy little sub. So hungry for my cock that you want to chock on it. Yes?” Ilya’s tone shifts lower, firmer.

“Yes, sir.” Shane whispers, looking up through his lashes.

“On your knees. Floor.” Ilya swallows hard at those brown eyes - still a little wet, but already shining with something close to want.

Shane scrambles to obey. He sits up on the bed, swinging his legs over the edge, and in one fluid motion, kneels on the plush rug by the bed. His arms are resting on his laps, wrists still crossed and tied.

“If you need to show me your number, raise your hands and touch my thigh. Squeeze me hard if you need my attention.”

Shane nods eagerly. “Yes, sir.”

Ilya’s fingers thread through Shane’s hair. Bringing his head up. “Eyes on me, Shane. Look at how I make you take it.”

Shane opens his mouth again, he waits patiently, blinking up to Ilya.

Slowly Ilya feeds his cock to him. It is half hard, but the moment the wet tongue brushes underneath, it grows harder quickly. Ilya’s hand guides Shane’s head inward, until his nose is close to the patch of curly pubic hair.

He lightly shakes Shane’s head left and right, finding the angle to allow his cock slide in even more. Shane exhales through his nose, relaxing his throat on cue. His lashes are blinking wet again, tears welling from the pressure at the back of the throat.

“That’s it, just like that. Stay still for me.” Ilya’s voice is low and thick.

Shane looks up with such obedience and purity in his eyes that it almost hurts. Ilya blinks that thought away, sliding back into his dominance as Shane contracts his throat again, silently massaging the head of his cock.

“Can’t get enough? My greedy little sub.” Shane nods slightly - his head can’t move far with the hand holding his hair, but he tries to blink hard at Ilya to show how much he likes it.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth now. Stay still and let me use you. Little sub.”

Shane whimpers through his nose as Ilya slides out, almost leaving his mouth, with just the tip in. He stops himself right before he tries to chase it, his fingers twisting hard as if he’s keeping still with sheer willpower.

“Ah, so eager for me, aren’t you?” Ilya smiles.

Shane lets out a muffled “yes, sir.” His mouth panting out hot air as he tries to pronounce that with a cockhead stuffed in there. It tickles Ilya in a way that draws a breath out of him.

One hand in Shane's hair, Ilya starts pumping in and out. He starts slow but quickly picks up the pace, the heat coiling from that warm mouth that tightens and relaxes at the exact right moments. Shane's eyes roll back briefly before they land on Ilya's again, there is a fog coming up to them, colored with pleasure and want.

Ilya pushes all the way in and stays, feeling the warm, rapid exhale from Shane's nose as he tries to breath through the sudden intrusion. There is a small gurgling sound as Shane tries to adjust. But he goes so willingly, Ilya doesn't even feel a hint of resistance where his hand holds at the back of Shane's head. Shane is blinking up hard. He holds eye contact perfectly just as Ilya told him, watching closely how Ilya makes him take it.

Ilya finally pulls out all the way. Shane coughs a few times. But a smile forms on his lips. He looks up, waiting for something from Ilya. A compliment perhaps, or just a pat in the hair. But his voice rings in Ilya's mind - *Want you to use me. Want to forget.*

Ilya slaps him instead. Not too hard, but not light either.

Shane dips his face to one side. When he looks up again, his eyes are glassy, his lips parted, a heat quickly spreads across his cheeks like the sky glowing at dusk after a summer rain. He looks so ruined and dreamy at the same time.

"Again, please, sir."

Ilya rubs his cheek roughly instead, pulling his face back to center. "No, little sub." His voice is heavy. "Remember, you only get what I give you. Smile."

Shane curls his lips sweetly, eyes still wet, he sticks his tongue out again, letting out a small sound when Ilya taps it with his cock, and then eagerly, he closes his mouth, tasting the precum.

"How does that taste? My hungry little sub."

"Want more, sir, please." He looks up pleadingly. "Want to eat your cum."

Ilya curses quietly again. He starts pumping his fist harder, smirking at Shane when he lets out a small whine - so eager to participate, but holding still because he was told to.

"Yes. Stay like that. Be good, and maybe I will let you."

Shane obeys beautifully, his hands folding in his lap, his eyes fixed on Ilya's cock, full of want. He lets out a few quiet whimpers when Ilya speeds up, his tongue brushing over his lips almost unconsciously. Ilya doesn't last long with that sight. He pumps a few more times, then grips Shane's hair again. "Open."

A few white streaks land on Shane's face, smearing across the path of his freckles. Ilya pushes his cock into Shane's mouth next, coming into the warm space that instinctively wraps around him, milking the head lightly.

Ilya hasn't come this hard in a very long time.

When he finally stills and pulls out, Shane looks up at him, opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue, showing the white pooling there. He waits patiently, his eyes smiling, like he's showing off something precious.

Ilya falls into those eyes, that smile. He loses his words for a moment, unsure what to say next. Then he swallows once, wiping the cum from Shane's face with his fingers before pushing them into his mouth.

Shane sucks on them, letting Ilya wipe the rest along the inside of his cheeks, then swallows once, twice, taking everything in.

They both take a while to calm down. Shane stays kneeling, his back straight but leaning forward slightly, his face resting against Ilya's thigh. Ilya's fingers thread slowly through his silky hair, feeling the rapid breathing gradually slow under his palm.

Then Ilya guides Shane up to sit at the edge of the bed. His large hands grip Shane's thighs, pushing them apart. Under Shane's widened eyes, he slowly sinks to his knees and presses his face between Shane's thighs, exhaling warm air over the fabric of his lounge pants. He's pleased to find Shane already hard beneath them.

"Sir, you don't have to." Shane wiggles uncomfortably, his hands coming up instinctively to shield, to guide Ilya away.

Ilya catches his wrists - still bound together by the thin ribbon - and stands, pulling his arms up straight before bending them back at the elbows so Shane's wrists rest behind his neck.

"Stay, little sub. Don't break the tie."

He kneels again. In one smooth motion, he pulls Shane's pants and boxers down and spreads his thighs.

Slowly, he kisses the inside of Shane's left knee, moving up along his inner thigh, licking the skin wet as he goes. Shane tries to stay still, but his whole body trembles violently, moans spilling out as he throws his head back.

Ilya smirks at that, moving higher, his lips brushing over the burn marks next. He feels Shane tense immediately.

"Stay with me. Shane. Don't go anywhere." He looks up, only breaking eye contact after he sees those brown eyes focused on him, so full of emotion it makes his chest tighten.

He kisses the burn marks, giving attention to each one. His tongue traces their paths like it once traced the unfamiliar contours of Shane's mouth when they first kissed, slowly, almost reverently, until it dips into the last small mark.

A soft sob reaches him. He lifts his head to see tears slipping down Shane's cheeks, his arms still raised obediently, his body trembling with emotion.

"Sir -" is all Shane manages before his voice breaks.

"Shh. My perfect little sub." Ilya reaches up, pressing a finger into Shane's mouth, rocking it gently. Shane sucks on it immediately, as if that single touch is enough to ground him.

Ilya lowers his head again, pressing a kiss to Shane's cock as it stiffens shakily under his attention. Slowly, he takes him into his mouth, drawing a broken sound from above almost immediately. Shane keeps sucking on his finger, his mouth growing wetter, tighter, as Ilya deepens the motion.

Ilya feels Shane hardening quickly, his body trembling as he nears the edge. It's so easy to push him there. Ilya realizes then that Shane has probably never received a pleasurable blowjob before, despite how perfectly he gives one.

Something like smugness settles in his chest, knowing he can give Shane this for the first time, knowing he can write something good onto a body that has known so much harm, knowing Shane trusts him enough to fall apart like this.

Shane lets out a muffled whimper as his body goes taut, thighs trembling. He shakes his head faintly, looking down at Ilya with pleading eyes, signaling how close he is.

Ilya pulls back just enough to meet his gaze, a smile tugging at his lips. "Come in my mouth, Shane," he says, before taking him down again in one smooth motion.

Shane cries out. His whole body shakes like a leaf in the wind, his head falling back against his bound arms as he looks down at Ilya - half mesmerized, half stunned - while Ilya takes and swallows him through each wave.

Shane is still trembling when Ilya lifts his mouth away. "Sir, I'm so sorry, I didn't think..."

Ilya stands, looking down at him with a smug smile. "What, you'd come so quickly?"

Shane flushes deeply, biting his lip and looking away. Ilya bends to untie the ribbon from his wrists, then gently guides his arms down. He presses Shane back onto the bed and follows, settling beside him.

"Taste so sweet. Just like you." Ilya can't resist teasing. Shane's freckles are so close now, scattered across his flushed cheeks. "Was that okay?" he asks, his tone shifting, softer, more grounded.

Shane nods against his chest. "It was so good, sir. It was what I... wanted."

"It wasn't too much? Not enough?" Ilya offers, making it easier to answer.

Shane is quiet for a moment, then lifts his gaze. "I can take more, sir. But it was just right. After we... stopped and started again."

Ilya exhales, relieved. He's glad he didn't slap him again when Shane asked. Glad he didn't pull away entirely when things first shifted. He's learning - his little sub needs firmness, not absence. Controlled pressure, not just gentleness. Something concrete enough to overwrite what came before.

"I shouldn't have used that word, Shane. That was my mistake. We'll make it explicit in the contract."

Shane lifts his head quickly. "It's okay, sir. I don't want to end it." His voice trembles with worry.

"Hey, little sub." Ilya cups his face, guiding him to meet his eyes. "Breaking something unintentionally doesn't mean everything ends. We can make mistakes. We talk about them. And we move on, if you're okay with that."

Shane nods quickly. "Yes. I'm okay, sir. Let's move on."

Ilya smiles, something tender and a little sad in his eyes. He can feel how fast Shane's pulse is, how afraid he is of losing this, for a mistake that he didn't make.

He steadies Shane in his arm, "Little sub, I want you to understand what happened today. I made a mistake, did something I shouldn't have, something we said is not okay in our contract."

Shane nods curtly, "Yes, sir, but it doesn't matter." His words coming out a bit too fast.

Ilya shakes his head, "It does matter. But it doesn't break the contract, because we can all make mistakes, and because you forgive me. Little sub."

He gently tilts up Shane's chin to make sure he is looking at him, "But it does matter, and we'll add that word to the contract. And I won't say it again. Okay?" He pauses. "Are there others you want to add?"

Shane is quiet for a while, his eyes lingering on Ilya's face. After a few blinks, he whispers, "Could we add 'whore,' sir?"

Ilya nods immediately. "Of course. Little sub. Thank you for telling me."

Shane hesitates, then slips an arm around Ilya's waist, to Ilya's surprise. He adds shyly, "But really, sir... you can call me anything else. I'll be okay."

Ilya hums softly. "Maybe I will, little sub. I do have many names that suit you."

He leans in, brushing a gentle kiss against Shane's ear.

"My baby."

...

"My sunshine."

...

"My sweet little pup."

Shane buries his face into Ilya's chest. Slowly, Ilya feels damp warmth spreading there. He tightens his hold, pressing a soft kiss to the top of Shane's head.

"Let it out, baby," he murmurs. "You're safe. You're with me."

"Sir?" After a while, Shane wipes his tears away with the back of his index finger, the gesture so small and careful that Ilya wants to bite his cheek. Shane snuffles a few more times before he looks up.

"Yes, baby?" Ilya smiles down at him.

"We haven't kissed today... Can I have one?"

Shane is pouting slightly again. Ilya isn't sure if it's a small protest for that kiss they haven't shared, or if he's simply waiting - softly, patiently - for something he's learned he can ask for.

Ilya doesn't care.

He doesn't tell Shane that they already kissed this morning, when Shane was still heavy with sleep, dreaming, mumbling an incoherent slew of *sir, want, more* into his chest. Ilya had cupped his face then and kissed him slowly, feeling the way he responded - still so new to it, hesitant and sweet in a way that Ilya never seems to get enough.

He leans down now and kisses him again, slow at first, just the brush of lips, letting Shane settle into it. Then a little deeper, a little warmer, until Shane melts against him, mouth opening with a soft, shaky breath, like he's remembering how to be here.

Ilya draws back only slightly.

"Better now, Shane?" he murmurs, searching those dark brown eyes, still glassy with tears.

"Yes."

Shane looks up at him, biting his lip, then the inside of his cheek, freckles shifting over flushed skin. He hesitates, his breath catching like he's standing at the edge of something.

Then he takes a deeper breath and whispers,

"Yes, better. Ilya."

Author's notes: kink bits

In healthy BDSM dynamics, terms that might sound degrading should only be used when they are **explicitly discussed, negotiated, and desired**. What's "hot" in one context can be genuinely distressing in another - especially when it connects to past harm, as it does for Shane here.

You'll also notice Ilya intentionally shifting into a more grounding, attentive mode - drawing Shane's attention to parts of his body that carry difficult history (like his scars), and responding to them with **gentleness and almost reverence**. This isn't about "fixing" trauma, but about offering a **new, safer emotional association** in a moment where Shane is supported and not alone.

As always, everything here is character-specific and not a universal model, but I aim to portray consent as something **ongoing, imperfect, and repairable**.

Also, I can't believe I wrote a full chapter just on blowjobs. 🙄 But "Ilya" deserves its own chapter right? There will be more plots coming up next! And maybe some backstories. 🙄🙄

Chapter End Notes

Ilya: so - my baby, my sunshine, my sweet little pup... all approved?

Shane: You're really going to use all of those, aren't you?

Ilya: Obviously. I like options.

Ilya: And me? What do I get?

Shane: Don't you have like everything already?

Ilya: :(

Shane: ...ok, fine.

Shane: Ilya.

Ilya: Yes sunshine. I will give you anything you need, baby. What do you want, my perfect boy? Money? Cottage? Oh you want us to never end the contract? Even better sweetheart. You are the sweetest little peach. 🍑

Chapter 13: Memory lane, closed

Chapter Notes

Do we see a chapter count??? 🙄 It's the minimum chapter count and it might grow if some chapters get too long, and I feel like I'm going to definitely write more one-shots after the ending (so keep the subscriptions on!), but I see a happy ending in the horizon and let me tell you it's sweet and hot and hot 🔥

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

Troy's car rolls quietly up the long drive just as the morning sun begins to spill over the edge of the property, turning the dew on the grass into tiny flashes of silver.

Harris spends the entire ride talking about the garden.

Not the way most people talk about work. Harris speaks about it like he is describing old friends. The peach trees need checking after the last hailstorm - God forbid there be another one this summer. The herb beds are finally starting to recover. The weeds are ambitious this week, which Harris says with the same fond irritation one might reserve for a mischievous child.

Troy listens, occasionally making a comment or asking a question, but mostly he lets Harris fill the quiet. It is one of the things he likes most about him. Harris never seems to notice when he is making a room brighter.

When Troy parks near the side entrance, neither of them moves immediately. They simply sit there in the comfortable silence and enjoy the fresh air of the day.

"You know," Harris says eventually, looking toward the mansion, "I think these morning drives with me are probably highlights of your days."

Troy glances at him. "You think?"

"Yes." Harris smiles. "You're much less grumpy than during the rest of your day."

"I am not grumpy. I am just usually lost in thoughts. I'm deep."

Harris laughs, the sound warm and immediate. "Of course you are, sir."

Harris rarely calls him sir anymore unless they are in a scene, and in these rare times he uses it, the word always has that teasing tone in it. Troy shakes his head, a smile curling on his lips.

They get out of the car together, walking toward the entrance before stopping at the point where their mornings usually separate.

Harris reaches over and fixes Troy's shirt, an easy gesture that still makes Troy's heart flutter every time.

“You’ll come find me later when you are bored?” Harris asks.

Troy looks down at him. “You mean after I’m done with work?”

“After you pretend you’re too busy to miss me.”

A small smile pulls at Troy’s mouth. “Go weed your garden, Harris.”

Harris grins, clearly satisfied anyway. “Okay, sir.”

Troy turns and enters the mansion. He finds Shane emerging from the breakfast room just as he reaches the main hall.

“Morning,” Troy says.

Shane looks up, slightly surprised. “Morning. Troy.”

“Harris is waiting outside in the garden for you.”

Shane gives him a smile, one so unguarded that Troy only sees it when Harris is in the picture. It is different from the smile Shane wears when Ilya is there - soft, gentle, trusting, but never so careless. He looks younger.

“He said today was weeding day,” Shane says.

“That’s right. He has special gloves for you.” Troy realizes he is learning way too much about gardening gears these days.

Shane nods seriously, as though this is important information requiring proper acknowledgment. Then he heads toward the door.

Troy follows at a distance, watching Shane step outside before he turns for Ilya’s study, and just before he reaches it -

“Shane!” The sound is so bright and unexpectedly loud that Troy actually pauses.

Harris’s greeting carries all the way through the doorway, full of unmistakable excitement, as if Shane arriving for a morning of pulling weeds is somehow the best possible start to the day.

Troy looks out through the window just in time to see Harris waving Shane over, already launching into an explanation about which garden beds they are tackling first.

Troy takes one more glimpse at Harris before continuing down the hallway. Whatever answers he and Ilya are about to discuss, whatever ugly truths are waiting buried in Shane’s past, Troy hopes that morning after morning, there will continue to be things like this waiting for Shane too.

A garden. People who are happy to see him. A place that finally feels like home.

If he deserves it. Troy’s jaw tightens slightly.

Please let him deserve it.

Troy heads toward Ilya’s office.

*

“The trail ends at the Slave Ring,” Troy says. “It doesn’t go any further back. Whatever happened before that... it was buried properly.”

Ilya’s gaze lifts from the tablet. “Do we know anything about the Ring?”

“I mean, they’re all illegal and nasty, which is why we never did any business related to them.” Troy says. “But this one is the largest currently operating. Serious backing with strong political insulation. Probably multiple offshore structures and layers of protection. Very good reputation among the buyers, which is never a good thing for something this illegal.”

A small silence settles between them.

“No one enters that pipeline willingly,” Troy adds. “Not ever.”

Ilya’s eyes drop briefly back to the screen, brows drawing together. “That matches what he told me. I know some people enter Slave Contracts voluntarily. But whatever happened there...” His jaw tightens slightly. “He didn’t choose that.”

“And he doesn’t know how he ended up there?” Troy tests. He is more troubled than suspicious. The answer is almost too simple. “If someone placed him there intentionally...” He paused, thinking through the possibilities. “We can’t rule out that he was meant to come out somewhere specific.”

Ilya looks up slowly, his eyes cold.

“He could be a placement,” Troy said, unaffected by the gaze. “A long-term operation. Or at least...” He exhales. “Not random.”

The silence that follows was colder.

Then Ilya leans back, his expression almost unreadable. “If he were placed there,” he says, “he wouldn’t look like this.”

Troy studies him. “He could have been conditioned. Deep cover for long-term insertion. It could be a manufactured vulnerability...”

“I know what trained assets look like, Troy.”

He sets the tablet down. “It’s impossible to fake losing the entire sense of self.” Ilya’s expression shifts, barely. “Shane was so... broken, he needs to be rebuilt.”

Troy’s weight shifts slightly. “You’re sure.”

Ilya looks at him fully then. “If I were that poor at reading people,” he says evenly, “I wouldn’t still be alive. And you wouldn’t still be working for me.”

Troy raises his hands in a *just saying* gesture, tapping a few things on the tablet.

“Then the training records are the only explanation left,” Troy says. “Things like isolation and deprivation. Probably neurological conditioning.” His eyes move back to the tablet. “Enough to explain memory disruption.”

Troy pushes the tablet across.

Documents and videos line up neatly in that folder, with just numbering in their titles. Ilya knows they are for him to dig through, that Troy wouldn't overstep unless he asks.

Ilya's expression sharpens. "So either he doesn't remember," he says quietly, more to himself than Troy. "Or he remembers, and he's buried it so deeply he can't reach it."

Troy nods once.

Neither of them speaks for a while.

Then Troy exhales, pushing the weight of the conversation aside for now. "I'll keep looking while you look at these." He gestures to the tablet.

He flexes his jaw once, frustration lingering. "Still doesn't feel right. Having him so close to you with a background that is just..." He gestures vaguely toward the tablet. "Nothing."

Ilya studies him for a moment, then the corner of his mouth lifts. "You don't seem particularly concerned about him being with Harris every day."

Troy's eyes narrow slightly. "Roz."

"What?" Ilya asks, far too innocently. "Are you going to explain to Harris if you keep Shane away from me, and from the garden duty? Because I won't."

Troy runs a hand through his hair. "Harris is not the head of a highly coveted security firm with dangerous enemies."

Ilya gives a noncommittal nod, a slight tilt of his head, an easy shrug. "With great enemies come great friends too." He flashes a careless smile. "Besides," he adds, "that is where you come in."

Troy gives him a look. "You are giving Harris entirely too much power. He is becoming untamed." Troy complains, though clearly there is no real bite. He sounds a little smug, even. "He signs Shane's timesheet now. Is that really necessary?"

Ilya smiles. "Oh, that - I'm teaching Shane about money," Ilya waves a hand in the air like it's the most normal thing. "And he is taking it very seriously. He only wants to be paid for hours actually worked."

Troy's expression softens slightly despite himself. "That sounds like him."

"Right? So cute." Ilya's smile grows so fondly that Troy is almost taken aback. "And I think Harris enjoys having a little authority." He glances at Troy, a teasing spark in his eyes. "I bet that's not too much for someone like you to handle, yes?"

Troy huffs, he shakes his head once, already opening another file to go over a new job that came in overnight.

*

Ilya's finger hovers over the files. There are so many videos, but he doesn't know if he has the heart to open them. He hesitates, before settling on the first file, a text document numbered as "0".

Training Log: Subject 580024

Status: Sold

Day 1 – Intake

Age: 17

Gender: Male

Designation: Submissive

Condition:

- Healthy
- Mild dehydration
- Multiple superficial injuries

Baseline Behavioral Traits Identified:

- High compliance with direct instructions
- Strong pain tolerance
- Seeks physical reassurance (contact, proximity)
- Positive response to verbal affirmation

Initial Response:

Subject displays confusion, fear.

Attempts to engage verbally with handlers.

Note: Subject attempts to establish rapport with handlers and other subjects.

Corrective protocol initiated.

Day 4

Behavioral Mapping Phase

Method: Controlled exposure to stimuli

Findings:

- Subject exhibits acute distress when left alone beyond 4 hours
- Subject responds rapidly to physical touch (grabs, restraint) despite distress
- Subject stabilizes when spoken to in calm tone

Notable: Subject attempts to thank handler following minimal kindness

Trait Classification: Highly exploitable

Day 9

Correction Cycle 1

Method: Isolation + auditory exposure (distress sounds from adjacent subjects)

Response:
Subject displays severe agitation
Covers ears, vocal distress
Requests cessation of others' suffering

Compliance leverage confirmed

Day 16

Conditioning Phase 1 initiated

Method: Pain association + relief via compliance

Response:
Subject endures direct punishment without significant resistance
Break threshold not reached through pain alone

Adjustment: Shift focus to other triggers

Day 23

Empathy Exploitation Protocol

Method: Subject restrained; exposed to distress of secondary subject

Response:
Immediate breakdown observed
Subject pleads for cessation on behalf of other

Outcome:
Compliance achieved without direct escalation

Day 28

Subject assigned numerical designation: 24

Instruction: Respond only to numerical identifier

Response:
Initial confusion.
Repeated errors when addressed as 24.
Corrective measures applied.

Day 46

Conditioning Phase 2: Identity suppression

Method: Isolation cycles, reinforcement punishment

Response:
Subject responds correctly to "24" in controlled environment

Fails under stress conditions

Prior name still retrievable

Assessment: Identity suppression incomplete

Day 57

Behavioral Conditioning

Condition:

Subject highly distressed after sexual training sessions.

Reduced reactions to external stimuli.

Reduced food intake.

Observation:

Subject seeks physical contact following distress cycles

Leans into handler proximity despite prior punishment

Adjustment:

Introduce controlled positive reinforcement

Method:

- Brief physical reassurance (hand contact, restraint without pain)
- Verbal affirmation

Response:

Marked stabilization

Subject displays visible relief response

Dependency forming

Day 68

Identity Suppression Progress

Prompt: "State your name."

Response: "24... I think." with slight hesitation(~3 seconds)

Correction applied for uncertainty

Notable:

Subject no longer spontaneously uses prior name

Day 92

Isolation Cycle Extended

Response:

Subject exhibits severe distress in absence of interaction

Begins self-directed compliance behaviors without instruction

No reference to prior identity

Reduced aversion to sexual trainings

Day 120

Purpose Conditioning Initiated

Instruction introduced:

“You exist to follow instructions.”

Method: Reinforcement through relief and punishment cycles

Response:

Subject follows partial instructions during sexual trainings

Displays reduced questioning behavior

Day 148

Degradation Protocol

Method: Verbal dehumanization

Terms applied:

“Worthless slut”

“Public property”

“Hole”

Response:

Initial distress response observed

Subject attempts contradiction

Correction applied

Day 176

Sexual Conditioning

Observation:

Subject exhibits strong positive response to:

- Gentle physical contact
- Calm vocal tone
- Verbal praise

Method:

Restrict all positive stimuli to post-compliance of sexual trainings

Response:
Subject begins to anticipate approval cues
Displays compliance-seeking behavior during sex acts

Day 229

Emotional Dependency Observation

Observation:

Strong emotional dependency to one particular handler (#17)

Higher acceptance to various sexual and pain trainings with such handler observed

Subject exhibits:

- Distress when ignored
- Rapid compliance when acknowledged
- Visible relief upon praise

Notable Behavior:

Subject attempts to initiate physical contact with handler #17 without permission

Correction applied

Day 261

Empathy Response Retest

Stimulus: Distress of secondary subject

Response:

Immediate compliance without prompting

No verbal pleading

Assessment:

Empathy response redirected into obedience

Day 300

Identity Suppression Verification

Stimulus: Prior name ("Shane")

Response:

No recognition

No emotional variance

Day 337

Identity Acceptance

Prompt: "What are you?"

Response: "Property of the Ring."

Prompt: "What is your value?"

Response: "To be used."

Subject proceeds to perform degrading acts without hesitation

Day 372

Purpose Fixation

Prompt: "What do you want?"

Response: "I want to be good."

Follow-up: "What does 'good' mean?"

Response: "Doing what I'm told. Making my master happy."

Assessment:

Purpose successfully re-conditioned

Day 401

Final Conditioning

Subject displays:

- Complete compliance
- No identity deviation
- No independent goal formation

Assessment:

Positive reinforcement sufficient to maintain stability

Very little aversion to negative reinforcement

Pain tolerance remains higher than most other subjects

Day 420

Public Exhibition

Observation:

Subject displayed high degree of compliance on stage

Willingly engaged in public training and sexual acts

No response to verbal degradation; identity further removed

High level of distress (off-stage) after handler #17 demonstrated humiliation acts

Exhibition results:

Multiple buyers expressed interests, auction date confirmed

Day 430 – Sales Clearance

Final Verification Protocol

Prompt: “State your name.”

Response: “24.”

Prompt: “Your name is Shane.”

Response:

Subject maintains eye contact

No visible recognition

No physiological deviation from baseline

Prompt repeated: “Say your name.”

Answer: “Shane.”

Prompt: “Who were you before?”

Response: “No one.”

Prompt: “Why do you exist?”

Response: “To obey.”

Stimulus: Gentle physical contact

Response:

Subject exhibits immediate calming response

Maintains eye contact, awaits instruction

Conclusion:

Subject identity erased

Purpose successfully reassigned

Approved for sales

*

Ilya throws his head back to hang on the headrest of the chair. The tablet feels heavy in his hands, so he drops it on the table. It makes a dull sound as it lands.

The study is quiet and peaceful in the early sunlight, all soft gold on polished wood and the faint hush of the garden beyond the glass. He turns slightly to see Harris and Shane squatting by the

garden bed, two round sunhats moving slowly, diligently across a row, four hands pulling and digging, leaving a track of weeds and dirt on the gravel ground.

His eyes land on Shane, thinking about that windowless room that stripped that sweet, seventeen-year-old boy bare of identity and memory before handing the name back to him as though it were a joke.

Four hundred and thirty days in the Slave Ring should have been enough to break anyone into something unrecognizable, and the fact that Shane survived it at all is proof enough of a kind of strength the report never bothers to name.

High compliance to orders.

Positive response to verbal affirmation.

Seeks physical reassurance.

All the things that make Shane so heartbreakingly easy to love are there in the file, flattened into clinical language, catalogued like traits in a breed and features to be optimized, as if tenderness itself were just another mechanism to be measured and controlled.

He closes his eyes and thinks of the way Shane watches people's faces before he speaks, the way praise lands on him not like pride but like *relief*, like air after too long underwater.

He exits the documents, realizing the rest of video files are numbered by days, ending at #430. He clicks open the first one.

The footage starts without sound for half a second, just a flicker of grain before the audio cuts in.

A bare room with a single chair bolted to the floor. The camera angle is fixed, slightly elevated.

Shane sits on the chair. Seventeen, though he looks younger like this - shoulders drawn tight, hands not restraint but folded on his laps obediently. His breathing is visibly uneven. His eyes dart around the room, searching for something that makes sense.

"There has to be a mistake," he says, voice unsteady but clear. "I - I shouldn't be here."

No response. He shifts in the chair, the chair doesn't bulge.

"I was, I was just, I was at..." The video lapse for a second, and Ilya realizes someone has edited the video to redact whatever he is saying. "I need to go back. Someone's going to... someone's going to notice I'm gone."

The voice comes from behind the camera. A Dom's voice, although not a command.

"State your name."

Shane's head snaps toward the sound. There's a pause, but Shane answers quickly, "Shane."

"Full name."

"Shane [redacted lapse]."

“Where are you from?”

“*[redacted lapse]*.”

“How old are you?”

"Seventeen, almost Eighteen. My birthday is next month." He tries to make small talk, but quickly falters after realizing whoever behind the camera is not going to go easy on him because of that.

"Who knows where you were before you got here?"

“*[redacted lapse]*.”

The voice doesn't change.

“Good.”

There's a visible shift in his body. The tightness in his face eases. And for a fleeting second, he gives a small, uncertain smile. He catches himself almost immediately, the smile faltering as confusion rushes back in.

“I - please,” he tries again, quieter now. “Could you just tell me where I am?”

No answer to that. The video ends.

Taking a big inhale, Ilya realizes he might not get anything useful out of these videos with how carefully edited they are. He goes back to the file, and after thinking for a moment, moves his finger to click open the clip attached to a specific incident report, the one about empathy exploitation, noted from day 23.

The screen fills with grainy footage from a narrow room lit too harshly from above, one of those sterile, colorless spaces where every sound seems to bounce back wrong.

Shane sits on a chair. His hands are behind his back - probably restrained, and the camera fixes directly on his face. It's been less than a month, but he looks so much thinner, the grey outfit he is wearing hangs loosely on him, his eyes filled with despair.

Another boy is on the floor, facing Shane, and the handler's voice is sharp enough to cut through the static as he orders Shane to watch.

Shane does watch. He watches with a kind of terrible, helpless focus, his shoulders drawing in as the other boy cries out, and when something happens - a button being pushed perhaps, the boy jerks up from the floor with a loud wail. Shane flinches so hard it is almost as though the punishment landed on him instead.

For one suspended second he looks stricken, not by fear but by the sheer force of his own empathy, and then he is speaking, too fast and too soft at first to be heard, before the words come through clearer, frantic and pleading and already half-broken: *Do it to me instead. I can take it. It's my fault. I will be good. Please - just let him go.*

His eyes are trained on the camera - or whoever sits behind. They are tear-filled, and they look so heartbreakingly helpless.

Do it to me instead.

Ilya realizes he has heard echoes of it before, that same soft, pleading voice, buried under different words. *I can handle it. It's fine. Sir, I can take more.*

Ilya shifts in his chair, suddenly aware of how still he has been. His fingers are digging into his palm, and he pushes the tablet away.

They will keep looking, but for now, he has something he can use to understand Shane's past better, to find a way to hopefully reverse what he has been through, to help him go back to being *Shane*, not the Shane after he was #24, but before.

*

When Ilya finally emerges from his study it's mid-afternoon. The new case turns out to be more involved than he expected. An existing client with a minor stake in a shipping company asked for help on a few delayed shipments, nothing visible enough to justify official intervention - or at least on paper. The losses are not trivial but not huge either, and the insurance claims are filed cleanly, approved cleanly, and forgotten.

Make sure they are regular delays - not something bigger hiding beneath. Ilya always appreciates a hunch like this, that what keeps his line of business afloat, and more often than not, the hunch turns into a reality that involves much more than what's on paper.

The pattern revealed itself quickly once he stripped out the noise. The containers are flagged as low-value cargo - industrial parts, bolts and screws - cycling through the same handful of routes. Each instance carries a gap of where tracking is lost. The missing records are not long enough to trigger audits, but enough to allow access.

Troy has already made calls to people who preferred not to be reminded of what they owed. And by noon they have access to customs routing data that didn't exist on paper. Ilya goes through a list of assets in his mind near the ports affected and assigns the ground verification job himself. Two of his operatives will be on-site within days, instructed to observe but not interfere.

That should be enough for now. The financials could wait until enough is gathered.

For now, the system is in motion - his money, his people, his access extending into places that do not open easily for others.

All of these happening while he waits for an update, safely in his much-too-large mansion that doesn't feel as empty these days, thanks to his little sub.

*

He steps out of the study at the sound of voices drifting through the house. He follows it to the kitchen.

Shane stands with his back to the doorway, an apron tied neatly at his waist, the strings pulling just enough to draw Ilya's eye. His right arm flexes as he kneads the dough, his left hand turning it.

There's a rhythm to it like he is familiar with the move. The movement carries through muscles in his shoulders and back, visible even beneath the fabric of his t-shirt.

"Good. Just like that." Ilya blinks. Marta is standing across the island, watching Shane's hands - and is she... approving?

Ilya wonders if he imagined it. Marta doesn't approve. She tolerates and corrects, occasionally she sighs in long-suffering disappointment. She is loyal, capable, indispensable - and never shy about letting Ilya know when he's failed to meet her standards. A misplaced book in the library. A forgotten coaster when he drinks his coffee. That time he tried to make something late at night and almost burned a pot, earning him a lecture that lasted longer than the cleanup.

But now - she wears a look that's almost motherly as she looks over Shane's work.

"Thanks, ma'am," Shane says softly, not looking up as he kneads.

"I swear, Shane, call me ma'am again -" Marta's tone snaps back into something more familiar.

Shane startles, his hands faltering. "Sorry! I'm sorry, Marta."

"Breathe," she says, already gentler. "I won't bite. Slow down. If you rush it -"

"It'll break," Shane finishes automatically.

Marta hums, satisfied. "You know it." Her gaze lingers on his hands. "Have you done this before? It's a good dough."

There's a pause before Shane resumes kneading, a little more carefully this time. "I haven't. Not that I remember." He hesitates. "But it doesn't feel new."

Something in Ilya's chest tightens.

He leans against the doorway instead of interrupting, watching. The ease in Shane's movements. The absence of fear, just him being there, doing something domestic in the kitchen. In *his* kitchen.

"What are you making?" Ilya clears his throat and Shane promptly jumps at it.

Shane turns too quickly, his whole body jolting before he steadies himself. "Sir." He still calls him Sir in front of other people, but Ilya doesn't mind, he likes that Shane is reserving his name for just between them, like a little sweet secret they share.

Behind the island, Marta fixes him with a look that clearly translates to: *must you still startle him?*

Ilya pretends not to notice.

He smiles instead, stepping closer. Shane lifts a hand to push his hair out of his eyes, leaving a streak of flour across his forehead without realizing it. The sight is so disarmingly cute that Ilya feels it somewhere deep in his ribs.

"Marta's teaching me how to make pasta," Shane says. "For dinner."

"From scratch?" Ilya leans in, glancing at the dough, the dusting of flour across the counter, the faint mess of effort.

“When was the last time you ate store-bought pasta, Ilya?” Marta cuts in, dry as ever.

Ilya laughs. “More recently than you’d like. When you were on vacation? That was survival mode.”

Shane looks at him then, his eyes so open and earnest. “We know it’s your favorite, so…”

He trails off, but he doesn’t need to finish. Marta does it for him. “So Shane asked me to teach him.” She paraphrases, her tone teasing, “*In case sir wants it when you are not here.*” There’s the faintest smile tugging at her mouth when she says it.

Shane flushes, color rising quickly across his cheeks. “I just - thought it would be useful.”

I will learn to be useful. Shane told him that, teary-eyed, not too long ago.

Ilya swallows the instinct to step closer and to brush the flour from Shane’s skin, to hold him and whisper sweet things to his little sub. But Marta is still watching.

He doesn’t care - but Shane will get uncomfortable. He gets shy with the most benign display of affections in front of other people.

The report from this morning flickers through Ilya’s mind. *Willingly engaged in public sexual acts.* His shy, sweet Shane, who flushes under a glance, who hesitates before reaching, who asks permission with his eyes, was stripped down and rewritten so completely, taught to override every instinct that once made him *him*.

Ilya exhales slowly, forcing the anger back down before it has somewhere to go.

Instead, he just smiles. “That’s perfect, thank you.”

Marta wipes her hands on her apron and unties it. “It needs to rest.” She gestures toward the dough. “Don’t overwork it. You know when to stop?”

Shane nods quickly. “Yes, I think so, ma’m…” He catches himself. “Marta.”

Marta gives him a look, but there’s no real bite in it this time. “Good. We will resume when it’s ready.”

She moves past Ilya without another word, leaving the two of them in the kitchen.

The moment Marta is out of the room, Ilya steps closer, his hands sliding behind Shane’s back, fingers brushing over the thin strings tied at his waist.

“My little sub.” He leans in, inhaling slowly. Shane smells like flour now, soft and powdery, but underneath it there is also a sweet scent that smells like *home*.

Shane’s knees buckle on cue.

Ilya tightens his hold immediately, steadying him, and Shane settles into the embrace as if it’s the most natural place in the world, his hands hovering at Ilya’s sides, careful not to smear flour across him.

“What was your trick, little sub?” Ilya murmurs, smiling against his temple. “How did you get Marta to be so nice to you?”

“Oh, umm.” Shane lowers his head, actually thinking, his brows drawing together in concentration in a way that makes him look unbearably soft, like a confused puppy trying to solve something important.

“She liked me more after I cleaned up your library - I noticed books on a few shelves were out of order, and after I organized the spice racks and the pantry,” he says quietly. “She said she would teach me how to cook.”

A shy smile flickers across his face. “She’s very kind.”

Ilya smiles at that.

It’s always the same with Shane - everyone is kind, everything is good, every small gesture is something to be grateful for. It’s the easiest thing in the world to be gentle with him, and Ilya cannot begin to understand how anyone ever managed not to be.

“Oh, are you hungry, Sir - Ilya?” Shane asks, glancing up at him. “We saved you something from lunch. Troy said you were busy today.”

Ilya doesn’t think he’ll ever get over that - his name in Shane’s voice, a lyrical tone in the end, like it’s supposed to be said gently. It instantly lifts his mood.

“It’s okay,” Ilya murmurs, his gaze drifting briefly to the island before returning to Shane, his hands tightening slightly at his waist as he leans closer. “I’ll wait for the pasta.”

He dips his head, voice lowering near Shane’s ear. “You smell delicious.”

Shane’s ears flush red almost instantly.

“Sir,” he stumbles, breath catching. “I need to knead it a little more, and then I can, I can...” He trails off, his gaze dropping somewhere below Ilya’s chest, unable to finish the thought.

Ilya chuckles softly, amused, and lifts his hand to Shane’s face, gently pinching his jaw between thumb and forefinger to tilt his head up.

“What do you call me?”

Shane swallows, eyes wide, always just on the edge of something too full to hold.

“Sir,” he whispers. Then, more carefully, almost testing the words as they leave him, “Because... want you, sir.” And then he adds gingerly, “want to play.” His face is so red like the ripest peach.

Ilya leans in and kisses him. A quiet, helpless sound escapes Shane’s throat as he tilts his head up to meet him, his hands lifting instinctively before dropping again, remembering the flour, his whole body trembling faintly like the energy has nowhere to go, caught somewhere beneath his skin.

When Ilya pulls back, Shane’s lips are flushed, slightly swollen, his eyes a little too bright.

He looks at Ilya, and an unguarded smile breaks across his face.

“What?” Ilya asks, already half undone by it.

Shane bites the inside of his cheek, trying and failing to hide it. “There’s a little flour on your face, sir.” He raises one hand and hovers a finger from Ilya’s right chin. “Right there.”

Ilya hums, amused, and takes Shane’s flour-dusted hand, guiding it deliberately across his own cheek.

“Here?”

Shane laughs - a real one, a soft, delighted sound that feels rare enough to catch.

“Sir!”

Ilya doesn’t stop there, with his other hand at the back of Shane’s neck, he dips his fingers into the flour on the counter and brushes a few pale streaks across Shane’s cheeks.

“A very pretty kitty,” he laughs, voice warm with quiet amusement. “One that makes pasta, too.”

Shane’s breath quickens, and he leans in instinctively, nudging closer, his body softening as he presses against Ilya, his head coming to rest on his shoulder.

“Sir...I - I just need a few more minutes.” His voice trembles. He is practically purring.

“Just Ilya,” he corrects gently, pressing a kiss into his hair. “We’ll play later tonight, okay? I want to watch you make pasta for me. My pretty cook.”

“...Okay, Ilya.”

“Can I sleep in your bed again tonight, Ilya?” He asks it in that soft voice, with those wide, earnest eyes, and Ilya thinks it is deeply unfair. There is no chance he will ever be able to say no when Shane looks at him like that.

“Of course, my pretty cook. You can come anytime you want.”

They stopped keeping track of the nights after the first one. What was supposed to be a few times a week has become every night. Shane always comes to him so politely, asking as if it is a favor Ilya might deny, as if being allowed to sleep beside him is something precious he has to earn.

And every night, Ilya has to remind him: it isn't a permission, it's just where Shane can choose to sleep now.

Shane lingers near Ilya’s shoulder for another moment, eyes half-lidded, as if waking slowly from something warm, before stepping back carefully. He rinses a towel at the sink, wrings it out, and gently wipes the flour from Ilya’s face before cleaning it again and doing the same for himself.

Ilya pulls out a stool and settles by the island, a soda in hand, watching.

Shane returns to the dough, his movements steady again, practiced in a way that doesn’t belong to someone learning for the first time, his biceps flexing with the motion, his left hand turning the dough with precision.

“I wish I knew how to cook,” Ilya says lightly. “Look at you, you know so much.”

Shane flushes. "I'm not sure I know... I don't remember, at least."

"Oh, no," Ilya laughs softly. "There's no way this is your first time. You're just making me look bad."

Shane smiles, but there's a faint sadness beneath it.

Ilya reaches out, resting his hand lightly against Shane's forearm.

"Shane - it's okay if you don't remember," he says gently. "You still know how to do it. Your hands remember, see?"

Shane nods, small and quiet.

"...Sometimes I wish my body didn't remember," he murmurs.

Ilya stills.

"Hey, hey, baby." He stands, stepping behind him again, wrapping his arms around his waist, resting his head against Shane's shoulder as he feels the tension settle there. "Stay with me."

A soft exhale.

"I'm very glad you remember how to make pasta," he adds, lighter now. "I won't have to survive on store-bought ones when Marta goes on vacation." He sighs dramatically. "She has far too many vacation days."

That earns him a real smile.

"I'll make it really good for you," Shane says, with that determined earnestness on his face.

"I know you will." Ilya watches his face carefully, waiting until the shadow from before has faded.

"Do you want Marta to sign your timesheet as well?" he adds. "You've been doing so much around the house. I didn't even realize."

Shane shakes his head immediately. "No, Ilya. This is for you. I don't want anything for it."

Ilya tightens his hold as he breathes down Shane's neck. He wants to tell Shane that he feels exactly the same when he gives him the bed, the food, and the library. He doesn't want anything back, he just wants Shane to be safe and happy. But he doesn't want to remind Shane of that conversation again.

"Thank you for doing this for me," he says instead. "It's been a while since someone cooked for me just because they wanted to."

There's a pause.

"Who was the last person?" Shane asks, his gaze fixed on the dough, his voice carefully neutral, but his body gives him away, shoulders tightening, hands slowing.

When no response comes. He presses a finger lightly into the dough, testing it. Then he speaks to himself, "It needs to rest now."

Ilya turns him gently, guiding him until he's facing him, boxing him in lightly against the counter, hands braced on either side.

"Is my little sub..." he murmurs, a hint of teasing in his voice, "jealous?"

Shane drops his gaze. He shakes his head, his lashes lower, shadows soft against his cheeks. "Sorry, sir," he says quietly. "It's not my place to ask."

"Hm, what if I want you to?"

"...You do?" Shane raises his eyes at that.

"Yes, I like it when my little sub is a little possessive." Ilya grins, "Makes me feel so good." He prolongs the "good", ending only when Shane breaks into a smile.

Shane bites his lips, a little scared still, but also a little more sure, "so who is it, sir?"

Ilya laughs, he loves it when his little sub dares to push just a little bit. "My mom, Shane! No one ever lived with me after I left my childhood home."

"Oh." Shane says. He rubs his nose, unaware of the smudge of flour finding its way back to his face now. "I can learn what she makes for you. I learn fast."

A bittersweet taste lingers on Ilya's tongue.

It's so easy to picture it - Shane in his mother's kitchen, sleeves pushed up, listening with that same careful focus he gives everything. Asking questions. Trying again when he gets it wrong.

She would have adored him.

She had always wanted more company in her kitchen. Her sons never gave her that. Ilya and his brother moved through her kitchen like it was given. When his mother called out for them, his brother dismissed it outright because it's "not a place for Doms", and Ilya was too young then to recognize the shadow that followed her smile.

By the time he was old enough to understand, she was rarely well-enough to be in the kitchen. And soon after that, she was gone.

She would love to teach you.

He brushes a long strand of hair away from Shane's eyes, "That would be amazing, Shane. But I want my pasta first." He leans over to poke the dough, "Is it ready?"

Shane gently catches Ilya's hand before it presses too far into the dough. "You have to wait, Ilya," he says, focused, almost absentmindedly. "It needs to rest a bit longer, otherwise the texture will be wrong."

He adjusts Ilya's hand slightly, guiding it away. "Good things take time."

Ilya watches him. "Mm," he hums. "Alright. You're the expert." His eyes linger on Shane, waiting for him to catch up on the thing he just said.

Shane blinks. It takes a second. Then another.

His hands still slightly against the counter, his gaze drifting, not to the dough, somewhere just past it as the words turn over in his head. His throat moves when he swallows.

“Oh,” he says softly. It’s quiet, mostly to himself.

Ilya leans in, brushing a light kiss against Shane’s temple. “Okay, Shane,” he murmurs. “We’ll be patient. Because good things are worth waiting for.”

Author’s Note: Kink-bits

Conditioning, Memory, and Trauma

While the Ring’s methods are fictionalized, they are inspired by real psychological concepts around **trauma and coercive control**. The idea that someone can have their identity completely erased and replaced is a fictional trope, because human memory does not work like a file that can simply be deleted. What can happen, however, is that severe, prolonged trauma can affect how memories are stored and accessed. Shane’s experience with the Ring is an exaggerated fictional example. The goal was not literally to erase him, but to make his previous identity feel unreachable and unsafe. Through isolation, fear, punishment, reward, and forced dependency, they taught him that survival depended on becoming exactly what they wanted.

This overlaps with concepts like **learned helplessness**: when someone has no meaningful choices for long enough, their brain adapts by focusing on what keeps them safe. For Shane, that meant becoming incredibly skilled at anticipating needs, following instructions, and prioritizing others, even when he no longer knew what *he* wanted.

Ilya’s approach is the opposite. He is not trying to rebuild Shane into someone new. He is creating enough safety for Shane to discover that the person they tried to erase was still there. However, that does require Shane to access part of his memories that don’t feel “safe”, hence his wish for just not remembering at all.

Service sub

Shane’s instinct to say “I want to be useful” overlaps with what, in a consensual kink context, might be called a **service-oriented submissive** - someone who finds fulfillment in doing things for their partner. However, in Shane’s case, this instinct is shaped by trauma and conditioning, where his value was tied to usefulness and compliance.

A key distinction in healthy D/s is that **service is a choice, not a requirement for worth**. A submissive is not valued *because* they serve; they choose to serve because they feel safe, valued, and fulfilled.

Chapter End Notes

Troy: You trust him too easily.

Ilya: I trust my instincts.

Troy: Your instincts once bought a stolen yacht.

Shane: I can make pasta?

Ilya: See? Totally safe, extremely reassuring.

Troy: Let me test that first.

Ilya: No way, no pasta for you.

Chapter 14: Date Night

Chapter Notes

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

Shane stares at the outfit laid out on the bed for a long time. That, by itself, feels strange.

Before Ilya, he rarely wore clothes. They were usually stripped away quickly anyway. Only when he had to be moved outdoors in the dead of winter would someone throw him an old jacket to cover his body, if whoever was handling him that day was kind enough. Most days, there had been no reason for them at all.

Here, at Ilya's house, he has learned that clothes can be soft. He has learned that he can wear different types of clothes for different activities marked in his daily planner - the one that Ilya gave him and he immediately fell in love with - garden duty with Harris, weekly bookshelf reorganizing, the daily dinner prep with Marta, or a workout in the gym.

He has learned that he now owns clothes that fit him only, and that the ones in his closet can grow in number and variety not out of necessity, but because Ilya saw them and thought, *Shane would like this*.

Still, the clothes waiting for him tonight feel different.

On his daily planner, there is a small red circle around today's date, and beneath it Shane has carefully written: *date night with Ilya*.

It marks the end of their trial period. It has been more than thirty days since they both signed their names on the contract, and on Day 30, Ilya had asked if he wanted to continue. Shane had almost had a panic attack when Ilya brought up the end of the trial.

But Ilya had only looked him in the eyes and told him that he would like to continue their agreement, to officially become Dom and Sub, if Shane still wanted. He mentioned legal steps they could take to make it more formal, and asked Shane if he wanted a new, permanent collar.

Shane had clutched the leather at his throat, shaking his head urgently, unwilling to give it up. It is the collar Ilya put on him, one he removes only to shower, then cleans and conditions carefully, almost reverently. One he will never give up.

So that is what they decided. They will complete the legal paperwork once Shane has an identity - Ilya is working on that - and Shane will keep the collar. In addition, Ilya is taking him out for a date a week later to celebrate.

"It will be fun," Ilya had said. "We'll go to a restaurant in the city. A proper date."

Shane doesn't really know what a date is, so he had asked Harris. Harris told him that people who like each other spend time together, eat good food, talk over drinks, and enjoy each other's company. Ilya will probably give him flowers, maybe even something shiny.

Shane had felt confused then. Every day with Ilya at home is already a date by that definition. But if Ilya wants to take him to the city, he has no objection. He still remembers the glimpse of the

skyline on their way to Ilya's mansion.

He had carefully marked his planner, and this morning Ilya sent the outfit to his room for tonight. It looks nicer than all of the nice clothes he already owns.

A pale blue knit, fine and light, soft enough that it barely holds its shape in his hands, like it belongs to warm air and sunlight instead of closets. When he lifts it, the fabric breathes, cool against his skin, almost like cotton but smoother. There is a fine sheen glint on it, reflecting light as Shane holds it up carefully as if it may melt away. The trousers are in beige, the material lighter than he expects, meant to move instead of hold.

It looks like something someone would wear on a quiet evening where the air is warm and the doors are open and nothing bad is waiting on the other side.

Shane puts it on.

He waits in the foyer ten minutes before the time Ilya told him, patient and still, carefully slipping on the pair of shoes Ilya left out for him. They aren't stiff the way he expects. The leather is soft, muted, quietly expensive - like everything else he's been given to wear. Probably too expensive for him to afford.

He knows that Ilya's things cost a lot. He just doesn't have a clear sense of how that compares to the hourly wage Ilya pays him.

Without anything to spend it on, the money doesn't feel real. It's just numbers sitting in a ledger Ilya insists he can access whenever he wants.

Still, it belongs to him. And that matters. Shane feels safe in that knowledge - safe, and proud that he earns something now, that it is his.

Voices drift from the study.

"Date night? You didn't tell me." Troy sounds surprised, a little irritated maybe.

"Are you my mother?" Ilya's voice is flat enough that Shane almost laughs.

"I'm your head of security. If you're going to a public place, you need to let me know."

"It's fine. We're going to Nocturne. It's exclusive enough."

"No, sorry, can't let you. Shit - I have to tell Harris. I was going to cook for him tonight."

Shane's head lifts at the mention of Harris.

"Ugh, it's fine. We'll be fine. Are you going to stand behind me and eavesdrop while I try to court Shane?"

Heat floods Shane's face.

He should leave. Pretend he was somewhere else, just passing through, not listening. But he's only halfway into taking the shoes off, fingers fumbling in sudden panic, when the footsteps approach and there's no time left to hide.

Troy and Ilya step into the foyer.

“Um - good afternoon, Sir. Hi, Troy.” His voice comes out small, his face burning so hot he can feel it.

Ilya is looking at him.

Those hazel-green eyes linger, and it feels so unfair, because the gaze is only making Shane's skin prickle even more. Ilya is dressed up too, in a soft, pale green shirt that matches his eyes, linen trousers falling effortlessly into place. He looks so relaxed but put together. Like this is all easy for him.

For a moment, Ilya looks almost as stricken as Shane feels. His eyes darken, fixed on Shane in a way that is grounding and dangerous all at once. His gaze moves slowly, taking him in, and then he grins.

It's such a wide grin. For a second Shane forgets how to breathe. *Do I look ridiculous? Is this so wrong it's funny?*

The front door opening cuts the moment clean in half.

Harris steps in, holding a large bouquet. The flowers look freshly cut, still carrying the warmth of the sun, the scent of the garden clinging to them. He pauses just inside, taking in the scene of those three in front of him: one flushed beyond reason, one smiling like an idiot, and one - his Troy - mildly annoyed.

“Oh, hello, my favorite people, all gathered in the foyer. What's the occasion?”

No one answers.

Harris nods to himself. “Right. I know the occasion.” He holds the bouquet out. “Here you go, Ilya, the one you requested. Flower language that says *you're the most beautiful person I know*.”

Ilya takes it, his grin widening. “Thanks, Harris. Which flower is that?”

“The whole thing, Ilya. It's a bouquet language,” Harris says, already glancing toward Troy. “Ready to go home?”

Troy exhales sharply. “Ilya's taking Shane to Nocturne. I'll need to be there.”

“You really don't -” Ilya starts.

“We're going to Nocturne?” Harris cuts in, bright and delighted. “That's wonderful. Thanks, Troy. Oh - and thank you too, Ilya, since you're paying.” His smile sharpens.

Ilya waves a hand. “Fine. But we're not sitting together.”

“Oh, I'm sure Troy can manage that.” Harris hooks himself onto Troy's arm, rocking it with barely contained excitement. “Are we going? It's a thirty-minute drive, and I'm starving.”

Shane speaks before he can stop himself, because he has been too overwhelmed to say anything so far, and because he can help -

“Oh Harris - if you slow your breathing, it dulls after a while. Drinking a lot of water also helps. Sometimes pressing here -” he gestures lightly at his side, uncertain now under everyone’s attention “... can distract from it.”

It comes out barely as a whisper as he realizes he has said something wrong and the room falls silent.

“We will make sure everyone eats soon,” Ilya says evenly, still smiling as he looks at Shane.

He is already moving to stand beside Shane, one hand settling around his waist, while the other holds out the large bouquet in front of him.

“Shane, this is for you. For our date.” His eyes are so soft that Shane almost forgets the silence around him.

Ilya is looking at him like he has done something precious, not just embarrassed himself. The tightness in Shane’s chest loosens slowly.

“Do you want to put this in a vase before we leave?”

Shane nods. Quietly, he says, “Thank you, Harris. And thank you, Sir. This is so beautiful.”

He takes the bouquet carefully and turns into the house.

Shane sits in the car again, but this time, he’s in the passenger seat. He’s never had this view before.

His lips part slightly as the world opens up in front of him, the road stretching ahead while trees and carefully kept gardens rush toward them and slip past just as quickly. It feels faster from here, like he’s part of the movement.

There’s soft music playing in the background, something without lyrics, just light, drifting notes that seem to fill the space between them without demanding attention. The air smells faintly like Ilya, a clean and warm scent that Shane has already started to associate with safety... with home.

Ilya’s hand comes to rest on his thigh. It’s so casual like it belongs there.

But It’s too much. It’s too soft and sweet in a way that makes Shane nervous. He suddenly understands why tonight feels different.

It isn’t just that they’ve left the house. It isn’t just that they are going into the city, or the restaurant, or the fact that everything is new.

It’s that Ilya is *looking* at him differently. Paying attention to him in a way that feels focused and intentional, in a place that’s totally new and offers no quiet corners of familiarity.

Just Ilya, right beside him, close enough to touch, choosing him in the open where anyone could see.

Shane swallows. He doesn’t know how to be this version of himself.

He doesn’t know how a Sub is supposed to behave in public - what’s allowed, what’s expected, what would be too much or not enough. He doesn’t know how to sit, where to look, whether he should speak or wait.

And more than that, he doesn't know what to do with the way Ilya treats him - showing him to the outside world, like he is something worth his attention and time, someone Ilya chooses as *his* sub.

Shane keeps his eyes wide as they drive deeper into the city, letting himself focus on what he *can* understand - the buildings rising higher, the movement of people along the sidewalks, the constant flow of cars weaving around them.

They stop in front of a low-rise brick building, its walls softened by creeping ivy that climbs steadily upward, giving it an understated charm.

They cross the sidewalk together until they reach a heavy door painted the same shade as the brick, blending in so seamlessly it almost disappears.

Ilya opens the door without knocking. And as he does, his hand finds Shane's and guides him inside, his fingers closing around Shane's, giving him a gentle squeeze.

Low golden light settles over everything. The room is busy but in a quiet way. There are muted voices, glass against glass, something slow and instrumental playing in the background.

Shane's shoulders tighten before he can stop them. It's too nice, too quiet yet too busy at the same time, reminding him of the stage that he was put on before he was sold. He feels sweat pickling in his hands as they become cold.

The hostess is pretty in a remote way. Her attention goes straight to Ilya.

"Good evening, Mr. Rozanov."

Ilya inclines his head slightly. "Good evening."

Her gaze shifts to Shane, just for a moment. It isn't unkind, but it is assessing, quick and practiced, and gone again before he can decide what it means.

"We already seated Mr. Barrett. Right this way." she says.

"Thank you."

As she turns to lead them, Ilya's grip on Shane's hand loosens. Just before he can panic, it finds its way back. Ilya's hand slides from Shane's fingers, moving instead to rest at his waist. The shift is smooth and effortless, a weight resting low on Shane's back.

Shane lets himself be led. Ilya's palm is warm and grounding behind him, slowly calming the loudness in his brain.

They pass through the main room, where conversations murmur under the dim light. Shane keeps his gaze low, catching glimpses of well-dressed people, soft laughter, the shine of glassware.

There are kneeling pillows placed at some tables, Doms enjoying the quiet intimacy with their Subs at their feet, under the small candlelight on the table and demurred settings.

Ilya doesn't slow.

A curtain is drawn aside for them, and they step into a smaller room beyond.

It's quieter here with more space between the tables. No one is kneeling. Shane knows the moment they enter that there are mostly Doms sitting around, and his posture tightens uncontrollably as he keeps his head even lower.

There are few heads lifted as they step in. No one is openly staring, but enough to make him self-aware again, Ilya's hand resting at the small of his back the only thing anchoring him in a room that feels too foreign.

"Here you are," the hostess says softly.

Ilya reaches past Shane and pulls out his chair first.

"Sit, Shane."

Shane looks at Ilya, and turns his head around to look at the room they just passed, where kneeling pillows are placed at the side of the tables. "Sir..."

Ilya gently guides him to the chair and pushes on his shoulder to have him sit down, "Just Ilya tonight, Shane."

Shane blinks hard as a well of emotions surge in his chest. He wasn't prepared to kneel at a place so nice and enjoy a quiet dinner with Ilya, let alone sitting across from him, while most Subs in the room do not have that privilege. He raises his head slightly and spots a few tables away, Troy and Harris already seated. Harris turns and winks at him promptly, drawing out a tight smile from Shane.

He swallows once and says in a quiet voice, "Ilya - I don't know... how to do this. I'm sorry." His fingers are twisting the fabric of his pants now, his lips a little red as he chews on them. He is sure that he's going to make a fool of himself, among everyone who is already eyeing them for whatever reason.

"Hand, Shane." Ilya extends one hand across the table, and Shane slowly releases the fabric he's twisting, putting his hand in that large, warm hand. He feels better instantly.

"Eyes on me." The low voice is mesmerizing, he loves the clean instructions he can just follow, and he raises his eyes to look into those eyes that always stir something in his chest.

"You are here with me, just like when we were at home. I want you to focus on me, not other people, ok? It will be a good time, I promise."

Shane gives a small nod. He can still sense the Doms around him in this room and he instinctively tenses at that. But the tables are spaced apart. Ilya is right here, still holding his hand. And Troy and Harris are close enough to see. That helps more than he expects.

When the menus arrive, Shane glances down at his, but the words blur almost immediately. It's like trying to read something in a language he almost understands, but not quite.

Ilya notices and doesn't ask him to make a choice this time. He reaches over and closes Shane's menu, "Can I order for you?"

Relief moves through Shane so quickly it almost makes him lightheaded.

There's a small pause after the waiter leaves but Ilya doesn't let the silence stretch too far. "I know this feels new, but you are doing great, Shane."

Shane's fingers tighten slightly in Ilya's hand before easing again.

"Stay with me," Ilya adds, his thumb brushing once, slowly. "Tell me something simple," Ilya says. "What can you smell?"

Shane blinks, caught off guard - it's something he can easily answer, it won't be wrong.

He draws in a breath, actually paying attention. "Wine," he says first, tentative. "And... something warm. Like - bread, maybe."

His voice steadies a little as he speaks. "And... something sweet. I don't know what it is."

Ilya watches him, expression unreadable but attentive. "That's Good," he says. "Very good."

Shane's shoulders loosen a fraction.

"And what can you hear?"

Shane tilts his head slightly without thinking, listening past the noise in his own chest.

"Glasses," he says after a second. "And... people talking. But it's quiet." He pauses and zooms out of those sounds, "There is music in the background."

"That's good." Ilya repeats.

His thumb brushes once more over Shane's hand. "You're here with me," Ilya says. "And you are so pretty tonight."

Shane blushes and stutters miserably, "You, you dressed up too, sir- Ilya."

"Yes, but I don't look pretty." There is a glint of light in Ilya's eyes, shining brighter than the romantic candlelight on the table.

"I wanted to take you out because I want to experience so many things with you, Shane. I love staying at home with you, but I also want to show you the world outside." Ilya's eyes are locked on Shane as he speaks; there is nothing but sincerity in them.

Shane nods, whispering quietly, "I want that too, Ilya."

"Does this bring back any memories - a restaurant, dining out, perhaps?" Ilya prompts gently.

Shane falls silent at that. It does, in a distant way. He knows how he should greet the waiter and ask for recommendations, but only if the Dom at the table gives him the permission. Otherwise, it's always safer to let the Dom order. He also knows he should keep the conversation going, but make sure the Dom chooses the topics, and never disagree outright - offering another option is acceptable, but not one that directly opposes.

These are social etiquettes he somehow knows, things acquired before he went through those dark years. But just like making pasta, the memory is locked somewhere in his body, showing only the surface, not the moments that built it.

He shakes his head slightly.

Ilya doesn't look discouraged. He's still smiling, as if this is the best evening he's had, and his fingers are now intertwined with Shane's, so intimate it sends a wave of warmth through Shane's stomach.

"Eating out always reminds me of something. Growing up, my father was always busy. So my mother took my brother and me out to places like this."

A faint smile touches his mouth. "She said if we could behave in a restaurant, we could behave anywhere."

That earns him a real smile from Shane, small but bright.

"She took you when you were little?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "Against her better judgment, probably."

"I was loud. Impatient. Deeply offended when food took longer than five minutes."

Shane lets out the softest breath of a laugh, surprised out of himself.

"And your brother?"

"Oh, he was worse," Ilya says immediately. "I complained. He protested. It was very balanced." His tone shifts softer, "It wasn't easy for her. Taking two boys out alone, as a Sub."

Shane's eyes widen, and then he nods, more certain now. "But she taught you well."

"I learned eventually," Ilya says. "Mostly after embarrassing her enough times."

There's a quiet pause, comfortable this time.

"She must be proud of you," Shane says, earnest as ever. "You're the best person I know."

Ilya exhales softly through his nose, a smile touching his face. "That's a very generous assessment," he says, deflecting just enough.

Then, he says gently, "I hope she would be." He pauses for a beat, "She passed a while ago."

"Oh... I'm so sorry, Ilya." Shane slowly lifts Ilya's hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss there. His eyes are filled with sorrow. Ilya has always known how empathetic Shane is, but the depth of it still surprises him.

"It's been a long time," he says. "It doesn't...feel as intense as it used to."

Ilya meets Shane's eyes, his expression shifting to be more serious, "Do you think, your people might still be looking for you?"

Shane looks away. His hand is still holding Ilya's, but his fingers loosen slightly. "I don't know, Ilya. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

“Yes,” Ilya says, “but maybe we could look for them. It wasn’t possible to find you when you were not existing in the outside world.”

Shane slowly pulls his hand back, his fingers curling around his glass, though he doesn’t lift it. “I like being with you, Ilya. So much. I don’t know if I would like my... family, if they are still around.”

He lowers his gaze to the glass. “It’s been so long, after all. And I’m not... me, anymore.”

As if he can see the worry rising behind Shane’s eyes, Ilya adds quickly, “You will still be with me. I don’t want to lose you. I only want there to be more people who care about you.” *Because you are so easy to love.*

Shane nods faintly. “Just you is more than anything I could imagine, Ilya. It’s more than enough.”

“Sometimes things come back in pieces,” Ilya offers after a while, “If anything ever comes to you... you can tell me, if you are comfortable.”

Shane nods again. But he doesn’t say anything. The food arrives, breaking the topic to his relief.

The server places the plates down with elegance, explaining the dish in a way Shane only half follows. There are too many words for something that looks so simple.

A clear broth sits in a delicate bowl, warm steam rising gently from the surface. A few vegetables and small pieces of tender chicken rest inside, arranged carefully but not excessively.

Shane looks at it for a long moment. It is beautiful. But more importantly. It looks safe.

Nothing is hidden underneath a thick sauce. Nothing unfamiliar is mixed together. There are no sharp smells, no overwhelming colors, no expectation that he will eat something he has never seen before.

He takes a small sip of the broth. The warmth spreads slowly, his eyes almost fluttering shut.

“I really like this, it’s so warm, mild but there are still layers of flavors to it.” he says after a moment.

Ilya smiles widely, “I’m glad. I thought you might like it.”

Shane lowers his gaze, hiding the warmth in his face. He always thought that Doms order for their Subs to show control and exert their power, but Ilya noticing what he likes and ordering something that’s exactly right for him shows nothing but *care*.

The soup is warm and comforting, spreading a sense of safety across his body. He thinks about his little awkward remark about handling hunger earlier today, and realizes suddenly that he hasn’t had to push down the uncomfortable longing for food for a long time.

His hand trembles slightly at that. The memories that he has seemingly lost don’t matter. If this is the only life he lives, he is already feeling like the richest person in the world.

The main course arrives not long after. It’s again a simple but beautiful dish - soft slices of chicken, a pale, smooth bed of mashed potatoes, a light sauce brushed carefully to one side instead of covering everything.

He glances at Ilya briefly. He is already eating, nodding to himself as he cuts his steak.

“So,” Ilya says as he pops a piece of meat into his mouth. Somehow Ilya masters the eating and talking and does it with an air of comfortable ease, “how are you liking your days lately?”

Shane brightens immediately at that. “I love them,” he says, too quick and too earnest. “All of it. It’s... it’s nice having things to do. Real things. I like helping in the house. And the kitchen - Ms. Marta lets me do more now. I think she trusts me not to ruin things.”

Ilya smiles as he shakes his head, “I think you might just be her favorite person in the world.”

“And the garden,” Shane adds, almost like he’s been saving it. “With Harris. That’s still my favorite. He explains everything. And I learn so much..”

There’s a quiet note of pride there, making Ilya smile.

“We planted new herbs last week. And I’m officially on rose duty now.”

Ilya nods, he doesn’t probe what that duty involves, Shane for sure looks like he is enjoying it.

Shane pauses, eyes Ilya quickly, then speaks more softly, “I don’t know why I get paid for it. It’s...” he huffs a soft breath, shaking his head. “It’s just fun.”

Ilya laughs out loud, enough to draw people’s attention, Troy’s eyes are fully on them all of a sudden.

“Don’t remind me,” Ilya says as he tries to tame his laugh. “I’m the one paying you.”

Shane smiles, quick and bright. “I like being useful.”

Ilya puts down his utensils and reaches out a hand to cover Shane’s. “You are very useful, Shane. But not just that. Everyone in the house loves having you around.”

He pauses to make sure the next thing he says lands, “You are our bright sunshine.”

Shane’s eyes rim red at that. He blinks quickly, and then snuffles once, gathering himself, “What about you?” Shane asks carefully.

Ilya glances at him. “What about me?”

Shane hesitates, clearly choosing his words. “What do you... do? In the study, everyday.”

Ilya watches him for a second, “Very little,” he says at last.

Shane blinks.

“I send emails. I call people,” Ilya continues, completely straight-faced. “Occasionally I tell people not to panic. Sometimes they listen.”

Shane smiles as he bites down his lower lips. Like he is indulging Ilya for being mischievous, and Ilya loves that little smile.

Ilya talks with his fork pointing up, a piece of steak still on it. "Officially, I run a security company. We keep things from going wrong."

"That sounds important." Shane thinks about it before offering.

"It sounds more interesting than it is," Ilya says. "Sometimes I piss people off, that's why that one has to follow me even on a date night." He lowers his voice, jabbing a thumb backwards towards Harris and Troy's table without turning.

Shane glances quickly at Troy, who is narrowing his eyes as he notices Ilya's gesture, before turning his attention back to Ilya.

"I think I like my job better," Shane says quietly.

Ilya smiles widely. "Oh, be careful. I might get jealous and try to trade places with you."

Shane doesn't notice the room anymore after that.

Time flows quietly around them, passing through exchanges about their lives, small discoveries, and laughter. Some of it is quiet, like Shane's, hesitant but growing easier. Some of it is not quiet at all, especially when Ilya forgets himself and laughs openly at something Shane says.

By the time their plates are cleared away, Shane's shoulders have relaxed completely. Ilya's eyes are so gentle on him, and then - leaning over slightly, he brushes a small smudge from the corner of Shane's lips.

The touch is brief, gentle. But before Shane can process it, Ilya brings his thumb to his own mouth.

Shane's mouth falls open. He can't find his words. He gulps instead, feeling the heat creeping up to his cheek.

The server returns with the dessert menu at the right moment, saving Shane from overthinking that gesture.

Ilya doesn't reach for it. Instead, he nudges one slightly toward Shane.

"You should order this one," he says.

Shane blinks. "Me?"

"Yes." Ilya's gaze softens. "Because my little peach deserves the sweetest thing in life."

Shane immediately lowers his head, trying and failing to hide his blush.

"I don't want to order wrong."

Ilya shrugs. "I know. So many ways to go wrong with dessert choices. Be careful - this is your chance to prove you have better taste than me. So don't mess it up."

Then Ilya tilts his head, a hint of smugness showing there. "Actually, that's impossible."

Shane looks up. "What?"

“I have the best taste of all. Because I picked you.”

The answer is so confidently ridiculous that Shane can't help it. He rolls his eyes just slightly - something he's seen Harris do often enough to copy.

“Ilya-” he drags the name out, a soft lilt at the end. He doesn't miss what it does. The smugness slips from Ilya's face for just a second.

And... Shane squints slightly, is he... blushing? It must be the lighting.

Shane shakes his head, retreating back to the safety of the menu, scanning the five dessert options printed neatly on the small card.

Then something flickers. “Ice cream,” he says quietly.

Ilya tilts his head. “You want ice cream? I think they have a seasonal sorbet...” He leans in, glancing at the menu.

“I just...” Shane hesitates, trying to hold onto it. “I remembered something. Ice cream. In a cone. The kind with the... grids on it?”

His brows pull together slightly. “I remember eating that.”

Ilya stills. “Waffle cone?” he says, a little too quickly. “You want ice cream in a waffle cone?”

There's something unexpectedly bright in his expression, too pleased for something so small.

Shane glances at him, unsure. “It just came up randomly. I don't need to have it now. The sorbet sounds good...”

“Oh no,” Ilya says immediately. “I disagree. If that's one of the first things you remember, we're getting it.”

Before Shane can respond, Ilya turns, already scanning the room. Troy is a few tables away, mid-conversation with Harris, their hands loosely linked, both of them look pleasantly lost in each other's eyes.

Ilya leans closer. “On three, we run.”

Shane gasps. “What?”

“Three.” And then - “Let's go.” Ilya grabs his wrist and pulls him up in one smooth motion.

Shane barely has time to react before they're moving.

They rush past tables of quietly dining patrons, past the rows of Doms and their Subs still arranged on kneeling pillows, past the dim hallway leading toward the entrance.

Everything blurs.

“Ilya -” Shane half-laughs, half-panics.

“Trust me,” Ilya throws over his shoulder.

At the host stand, he doesn't even slow.

"Invoice my account, please," he says smoothly to the startled hostess. Then, as an afterthought, "Oh, and put Barrett's tab on there as well."

He glances back, already grinning. "Extra tip if the valet delays his car for five minutes."

And then they're out the door.

Behind them - "Roz, wait!"

Shane hears it just as the door swings shut. Summer breeze hits his face. Ilya lets go of his wrist as they approach the car, turning toward him with a satisfied grin that makes his heart flutter.

"Still got it," he says as they get in quickly, slamming the doors shut. "Outrunning my own security."

Shane is breathless, a little stunned, but smiling brightly. "That was impressive, Ilya," he says, playing along.

That earns him a wide, boyish grin.

"Is this something you practice often? Some sort of drill?" Shane adds, his eyes are smiling, teasing.

Ilya barks out a laugh. "You're funny," he says, glancing at him like that realization is still new.

"No. I just don't want him third-wheeling our ice cream date." He is looking at Shane with that soft look again, like he is saying something important and wants to make sure it lands with Shane.

Shane looks down at his hand. An ice cream date, after a dinner date.

Ilya pulls up a couple of blocks away, stopping in front of a small ice cream shop glowing softly under warm lights.

Everything feels softer inside.

Golden light spills across glass cases lined with rows of ice cream in muted, pastel colors, the faint scent of sugar and vanilla hanging in the air in a way that feels almost nostalgic, even if Shane can't quite place where.

"Take your time," Ilya says, his voice is gentle now, the earlier edge of mischief fading into a tone that's patient and attentive, as he comes to stand just slightly beside Shane.

Shane nods, though he doesn't look at him, his attention caught between recognition and uncertainty as he leans in just a little, studying the options.

There are more than he expected. Too many, maybe.

But it doesn't overwhelm him the way it might have before. Not with Ilya here, a few steps beside him, looking at him like he wants to buy him all the ice cream in the world.

“This one,” Ilya says after a moment, lifting a hand to gesture lightly toward the side of the display. “That’s the waffle cone you were talking about.”

Shane follows the motion, his eyes landing on the stack of cones - golden, crisp, the faint grid pattern catching the light. “I think that’s it,” he murmurs.

“Do you remember the flavor you like?” Ilya asks.

Shane hesitates, his brows pulling together as he looks over the options again.

“I don’t know,” he admits quietly.

“That’s alright,” Ilya says easily, like it’s totally normal to not have a favorite ice cream flavor. “We’ll figure it out.”

He gestures, and a moment later, small sample spoons are set in front of them.

Shane takes one carefully, and tries vanilla first.

The reaction is subtle but immediate - his shoulders ease just slightly, his expression softening in a way that feels more like recognition than discovery.

“I like that,” he says.

“Of course you do,” Ilya replies, a trace of teasing slipping back into his tone. “Vanilla. Safe choice for a very good boy.”

Shane glances at him, although he is too busy savoring that mild and sweet flavor to say anything back.

Another spoon. Chocolate this time.

He shakes his head almost immediately, the richness too much, before reaching for the next.

Pistachio. That one makes him pause longer, his gaze dropping slightly as he considers it. “It’s different, almost a little savory,” he says slowly, like he’s searching for the right word and settling on the closest one he can find. “I like it too.”

“Then get both,” Ilya says.

Shane looks up at him, a little surprised. “I can?”

“Yes.” Ilya shrugs faintly. “I will buy you a thousand flavors if you like them all.”

When the waffle cone with two scoops of ice cream is handed to him, Shane takes it carefully, his fingers adjusting around the cone as though his hands are searching for the memory of how to hold something like this, something simple and familiar from a life that feels just out of reach.

He studies it for a second, then leans in and takes a tentative lick, before his lips close softly around the edge to catch the melting sweetness. The flavor blooms across his tongue - rich and cool and almost startling in how indulgent it feels, and he pauses, drawing in a quiet breath as it settles.

He lifts his eyes to Ilya without thinking, wanting to share it, only to stop when he catches the look on his face - the curve of his mouth, the unmistakable glint of an emotion that's sharper and hungrier than before, in those pale green eyes fixed entirely on him.

"Oh, sorry, Ilya, you haven't got yours," Shane says quickly, like he's just remembered the world beyond this moment. "This is really good. You should have some too."

Then, as if another thought sparks all at once, he straightens slightly, a flicker of excitement lighting up his expression. "Can I buy you one? I have money now." The realization seems to delight him in a way that's almost boyish, unguarded and bright.

Ilya laughs, looking at him with something openly indulgent. "Wow, Mr. Rich Man," he says easily. "But no. I think I'll just have some of yours, if that's alright."

Shane nods immediately, and holds the cone out toward him without hesitation, waiting.

But Ilya doesn't take the cone.

Instead, his hand closes gently around Shane's wrist and guides it upward. The movement is steady and certain, leaving Shane with no choice but to follow as his breath catches somewhere in his chest.

Ilya's gaze never leaves his as he leans in, and then slowly, he takes a long lick from the rounded scoop, his tongue flattening, his nose almost dipping in.

Shane wants to look away, but his eyes don't oblige. He gulps pathetically at that. His lips fall open.

"Hmm," Ilya says, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Very good ice cream indeed. Is this what you wanted?"

"Yes, Ilya, I..."

The words disappear.

All Shane can see are Ilya's lips, the faint sweetness left behind from the ice cream, the warmth of his smile, the way he looks at Shane that always makes him fluster.

Shane leans in before he can overthink it, pressing a kiss to those lips and tasting the lingering sweetness there.

Ilya responds immediately, one hand settling around his waist as he deepens the kiss, and Shane feels himself getting lost in the warmth of it, in the strange realization that this is something he can have now. Something soft and happy.

"Home?" Ilya asks when they finally pull apart.

His voice is quieter, rougher than usual.

"Yes," Shane whispers quickly. Then, remembering the ice cream still in his hand, he lifts it slightly. "Can I eat this in the car?"

His face is flushed all the way down to his neck.

Ilya laughs softly. "Yes. Come on."

He takes Shane's free hand, and together they hurry back toward the car.

Shane tries to focus on his ice cream, because it is so good, how can he forget something that tastes so good? But it's so hard to do that, because the moment they get out of the city blocks and onto the highway, Ilya's hand moves to his thigh.

Shane gulps as he looks down at that hand, moving higher and higher, the heat of that palm seeping through his pants, spreading all the way to his stomach.

"Do you... want another bite of the ice cream?" Shane offers weakly, his voice trembling.

"No, Shane. You know I want a bite of something else." Ilya smirks. His eyes are fixed ahead, but Shane feels like he might as well be naked in Ilya's eyes now.

He rocks his hips forward and rolls down on the seat slightly, so Ilya has better access to the part of his pants that's tenting. Ilya's finger brushes over the sensitive tip through his pants, and Shane lets out a needy moan, his hips bucking up at the touch.

A ringtone slices through the thick air. Ilya mumbles something, pressing a button. Troy's voice suddenly comes up in the car, startling Shane. "Please tell me you two are heading home." The voice is dry.

"Oh, we had to stop somewhere, but we are on the way now." Ilya says lightly, his right hand is grabbing the shape of Shane through the pants, the touch so firm that Shane almost yelps. He shoves the ice cream into his mouth before he lets out a sound. The cold sweetness permeates through his mind.

"Don't do that again. Roz."

"Fine, Troy. But I let you tag along to dinner! How was your date?" Ilya's hand is now stroking Shane up and down, with force and speed, like he isn't just chitchatting with his friend or security or whatever. Shane can't think anymore.

Shane gasps silently, his hand goes to Ilya's hand, but before he dares to push it away, he sees the stern look in Ilya's glance, and gives up. He tries to muffle his moans in the ice cream again, but it's too much, and Ilya's hand tightens even more all of a sudden.

Shane whimpers uncontrollably.

"What's the sound, Roz? Did anyone get hurt?" Troy is alert right away.

"What? No, relax. We are in the car. Very safe." Ilya chuckles.

It's not safe at all. Shane wants to scream. He is handling a dripping ice cream, a very hard cock, and his Dom who's hand and eyes keep riling him up even more.

"Okay. I will get notified when you get home. See you next week." There is a sound in the background. And then - "Harris says thanks for dinner again."

"Tell him it's nothing. Shane - do you want to speak to Harris?" Ilya glances again at Shane, who is on the verge of crying at this never ending phone call.

“No, sir. Ah - just, just have a weekend. A good weekend I mean.” Shane throws his head back and squeezes his eyes shut.

The line disconnects.

“Ilya.”

The word has an edge that Ilya has never heard from Shane before. Ilya stares for a second before a grin slowly spreads across his face.

Shane looks angry. Very adorably angry.

“What. You don’t like it?” Ilya teases, eyeing Shane again to capture that look in his mind.

“I- no, I do, but it’s, it’s embarrassing. Troy doesn’t need to know.” His voice is still a little shaky, but he has gathered himself now that Ilya stops touching him.

“Well,” Ilya says, “you know you can always tell me when something is too much.”

Shane looks at him.

“You can say stop,” Ilya reminds him. “And I’ll stop. Promise.”

The teasing returns a moment later. “Troy doesn’t know anything. Trust me. He is only sharp in security matters.”

Shane doesn’t respond. He takes a bite of his waffle cone. He chews hard as if it’s the ice cream that has just bullied him, still wearing that adorable angry look. The crispy cone makes crunchy noises in his mouth.

“Can I have another bite?”

“No, Ilya.” Shane narrows his eyes.

Ilya can’t hide his grin when he savors that first ever “no” coming out of Shane’s mouth. Somehow that answer makes him happier than almost anything else tonight.

“Will you save me a bite if I touch you more?” Ilya grins wide, his hand already reaching over, hovering above Shane’s leg.

“...Maybe.”

Author’s Notes: On the “Quiet” Kink

This chapter is lighter on overt kink, but it’s actually full of small, everyday D/s practices that often get overlooked. Not every expression of dominance and submission is intense or scene-based. In many real-life dynamics, it shows up in subtle invisible ways:

- making decisions on what to wear, what to eat (ordering food)
- a guiding / steering hand at back when entering a new space

- maintaining light, grounding touch (like a hand on the thigh)
- taking responsibility for logistics and social navigation

These gestures might seem small, but they do a lot of emotional work. They create a sense of **structure, safety, and being held**, especially in environments that are new or potentially overwhelming. For someone like Shane who is still figuring himself out, this kind of subtle guidance allows him to *exist* without constantly second-guessing every move.

And one important note: when these dynamics exist in public, they should remain **discreet and respectful of others**. D/s is not about drawing non-consenting people into a scene or making the dynamic performative for an outside audience.

Next up: the thing people do to wrap up a good date! 🔥

Chapter End Notes

Troy: I regret answering that call.

Ilya: You called me.

Troy: I regret that too.

Shane: I'm so sorry, Troy.

Troy: Shane, you've done nothing wrong.

Ilya: He refused to share his ice cream with me.

Troy: Good. Growth.

Harris: Historic moment. Should we mark the calendar?

Ilya: I already did.

Chapter 15: The first time

Chapter Notes

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

Shane somehow manages not to come in the car, probably because Ilya only has one hand free to help him, and when he gets close, he is far too shy to ask Ilya to speed up.

But by the time they pull into the driveway, he is already wound so tightly that it is almost unbearable. Despite the loose trousers he is wearing, getting out of the car and walking the short distance into the house feels almost painful.

The moment they step inside, when Shane bends down to take off his shoes, he immediately feels Ilya's heat pressing against him from behind. His heart stutters wildly in his chest. He turns around, his knees hitting the floor as he looks up at Ilya, wanting - *needing* - to make it absolutely clear so that Ilya will not turn him away again.

"Sir, I... I really want it. Please."

His hands slide up to rest on either side of Ilya's thighs. He bats his eyes at Ilya as he looks up through his lashes.

Ilya's finger brushes over Shane's lips, still faintly sweet from the ice cream, and Shane's eyes flutter shut at the tenderness of the gesture.

"Oh, I know, Shane. You need me to fuck you, hard."

Ilya's low voice rolls over him, and Shane feels it everywhere. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying with every bit of willpower he has not to lose himself from the very first dirty thing Ilya says tonight.

"Yes, sir. I need you so badly."

"Good boy. You can say my name tonight if you want."

Shane still does not understand why people seek intimacy if not to dominate and submit, but he cannot risk Ilya discovering that and pulling away from him again. So he nods eagerly, parting his lips as he looks up.

"Ilya. I want you, Ilya."

Ilya takes Shane's hand and helps him back onto his feet, guiding him toward the stairs.

Near the bedroom, Shane slows down, almost dragging his feet. "Can I clean up first? Sir... Ilya. I'll be quick."

His face flushes as he lowers his eyes. He showered before the date, but the urge to scrub himself clean again before this is overwhelming.

"No. I'll shower with you, sweetheart." Ilya takes his hand and leads him down the hallway toward his bedroom.

Shane's mind goes completely blank at the pet name. He simply lets Ilya guide him into the bedroom - the one that they share now, and then into the bathroom, too stunned to say anything.

"What are you waiting for? Get in there."

Ilya raises a brow at him, teasing. Shane exhales. He is strangely relieved that Ilya is still bossy, even though tonight he is Ilya, not Sir.

Quietly, he removes his clothes and folds them neatly before placing them in the laundry basket. The delicate knit goes on the shelf for now because it probably needs to be dry cleaned. He glances down, then steps into the shower with his head lowered.

He doesn't know how to do this.

He has always handled the cleaning part alone, trying to hide away from wandering eyes and unwanted hands as he did it. He knows there are consequences if he does not prepare himself properly.

But Ilya wants to shower with him.

And that is something Shane has never done before.

Strong arms wrap around his shoulders, and Shane swallows hard. Ilya's warmth is everywhere. The water begins to fall from the showerhead, cascading over them. Shane closes his eyes as he buries his face against Ilya's shoulder, letting the warmth wash over him.

"Relax, sweetheart. You're so tense." Ilya's voice is soft, almost soothing.

Shane tries.

He realizes he is trembling slightly, not from fear exactly, but from the unfamiliarity of it all. He tells himself to calm down, to remember that he wants this, that Ilya will never hurt him.

But every experience he has ever had with sex has been painful and humiliating, and he does not know what to do with this kind of intimacy. Not when his body is asking him to trust Ilya with everything he has but his mind is screaming at him telling him to run.

Ilya cups his face in both hands, waiting until Shane meets his eyes. He guides him one step backward so the water is no longer hitting directly against his face.

"You trust me, yes?"

Shane nods immediately.

"We go slowly. And if at any time you want to stop, you tell me to stop. Okay?"

Shane nods again.

"I'm serious, Shane." Ilya's fingers brush gently beneath his eyes. "If you tell me to stop, we can take a break. We can try again later, or tomorrow. I promise you."

His thumb traces softly along Shane's skin.

“But if you don’t tell me when you need something, then we will both have to wait much longer before we try again.”

“I understand, Ilya.” Shane’s voice is quiet. “I’ll let you know.”

“My perfect baby.” Ilya smiles before lowering his head and kissing him gently.

It is such a good kiss.

Shane loves kissing. He always has. But it never occurred to him that he could ask for a kiss before anything else happened, that something so tender could be part of sex too.

And now Ilya is giving him the most knee-weakening kiss he has ever experienced.

Shane melts into it, a soft sound escaping him as he lets Ilya take more.

Ilya keeps one hand at his waist, holding him close, while the other moves to give Shane’s cock a few tugs. Shane shudders, his bottom lip caught gently between Ilya’s teeth, and the warmth spreading through him burns away the fear and uncertainty that had been there only moments before.

Shane moves one hand behind himself, trying to handle the preparation quietly, the way he always does. But Ilya catches his hand immediately.

“Hands on my shoulders, Shane. Let me do it.”

“But Ilya -” The words die on his tongue before he can explain that this isn’t clean, because he already knows Ilya will not like hearing him say that.

Ilya presses a kiss to his cheek as Shane slowly moves his hands up to Ilya’s shoulders.

“So good, baby.”

A finger presses lightly against him, and Shane tenses immediately. But it does not go further. Instead, it moves in slow circles, the warm water washing over the touch and making everything feel strangely soft.

It feels a little ticklish. And so, so gentle.

Shane takes a shaky breath and presses his forehead against Ilya’s chest, trying to absorb everything about him: his warmth, his scent, the steady rhythm of his breathing. The touch is doing so little, yet somehow so much. The slow movement draws all his awareness there, making his skin burn and leaving him with a strange, unfamiliar sensation he has never experienced before.

Ilya reaches behind Shane to apply something to his fingers, and with a gentle tightening of his hand around Shane’s waist, he slides his index finger half way in.

Shane gasps at the intrusion, but it is not uncomfortable. It only barely scratches the itch building inside him, just enough to make him realize how much he wants more.

“This okay?” Ilya asks.

Shane nods against his chest. “Yes. Yes, Ilya. More. I need you.”

His body feels tight, unused to this kind of attention after so long. And while Shane always prepares himself carefully before they play, Ilya's touch feels different from the very beginning. It does not feel like a task to complete or a requirement to fulfill. It feels like Ilya is paying attention to him, learning him.

"So eager, sweetheart." Ilya's laugh brushes against his ear.

The finger goes in completely, and Shane feels himself tense before slowly relaxing, allowing himself to trust the feeling instead of fighting against it.

"Turn around. Hands on the wall. I want to see you."

Ilya's voice is low as he guides Shane into position, manhandling him a bit until his upper body rests against the cool tiles. Ilya's leg slides between Shane, his foot tapping on Shane's calf.

"Wider."

Shane shivers at the contrast between the cold surface beneath him and the heat rushing through his body. His entire body burns at the thought of letting Ilya see him like this, of allowing himself to be completely vulnerable in front of him.

He spreads his legs wider.

"My perfect baby." The finger comes back again, this time sliding in much easier, it explores the tightness slowly, swiping over the sensitive spot that sends lightning through Shane's body. "Ah-" Shane's voice is wet and breathless as he shivers, panting into the wall.

"Right here?" Ilya slides the finger out and then back in, going straight for the spot.

"Ahhh Ilya, no, yes, hmm..." Words tumble out but Shane doesn't know what he wants to say. His cock is already flushed red and fully erected, with just one finger inside him.

"Need more, more, please, Ilya, please." He turns his head to look back at him.

Ilya is standing behind him, water still dripping from his skin, a faint flush spreading across his chest. The sight is overwhelming. Everything about this moment feels impossible: the intensity, the trust, the fact that something that once filled him with dread can now feel so deeply wanted.

"Yes, my hungry baby." Ilya chuckles, another finger presses to his rim now. It immediately feels like so much more - Ilya's fingers are thick and slightly callous, and if one is already sending Shane shivering like a leaf in the wind, he doesn't know what the next one is going to do.

The two fingers slowly and carefully stretch out his entrance, scissoring slightly to expand. It feels sore, but not painful at all, just full and smooth, stopping from time to time as Shane lets out a hiss that he couldn't swallow. Shane tilts his head to moan into his arm at that new sensation.

The fingers make a wet, squeezing sound as they fully dip into Shane's body, turning and brushing and thrusting inside Shane's tightness, scratching the itch but also lighting up so much more desire that Shane never associates with this act - it is so... intimate and arousing, he feels Ilya's breath quicken as he wiggles his hips, trying to get more of Ilya's fingers in there.

Ilya turns the water off. His fingers slide out before brushing over Shane's balls that are wound up impossibly tightly now. Shane shivers at that touch. His knees feel weak and he is holding himself

up with just his arms on the tiled wall.

Slowly he turns, facing Ilya again, his hand dropping to touch Ilya's hardening dick. It's not fully hard yet, but Shane can get it there quickly. He lowers himself to the tiled floor.

Ilya lets out a low breath as Shane envelops his mouth around that thick cock. It tastes like skin and bodywash, a scent that only belongs to Ilya, and Shane loves it. He wants to swallow it, chock on it, and have it all over his body. Shane takes the long cock all the way in and holds his nose close to Ilya's pubic hair, his eyes rolling back slightly as he looks up at Ilya, and he tries to smile with his lips stretched thin, to let Ilya know how much he enjoys this.

Ilya mutters something under his breath as he pumps into Shane's mouth a few times. He pulls out next, letting Shane lap his tongue around the tip as he looks down at him, his pupils growing wide. "I love using that mouth." He murmurs. Shane eagerly nods as he flickers his tongue faster.

Ilya's pupils are blown wide. "I will be more excited to get down that hole of yours. I'm going to plow it really deep, do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. Yes." Shane pants out the few words before getting back at it, he whimpers as Ilya guides his head deeper, holding him in place for a beat.

"I'm going to plow it deep and strong, and it will feel so good. It's going to go all the way down and deep in you."

Shane keens from the back of his throat. He almost came from just those words alone. He closes his eyes, thinking - *dreaming* - about how that would feel.

"And I will make you beg for it, I love to hear you beg. My little peach." Ilya snaps his hips forward, pounding into the back of Shane's throat. Shane almost gags at it but he quickly recovers. He pulls back slightly, his eyelashes trembling.

"Yes Sir. Please. Want you."

Ilya smiles at it, "You have to try harder than that, baby." He grabs Shane's arm and pulls him to his feet, "Tell me what you want."

Shane's eyes are burning. He doesn't know from what, whether the humiliation or the burning desire for Ilya or the deep throat. Probably all of them.

"Want your cock, Sir. Please." His voice is hoarse, and his face is so so red, he wants to lower his head to hide it, but Ilya grabs his face in between his thumb and index finger, tilting it up and forces Shane to look him in the eyes.

"Do you want me to tease your hole until you are so hungry for my cock that you can barely talk. And then let me use it?" His voice is becoming more and more dominant, and Shane doesn't remember when Ilya has become Sir, but he loves it. Every part of his body is tingling with the desire to submit.

"Yes sir. So much." He whispers, blinking a few times before he lowers his face slightly to give those long fingers holding his jaw a gentle lick.

Ilya grabs Shane's arm and leads him out of the shower. He takes the towel left on the counter and wipes him down quickly, like drying off a puppy that got himself all wet in the rain, and then points outside, "On the bed."

Shane scrambles to the bedroom, getting on the bed on his all fours. The air in the room is cooler, he feels goosebumps climbing on his freshly dried skins.

Footsteps sound from behind. Shane feels the eyes on his body, and he trembles. As much as his desire burns, being on his all fours waiting for an intrusion still rings up too many traumatic memories. He squeezes his eyes to shut them out.

"On your back, Shane." The voice sounds from behind. "I want to look at how you beg and cry when I get deep into you."

Shane flips over. Shakily he hooks both legs over his arms by the knees, laying himself completely open on the bed. This position feels more exposed than when he is facing the bed, and he instinctively closes his eyes. His body is shaking again.

A kiss is pressed on his lips, followed by a warm body that covers him, holding him close. The kiss is so gentle. Almost too contrasting to the talk Ilya is giving him. Shane blinks his eyes open, realizing he is tearing up at that kiss.

"You okay, baby?" The check-in catches him off guard. He doesn't know he still gets to say how he feels now he is laid out so openly on the bed, with Ilya's burning cock inches away from his entrance, but there is only genuine care in those green eyes. So he nods, and then shakily, "One more kiss, please, sir?"

He gets the kiss, and two slicked up fingers pressing into him as they deepen it. Shane whines helplessly, the two sensations are too much for his brain - one that he absolutely loves and only ever have with Ilya, one that he has experienced a thousand times but now receiving it from Ilya who does it with so much care.

Shane can't find any words. He wiggles, moans, rocks his hips higher to present himself more - all in hope that Ilya will help him with that deep itch that's been growing in him for so long, one that he doesn't know how to name or explain.

Ilya's breath is also becoming heavy. His fingers are sliding in and out with little resistance before he takes them out fully and starts circling the entrance with his finger nails. They dip into the creases, stretching the skins near the entrance out like trying to pull them flat, and occasionally, they poke slightly in - just half a finger tip - and scratch the inside before pulling out.

"You look so cute like this, Shane. Like you are my little plaything." Ilya mumbles. "I will get it all nice and hot from the outside. So hot that you can't wait for more inside."

"Sir - I want more inside, please...It's too much." Shane is flushed beyond himself, his fingers are reaching towards his hole, trying to sooth that burning desire.

A slap lands on his butt cheek. "You will be a patient little fuck toy. I decide when you get it."

Shane mewls weakly, "Sir - help me. I can't." He shakes his head a few times, fingers moving back to behind his knees obediently, "I don't know why - I, there is this feeling inside me. It's too much. Please please sir."

“Aww, my poor little toy is so horny that he is crying.” Ilya leans down and kisses the tear that escaped. And then as if he decides this is enough torture for Shane, he leans back and gives himself a few strokes. “Tell me you want my cock.”

“Want your cock, Sir.” Shane says right away, he will do anything, say anything to get Ilya inside him now.

“Say it again.” He taps his cock on the inside of Shane’s thigh, leaving a trace of clear precum.

“Sir - please, want your hard cock in me, please.”

Ilya hums, finally satisfied, “you do know how to be a good boy.”

He grabs the lube and drizzles across his dick generously, before lining up against Shane’s hole and presses in.

Shane draws a breath at that strong, dominant push. His body tenses before he forces himself to relax, he has learned that relaxing and opening up may be more painful in the moment, but that his body will tear less and heal faster, than if he tries to fight it.

Shane bites his lips sharply at that thought. *No, don’t go there. This is Ilya. This is different.*

“Sir- Sir, I need it, but slower, please?” Shane asks shakily. The hand holding his thigh open tightens right away, anchoring him.

“Of course, baby. You did so well telling me.”

Ilya slows it down a lot. It can’t be comfortable for him. Shane sees sweat beading across his forehead as he tries to push his painfully hard cock inside at a speed that is so, so slow. The veins on his forehead pops out, jumping with his pulse.

It is so clear to Shane that Ilya is struggling with his own desire. And yet, somehow, he is still doing everything he can to not hurt Shane.

Shane looks at that handsome face that looks more focused than he ever was. He knows that if he says stop, Ilya will stop. Not reluctantly. Not after making Shane feel guilty for needing something. That Ilya will simply stop because he cares.

Shane gulps at that realization. He is not being hurt. He is being *loved*. By his Dom, who dominates and talks dirty and manhandles him tonight, but who also looks at him like he is worth protecting and being gentle with.

When Ilya bottoms out, he looks down, his sweat sliding down his face onto the sheet below. “Still okay?” Shane nods, because it’s so full that he feels air being squeezed out and his words leaving him.

Ilya smiles softly, “you are so beautiful, Shane.”

Shane blanks at that for a second, and then, looking into those pretty green eyes as a wave of emotions hits him, Shane sobs.

He is used to being called dirty, slutty, a good, obedient hole in this position. But Ilya is looking at him like he is precious. He is calling him beautiful. It never occurred to Shane that sex can be so

intimate and tender.

Ilya's expression changes immediately, concern replacing everything else. "Shane?"

"I'm okay," Shane manages, his voice uneven. "Ilya, I..." He swallows, embarrassed by the tears. "Can you say that again?"

Ilya's face softens. "My perfect Shane." His voice is quiet but certain, "You are so beautiful. You are perfect."

Shane closes his eyes. He does not know where to put the aching tenderness that fills his chest, because there has never been a place for it before.

Ilya brackets him with his arms, letting some weight drop onto Shane as he covers Shane's body with his. And then, as he kisses the teardrops slowly, his hip starts moving in a slow, thrusting motion at the same time.

Shane lets out broken moans at that. The fullness is transforming into waves and waves of tingling sensations as Ilya moves inside him. They are so close together, bodies pressed tight from chest down to hips, while the cock inside radiates heat and pulses with Ilya's heartbeat.

Shane feels like they are becoming one, and there are no other places that he would rather be.

The tingling sensations build and scale into something Shane doesn't have a word for. It goes straight through his spine and into his cock, which has been hard the entire time but now dripping with excitement.

He tenses, "Ilya, Sir, I- I might come soon." He never had this problem before - he rarely had an erection during sex, let alone feeling so close to coming.

Ilya kisses his ears, "relax, that means I'm doing something right." And then he pulls up a little and looks at the confused, almost-panicky look on Shane, "You are so adorable. My sweet little sub. You are allowed to come tonight."

Ilya straightens next, holding one of Shane's legs over his shoulder, and speeds up. His hips snap forward at a cadence that's almost punishing, and Shane yelps. He is definitely not going to hold up for long like this, he is drowning in waves of pleasure, and his hole is stretched so full, but all while Ilya holding his leg in one hand and his hand in the other, reminding him that he is here, with Ilya, going through dazzling waves of pleasures in an act that he only knew as painful before.

Shane cries out when he comes. He shoots streaks and streaks of white onto his chest, and his visions black out for a while. When he comes back from it, Ilya is still pounding inside him, that sensitive area in his body feels sore now, jumping with each thrust.

Shane whimpers miserably. It still feels good - the oversensitive spot being pounded now hurts deliciously, and he doesn't want Ilya to stop. He knows he will feel sore for days, but it won't be the pain from tearing flesh inside, it will just be imprints of Ilya reminding him of how close they are tonight, and how good it feels the entire time.

Ilya looks like he is lost in chasing his orgasm now. His hand is still linked with Shane's but his eyes are becoming a little unfocused, and his lips are parting, the moans coming out of them sound heavier and heavier.

Shane is shaky with the overstimulation, but he knows Ilya is near, so he clenches his hole slightly, crying out as the next thrust to his prostate sends him almost arching off the bed.

Burning, sticky liquid spills inside him. Shane feels Ilya's cock pulsing out the cum, and with each wave his body jerks up slightly with it. He sags into the bed, his arm holding out straight, waiting patiently until Ilya lets his leg down and lowers on top of him.

Shane wraps his arms around Ilya right away.

They stay still for a while. The stickiness in between their stomachs is cooling off with sweat, and Shane feels the cock inside him softening bit by bit. It's still so deliciously full, he doesn't want to let go.

Ilya turns his head and presses soft kisses on his cheek, one after one, until Shane's face is so wet and he is giggling and slapping Ilya's back a couple times to make him stop.

Ilya then rests his face next to Shane's, letting all his weight cover Shane's body now. "So you didn't know you could come just from me fucking you, hands free?" He asks.

Shane blushes right away. He turns his face away to the other side, trying to escape the gaze from that handsome face inches away.

"That was such a nice trick, wasn't it?" Ilya turns Shane's face back so they are back to lashes to lashes.

Shane nods shyly, "Yes, Ilya."

Shane wets his lips and quietly says, "That was better than anything I have ever had. Ilya. Better than ice cream."

Ilya grins widely. His finger traces over Shane's freckles indulgently, murmuring, "So pretty, my sweetheart."

Shane wants to stay like this forever.

A while later, Ilya pushes himself up on the forearm, "I'm going to pull out now, okay?"

Shane pouts, "No, don't go." His voice is needy as he tries to tighten his arms behind Ilya's back, and his hole around Ilya's cock buried deep inside him.

"Hmm, my clingy kitty." Ilya smiles as he leans down for a quick peck on those pouting lips. "Let's clean up before it gets too sticky. We will cuddle more after, okay? For the entire night."

Shane sighs defeatedly and winces as Ilya pulls out, he is already pushing himself up as Ilya rolls off him. "You stay there, Shane." Ilya pushes him back to the bed.

Shane blinks, "I am going to get a towel so I can help you clean up." He gestures to the mess between him and Ilya.

"No, I don't think so." Ilya puts a hand on his shoulder, pushing him firmer into the bed. He returns quickly with a warm towel, gently wiping down the smeared cum on Shane's stomach before tending to himself.

“I am drawing you a bath. I will help you clean the inside before we sleep, once that’s ready.” Ilya lies back down, wrapping an arm around Shane.

“I- I can just do it, Ilya.” Shane whispers, the corner of his eyes are a little pink again.

Ilya kisses the tip of Shane’s nose, “No, baby. Not allowed. You let me care for you. Always.”

Shane hides his face into Ilya’s chest and mumbles, “Thank you, Ilya.”

“For my strong dick that plows hard and deep? Sure.” Ilya smirks. His hands are coming up to the back of Shane’s head, scratching gently.

Shane smiles, fatigue is washing over him like waves, but he feels so sated, warm, and safe.

He says after a while, “For kissing me, Ilya. And for helping me open up, and telling me I’m beautiful, and taking care of me now.” Shane looks up to Ilya, his voice dropping softer, “For showing me that this can be so tender and not scary.”

Ilya smacks a kiss on Shane’s cheek, “And?” He wiggles his eyebrows as he looks down to Shane’s cock.

Shane sighs, “And for fucking me so hard that I came, Ilya.”

Ilya laughs and hugs Shane in tightly. “You are welcome, baby. I enjoyed every bit of it.”

*

Shane sleeps in the next morning. It’s rare for him, but Ilya doesn’t wake him since he knows Shane must be exhausted after last night.

It is Saturday, and the house is quiet. Ilya walks into the kitchen and finds Marta, who only takes Sunday off.

Two plates of breakfast are sitting on the counter, still steamy as she always times it perfectly for when they are downstairs.

Ilya pours himself a cup of coffee and grabs a plate, “I will be in the study, Marta. Shane is sleeping in today.”

Marta takes Shane’s plate and pops it into an oven to keep it warm. “There has to be a better way to spend your Saturday, Ilya.” She says dryly.

“Ah, I guess that makes two of us, just loving our work too much.” Ilya winks and ducks out with food and coffee in his hands.

“Use a placemat on your mahogany desk!”

Ilya chuckles. He wants to shout back a “yes mother” but he still wants to be on the good side of Marta, even if he will never outrank Shane.

He needs to finalize the identity application for Shane. He pulled a few strings to fast track the process, because otherwise it could take years for someone like Shane with very limited background information to gain a legal presence.

And once Shane has an identity, he can declare the official Dom/Sub relationship between them, making the whole thing official and legally binding. He will have custodial responsibility for Shane in many matters, and in return, authorities over many aspects of Shane's life. Not that they don't have that already, but legalizing it is still a big step.

One that felt so big that he never had the desire to take before Shane. With Shane though, this feels natural. It feels destined. Ilya gets an unexpected sense of pride and relief when he thinks about protecting, guiding, and caring for his little sub as his primary and only Dom.

Ilya organizes the papers for the application in a folder, which isn't his strong suit. Halfway through wrangling the nearly hundred pages of documents, he thinks this would be a fantastic job for Shane, who loves organizing and lives by his planner day by day. Ilya remembers Shane opening up his planner and carefully putting in "movie night", then smiling contently at that, as if he didn't have most evenings completely open.

Ilya smiles indulgently, getting distracted from the paperwork again. He looks down to those papers, realizing this can't be a job for Shane after all. He has printed out evidence from the training records from the Slave Ring. It took him a full week to go through a couple of those videos, each time needing a good boxing session in the basement after, to punch out the fury and deep ache in his heart.

Shane doesn't need to know that those records exist. He deserves to just live as his little sub, let Ilya care for him and indulge him, take him out to dinner and get ice cream, and cuddle up by his side night after night, until everything that happened before they met fades into insignificance.

He puts those files away carefully, taking the first couple of pages with him as he gets out of his study. He stops by the kitchen, Marta is not there, but Shane's breakfast is still sitting in the oven. So Ilya takes it out and brings it upstairs.

Shane is curled up on his side of the bed. He always looks smaller than he is when he is sleeping, hugging his torso in a self protective form. Ilya sets the plate on the night stand before leaning down, his hand brushing gently over Shane's face.

Shane's brows are creased together, and his hair a little damp. Ilya frowns as he sets a hand on his forehead.

It is cool to touch, just damp from sweat. Must be another nightmare then. Ilya's heart clenches, he gets into the bed with Shane, leaning over to have him in his embrace.

The nightmares don't come every night now. But once in a while, Shane will wake up disoriented and twitching, sometimes crying, but he always settles right back when Ilya hugs him. Ilya wishes he was here for him this morning - it makes sense that his body is stressed after the sex, it probably will take a while to reset.

"Please." Shane mumbles weakly, his eyes are shut tightly as he flinches from Ilya's touch. "Hurt." And then very quietly, "too much..."

"Shane. It's me. Come back to me." Ilya says gently, his hand finding Shane's hand, interlacing the finger.

"Ilya." Shane's brows knit more tightly together. "Help. Ilya." His body is shaking now, his hand limp and sweaty in Ilya's palm.

“I’m here. Baby. Wake up.” Ilya hugs Shane in tightly and gently shakes his body.

A soft sob, Shane opens his eyes. Those large brown eyes are empty and scared. He looks confused and disoriented for a second, his hands instinctively jerking away from Ilya’s as he weakly pushes himself back from the hug.

“Shhh. It’s me, baby. You are awake. You are safe now.” Ilya doesn’t loosen his hold as Shane pushes against him, he places a palm flat against Shane’s back, grounding him.

“Ilya.” Shane whispers as he looks up, relief flushes over his face.

“Hey, good morning. Sweetheart.”

Shane buries his head in Ilya’s chest and takes a deep breath. “You are here.”

Ilya hums, “Yes. You slept in and I just came back. I should have stayed with you.”

Shane shakes his head, “Sorry, I was having a nightmare again.”

“Hey, you don’t apologize for that, remember?”

Shane gives a small nod. “I thought, I would dream of you, Ilya, after last night.” There is a faint blush replacing the paleness now, to Ilya’s relief.

“It just means I have to plow you harder, more. So your body can only think of me.” He says smugly. “How are you feeling?”

Shane wiggles a little, his blush deepens. “A little sore, but nothing hurts. It feels good.”

Ilya smiles, “Good. You must be starving. I brought you breakfast.” He sits up and reaches over to the plate on the nightstand.

Shane touches his stomach, as if trying to sense whether he is indeed hungry, a gesture that is so adorable that Ilya wants to hug him into his chest again.

“I will eat downstairs. Marta will be so mad if I eat in bed.” Shane is already sitting up, ready to get out of the bed.

“She doesn’t need to know.” Ilya pulls him back, arranging the pillows so Shane can sit up straight with back support. “I have a few things I need for your identity application. We can go over while you eat.”

Shane sits up obediently, leaning over slightly to Ilya’s side, he doesn’t reach for the food yet. “Could I see the application?”

“Yes, of course, here.”

Ilya shows him the two pages of his key information, a few fields where information is missing are highlighted yellow.

Shane’s fingers trace over each field as he reads, most of them are biological information from his physical exam that Jacqui performed a while back. His eyes land on the birthday field.

“Is this... my birthday?” He looks at the *1991/5/1* written on there.

“The year was in your... Slave contract. I put in a random date.” Ilya lies. He knows the month because Shane mentioned in that intake video that the next month was his birthday.

“Oh, can we change it?” Shane looks at him, “to the date when you gave me this?” His fingers trace over the leather collar on his neck.

“Of course.” Ilya feels warm and fuzzy at that request, he gives Shane’s shoulder a little squeeze.

“What does this mean?” Shane points to the designation field, where under Dom/Sub/Switch, “other” was checked and next to it, the field is filled out as “Dependent Sub - Unregistered.”

“It means you didn’t have a record before - no family or parents responsible for your wellbeing, so in order to give you an identity, you will need to be bonded with a Dom, otherwise they will have to put you through social programs before you can live independently.”

“Oh.” Shane says. “That means I belong to you?”

Ilya looks him in the eyes, “I’m responsible for you, but I don’t own you. We are legally bonded until you have a track record of being in this world, then you can be independent.”

“Hmm, okay.” Shane says, dropping his head to lean on Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya smiles. “Okay. This is the fun part, you get to pick a last name.” He points to a highlighted field, and pulls another paper with a long list of last names on it.

Shane goes through the list. And then he looks up, “Can I just have your last name? Rozanov, right?”

Ilya raises his brows. “You want my name?”

“Is that not okay?”

“No, it’s fine. But it’s not particularly... American.”

Shane shrugs, “Do we know for sure that I’m American?”

Ilya smiles at that. He takes a look at Shane’s beautiful face, his fingers tracing over the jaw line and freckles that are so familiar to him now. “Where you are from doesn’t matter, you are my pretty little sub. But Shane - do you know when people change their last names?”

Shane shakes his head.

“Sometimes, when people get married, they will change their names so they appear to be from the same family.”

“Oh.” Shane says, pondering, a smile appearing on his face, “I like that. Can we be family?” And then, “Can we get married?”

When Ilya is too stunned to answer him, Shane lowers his head. “Sorry, is that not a socially acceptable question?”

Ilya drops the papers on the nightstand and hugs him in, “It’s more than acceptable, Shane. We can be a family, but one step at a time. For now, we will make sure you get my name and become my Sub legally, okay?”

Shane nods eagerly. He smiles up to Ilya, hugging him back.

Chapter End Notes

Shane: so is it true that only the Dom can ask their Sub to get married?

Harris: why are you asking??

Shane: I just figured it would be convenient to be married if I’m taking Ilya’s name.

Harris: you what?! How did that happen?

Shane: we had a date, you were there! At the chicken restaurant.

Harris: man I need to hear everything that happened after the date.

Chapter 16: The chase

Chapter Notes

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

Summer is slipping into autumn. The leaves are turning yellow, and the apples in the orchards hang heavy on their branches, ripe and ready.

It's probably the best summer of Ilya's life. He has the most beautiful, obedient, ~~shutty~~ eager little sub in his bed every night. They play often, mapping the painful terrain of Shane's past like two explorers charting dangerous but rewarding ground, and Ilya can feel the trust between them deepening with each passing day.

When they aren't playing, Shane fills his time exploring the rhythms of the house. He works out, reads, cooks, and recently, he's even taken up tennis lessons with a trainer Ilya trusts. He brings back small stories from his day to share over dinner, and afterward they usually end up in the entertainment room together, lingering in easy, quiet companionship.

Work has been relentless.

Just last week, Ilya and Troy got a message from one of their assets stationed at a foreign port. After weeks of chasing dead ends, they finally caught a break: one of the cargo ships that had dropped off tracking for two hours had been located.

It was docked at an abandoned port - cartel-controlled, inaccessible without cooperation. When they boarded, the cargo manifest didn't match what they found.

Instead of low-value goods, there were eight unconscious Subs. Drugged and restrained, hidden in plain sight.

Ilya understood before anyone said it out loud. The two-hour gap in the tracking logs hadn't been an error, and it hadn't been about the listed cargo. It was the transfer point, the moment the ship stopped moving goods and started moving people.

Trafficked Subs. Just like Shane.

He's handed the case back to the client so they can coordinate with local law enforcement, but he hasn't let it go. He keeps following the trafficking leads in his own time, tracing patterns, routes, contacts, quietly searching for anything that might connect back to the specific Ring he's been tracking.

To Shane's past.

He tells himself it's for clarity for him, even if Shane never wants to find out. It will give him a closure, if nothing else.

Ilya steps out of his office with Troy after another long day. Harris is sprawled on the bench in the foyer, idly biting into an apple, looking bored out of his mind. His face lights up the second he

spots Troy.

Marta emerges from the kitchen at the same time and pauses when she sees Ilya coming down the hall.

“I was going to check on Shane,” she says. “But if you’re done, do you want to?”

“Shane?” Ilya frowns. “What happened?”

“He’s sick. Been resting since before lunch.”

She gives him a mildly reproachful look that feels entirely undeserved, Ilya’s barely left his office all day, surviving on a sandwich someone dropped off while he worked through a mountain of files with Troy.

“He didn’t feel well when we were in the garden,” Harris adds helpfully. “So I told him to go lie down and take it easy.”

Shane hasn’t been sick once since he came home with him.

Ilya’s frown deepens as he heads upstairs.

He pushes open the door to his bedroom first. The bed is freshly made, the room faintly scented with cleaning supplies. It’s clean and untouched.

He turns and walks back to Shane’s room, the one he doesn’t really sleep in anymore, but still uses for clothes and occasionally the shower.

“Shane?” he calls, pushing the door open.

It’s also empty and spotless. There is no sign of use, no trace of him at all.

Something cold settles in Ilya’s chest. He turns sharply and heads back downstairs, faster now, to where the others are still gathered near the stairs.

“Shane’s not in his room,” he says, voice low and tight. “When did you last see him?”

His gaze lands on Harris, then Marta.

Harris’ eyes widen. “Before lunch. I saw him come back inside.” He turns abruptly. “Maybe he’s in the library...” He’s already moving before anyone can respond.

Marta nods after him. “Around eleven, he told me he was going to sleep it off. Said he likely wouldn’t be helping with dinner prep.”

Harris is running back before she finishes. “He’s not there.”

Ilya’s brows knit together.

The premises are secure. Protected by layers of systems and monitoring Troy designed himself. No one gets in or out unnoticed.

But his heart is already pounding, hard enough to make it difficult to think. He was just reviewing trafficking routes, and his mind, unhelpful and vicious, goes straight there - abduction, torture, losing Shane to those monsters again.

“Troy,” he says sharply, “pull the video logs. Start with the gates. I want every entry and exit today.”

Troy nods once and heads towards the study briskly.

“Harris, check the grounds. Garden, orchards, the woods. If you need more people, come back and tell Marta.”

Harris bolts for the door.

“I’ll check with the staff,” Marta says, already turning. “And search every room in the house again.”

Ilya stands at the base of the stairs for half a second longer, swearing under his breath, before turning and striding after Troy into the study.

“Two cars left after eleven,” Troy says without looking up as Ilya walks in, eyes locked on the monitors. “Routine deliveries. I’ve already got people tracking the drivers.”

“Any foot traffic through the gate?” Ilya asks, scanning the small video footage lining up on the screen.

“No. Foot traffic is rare and I get notified right away when it happens.”

Ilya runs a hand through his hair and says, “Fuck.” He feels air getting punched out of him. He regrets not letting Troy set up cameras inside the house. He always insists that if the parameter is secured, the house itself is safe. But how he wishes he could just look at where Shane went after he talked to Marta this morning.

“Look through every worker that came in today. Their background, any linkage to... the wrong side.” Ilya says after a while.

He exhales slowly, trying to steady himself. Shane needs him clear-headed. He needs to find Shane. Now.

Harris pushes open the door to the study, a little out of breath. “Ilya, I need more people, he is not in the garden, and the orchards and forests beyond are too big for me to search alone.”

“The workers should still be here,” Ilya says immediately, without hesitation, “tell Marta to divide them up and cover as much ground as possible, no one leaves the premises until we find Shane.”

Harris nods and turns to hurry out, already moving.

“Harris.”

He stops mid-step and turns back. “Yes, Ilya?”

“What did Shane tell you before he came inside?”

Harris squeezes his eyes shut, trying to pull the conversation back into focus. “We were talking about my vacation coming up, and that I’m visiting my family,” he starts, his voice uneven as he retraces it, “we talked about my parents, and then I asked him whether he still remembers his, and what he would say to them if you and Troy find them, and then he...”

Ilya stands, and begins walking toward him slowly.

Harris’ voice falters, growing smaller and smaller with each step Ilya takes, until it nearly disappears entirely as the Dom closes the distance, his presence filling the space so completely that Harris drops his gaze without thinking, his shoulders drawing in.

“You told him we were looking for his parents,” Ilya says, his voice flat, not raised, but carrying something far more dangerous underneath.

Harris’ breath catches as the realization hits all at once, Troy’s earlier words flashing through his mind - the trafficking route and its possible link to Shane’s past, the instruction to keep it confidential - but he hadn’t even thought to keep it from Shane, because Shane tells him everything, because he tells Shane everything...

“I didn’t, I wasn’t thinking -” Harris stumbles, panic rising fast in his chest.

Troy is suddenly in front of him, stepping in in one clean motion and placing himself squarely between him and Ilya, cutting off Ilya’s line of sight completely, his body a solid barrier in front of Harris.

“Ilya,” Troy says, his voice steady, anchoring the room as he reaches one hand back without looking and closes the large palm around Harris’ forearm.

The touch is grounding, Troy is keeping him there, keeping him from folding in on himself or stepping forward to make things worse, “I mentioned it. I didn’t tell Harris to keep it away from Shane.”

Harris’ eyes snap open in panic, because that’s not true, Troy had absolutely told him it was strictly between them, had trusted him with it, and he had ruined it in the most careless way possible. The words rise up his throat in a desperate need to correct it.

But Troy’s hand tightens around his arm, a quiet warning, and Harris swallows hard and forces his head down again, the words dying before they can leave him.

Ilya exhales.

When he speaks after a moment, he doesn’t sound angry. He sounds defeated, and somehow deeply hurt.

“Let’s find him,” Ilya says, his voice low. “I don’t care about anything else.”

He steps around Troy then, and Harris immediately drops his gaze even further as Ilya faces him again, unable to hold eye contact with the Dom for even a second.

“I need you to go find Marta and organize the search,” Ilya says, his tone back to control. “You know the grounds the best, divide it properly and make sure every single inch is covered as efficiently as possible.”

Harris nods quickly.

Then, after a small hesitation, he raises his eyes just enough. “The lake as well?”

Ilya pauses, his gaze sharpening for a fraction of a second. “The cottage,” he says instead. “It’s too out of the way. He doesn’t know where that is.”

Harris swallows. “I... I drove him there once. I was making sure the path through the woods isn’t completely blocked. I know you like to keep it wild, but...”

Ilya raises a hand, cutting him off before he can finish. “Key to the golf cart.”

Harris fumbles immediately in his pocket and hands it over, his fingers clumsy with nerves.

“I’m going to the cottage,” Ilya says, already turning toward the door, “you go find Marta and organize the search. Remember, no one leaves until we find him.”

Harris nods and follows him out of the study, moving toward the kitchen, while Troy lingers just half a step behind, his hand sliding from Harris’ arm to his shoulder to give him a brief, grounding press before letting him go.

Ilya hates that this golf cart doesn’t go any faster no matter how hard he presses the pedal, the machine whining in dull protest as if mocking the urgency clawing up his throat, but it is the only way to get to the cottage, so he forces himself to breathe and hold onto the one steady thought that so long as Shane stays within the bounds of his estate, he is safe, he *has* to be safe.

Because if he was in one of those two cars that left... Ilya cuts the thought off before it can fully form. He reminds himself that Troy is already tracking them down and they can’t have gone far.

He stops the cart at the edge of the woods, the sudden quiet pressing in around him. The paths are overgrown, just as Harris said, deliberately neglected because Ilya prefers the cottage to stay hidden behind the trees with no obvious access, a place meant to be his and his alone.

He studies the few narrow entry points, eyes scanning the bent grass and broken twigs, trying to read the ground for signs of passage, but nothing stands out clearly enough, so he picks one and pushes into the woods.

Please be there, he tells himself, the words running on a loop in his head, tight and fraying at the edges. *Please don’t disappear on me*.

Ten minutes on foot brings him to the front of the cottage, rustic but carefully maintained, standing quiet and still as if untouched by the panic tearing through him. He retrieves the spare key from its hiding place and unlocks the door with hands that are steadier than he feels.

The living room and kitchen are empty and neat, there are no signs of movement, nothing that proves Shane was ever here. Ilya moves quickly toward the bedrooms, opening doors one after another, each empty space hitting him harder than the last. Closets, bathroom, utility room... He checks everything, and every empty room chills him further, drains something vital out of him.

He hasn’t felt this helpless in a long time, not since he was twelve and found his mother lying across the cold bathroom floor, the memory flashing sharp and unwelcome before he can push it away.

He ends up back in the living room, facing the large windows that open out toward the lake, and then he stills.

There is a single figure sitting on the giant rock by the water, small against the wide stretch of shimmering gold, shoulders hunched inward as if trying to fold into himself, his silhouette catching the glistening light reflected off the lake in a way that makes him look almost unreal.

It is the most beautiful thing Ilya has seen.

Relief hits fast, his legs nearly giving out beneath him as the tension snaps, and then, just as quickly, a hotter mix of emotions ignites underneath - delayed fear, fury and anxiety crashing through him in a dizzying rush that leaves his thoughts buzzing.

He pulls out his phone, fingers moving fast as he texts Troy - *found him, send everyone home* - before shoving it back into his pocket and stepping out through the back door toward the lake.

“Shane,” he calls, only realizing after the fact that his voice comes out rough, his throat tight like it’s been scraped raw.

Shane turns sharply at the sound, eyes wide as they land on Ilya standing there, and for a brief second they just look at each other. Ilya watches as Shane rises slowly from the rock, feet finding the ground.

He bolts for the wood.

What the...

Ilya’s thoughts scatter even as his body moves, instincts kicking in as he breaks into a sprint after him, following the direction Shane bolts toward without hesitation.

Shane is faster than he expects, the training clearly paying off as he darts through the woods, weaving between trees, leaping over roots and stones, stumbling once or twice but always catching himself, always pushing forward.

But Ilya is closing in, because he knows this terrain, because he is still stronger, still faster.

“Shane, stop,” he calls out, voice sharper now, eyes locking onto the path ahead as he sees the large root coming up in Shane’s way.

He could use his command, could drop him where he stands, but the thought of Shane hitting the ground wrong, of hurting himself in panic, stops him short of it.

Shane doesn’t stop. He speeds up.

Since when did his quiet, obedient sub learn to disobey like this? The thought flickers through Ilya’s mind, bringing with it the memory of when Shane first arrived, when he flinched at every raised voice, collapsed to his knees to beg forgiveness for the smallest perceived mistake.

For a split second, Ilya almost smiles at how much he’s changed, at what that means, but the moment passes as quickly as it came, swallowed by the chase.

Shane moves like something wild, all sharp turns and instinct, a deer or a fox darting through the underbrush with a predator at his heels, and the image hits something deep and primal in Ilya that

he doesn't have time to unpack, heat sparking low in his gut before he forces his focus back where it belongs.

"I swear, Shane," he calls, "if you don't stop, you are in big trouble."

A small, helpless sound escapes Shane at that stern tone, a whine that carries through the trees, but he keeps going.

A large boulder looms ahead, cutting off his path, and Shane hesitates for a fraction of a second, clearly weighing his options, calculating whether to climb or divert.

He goes for the climb. He almost makes it.

His hand slips just short of the hold, his footing falters, and he scrambles, sliding back down the rock.

And that moment is all Ilya needs. In seconds, he closes the distance and corners him against the boulder.

Shane turns then, his breath hitching, his face gone pale, eyes wide as they lift to meet Ilya's, and something flickers there, quick but unmistakable.

Ilya doesn't miss it. There is fear, the primal kind that comes from being cornered by the predator, but beneath it, there is trust, bright and stubborn enough that it refuses to be swallowed by the panic.

Ilya steps closer, unhurried, each step closing the distance while Shane presses himself tighter against the boulder, shoulders drawn in, his whole body trembling in a way that he can't seem to control, like a startled deer that hasn't yet decided whether to freeze or bolt.

When Ilya is close enough, he lifts a hand and plants it against the stone beside Shane's head, boxing him in, and the faintest, meanest smile curves across his lips as Shane shudders at the movement.

He is going to teach his little sub a lesson, for running, for disobeying, for making him worry in a way he hasn't felt in years, but he will give him a chance to explain. Because he is nice and considerate. Because he promised to never act out of anger again.

"Explain. Little sub."

Shane looks up at him, lips trembling, trying so hard to steady his voice and failing anyway. "You, you said I can come to the cottage if you don't want me. You promised."

Ilya stills for half a second, then lets out a dry, disbelieving laugh. "I said you can live here if I end the contract," he replies, voice low and even. "Tell me, when did I do that?"

Shane swallows, gaze dropping briefly before he forces it back up again. "You might as well. You're trying to send me away."

"Oh, really?" Ilya narrows his eyes, stepping in closer still, crowding into his space until Shane has no choice but to tilt his head back to keep looking at him. "And what makes you think that?"

“You’re trying to find my parents,” Shane says, the words coming out tight, strained, his brows pulling together as he bites down on his lip, fighting the tears threatening to spill. “You, you’ll ask them to take me back.”

Ilya hums, as if considering that, though the glint in his eyes says otherwise. “My little sub is so clever that I can barely keep up,” he murmurs, tilting his head as he leans in, close enough that he can feel Shane’s fast breath on his neck. “Help me understand, I find your parents, and then what?”

Shane tries to hold his gaze, he tries hard, but it costs him, his whole body tense and shaking where it’s pressed to the stone. “You’ll... you’ll call them. Ask them to come get me,” he manages. “So I’m not your problem anymore.”

Ilya’s grin widens, slow and sharp. “Oh, little sub,” he says, almost fondly, “and here I thought you were smart.”

He lifts his free hand, brushing a loose strand of hair away from Shane’s face, and smiles when Shane’s full body jolts at the contact.

“Tell me,” Ilya continues, voice light, almost teasing, “what exactly do I gain from that? What do I get when they take you off my hands?”

He emphasizes the last words just enough to make them sound ridiculous, and then lets out a quiet laugh, like the very idea amuses him.

Shane stares at him, momentarily blank, clearly trying to follow, to recalculate. “You... you get...” He falters, swallowing hard.

Ilya watches him for a beat, then hums again, as if helping him along. “Let’s say they do take you back,” he says. “Then who makes me pasta whenever I feel like it, hm?”

“Marta,” Shane answers immediately.

Ilya huffs. “No, no, I’m talking about the kind even she can’t seem to replicate,” he counters, eyes glinting. “What’s your secret sauce?”

Shane’s lips press together, stubbornness cutting through the fear. “I’m, I’m not telling you,” he blurts, the defiance small but real.

“Alright,” Ilya concedes easily, the smile still playing at his mouth. “Forget the pasta.”

He leans in a fraction closer, his voice dropping, turning softer, heavier with implication.

“Who would I play with everyday, hm? Who would let me tie him up and crack a whip against him and cry so beautifully, and thank me after?”

Shane’s eyes grow impossibly wide at that, his pupils are growing too.

Ilya smirks and presses in. “Who would beg for my dick like a little bitch in heat and drool all over the floor waiting to be fucked? And let me edge him for hours and somehow hold off from coming?”

Shane whimpers, he closes his eyes, rocking his hips forward as if chasing a friction that doesn’t exist.

“Oh - you are enjoying this, aren't you little sub.” Ilya smirks, “Your hungry little hole wants a big cock in it so bad, and you want me to cum in you and plug you up after so you can be reminded who you belong to.”

Shane stills. He opens his eyes, looking up at Ilya, calculating, testing, and finally, he gives a tiny nod.

Ilya laughs then, the laughter ringing in the wood. “Too bad,” he says, “Because I only take care of my good boy Shane.”

He lets the words hang there for a beat, watching them land. “And I don't see one right now.”

Panic flickers across Shane's face at that, but it doesn't settle. He widens his eyes instead, searching on Ilya's face, and he probably finds what he needs - a proof, a sign that Ilya will not cast him aside because he isn't an obedient sub now.

So Shane tries again.

He straightens a little, and after taking a deep breath, he says, “I, I didn't do anything bad. I didn't break any rules in the contract.”

He aims for confidence, but the effort behind it is painfully obvious that Ilya has to fight the urge to smile.

“Is that so?” Ilya asks, tilting his head slightly. “You think you're meeting my expectations? Because that was in the contract.”

Shane hesitates. Ilya takes another step closer.

“Tell me,” he says quietly, “do you think I expect my sweet little sub to wait for me at the dinner table after a long day of work and tell me about his day?”

He closes the distance completely, pressing his chest against Shane's, feeling the frantic rhythm of Shane's heartbeat through their clothes.

“Or do you think I expect him to disappear without a word and nearly give me a heart attack while I run through every possible scenario of what happened to him?”

“Do you think I want to imagine him hurt?” Ilya continues, his voice growing rougher despite his attempt to keep it controlled. “Do you think I want to wonder how scared he might be when I find him? How badly someone might have hurt him?”

His jaw tightens.

“Do you think I want to sit there and pray that he's alive?” His voice drops, more broken around the edges. “That's all I could think about. That I didn't care what condition I found him in, I just needed him breathing so I could hold him, put him back together, and do better. Protect him better.”

He takes a shaky breath in. “not fail him as his Dom.”

The woods are too quiet.

Ilya knows he is saying too much. He knows he is revealing too much of the panic that tore through him only half an hour ago, the helplessness, the terror, the way his mind had gone immediately to the worst possibilities.

But he can't stop himself. Because Shane needs to know. He needs to understand how much Ilya cares, how this was never about getting rid of him.

Shane deflates in front of him, all the fragile fights he put up disappearing at once. His shoulders drop, his expression crumpling, and when he looks back up, his large doe eyes are already shining with tears.

"Ilya, I..."

Ilya steps back and shakes his head. "Oh, little sub," he says softly. "I don't think so."

Shane freezes.

"There is no Ilya for you tonight."

The words hit exactly where they are meant to. Shane lowers his head immediately, swallowing hard, a small broken sound catching in the back of his throat.

"Sir," he whispers. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Now you're sorry," Ilya says, crossing his arms. "After spending all this time explaining to me how little I care about you and how you didn't break any rules."

Shane doesn't answer. He just blinks. Once and then twice.

And then the tears finally spill over, sliding silently down his cheeks. He looks utterly helpless, a trembling puppy trapped against the boulder in the wood.

It almost makes Ilya feel bad.

Almost.

"I think you enjoyed talking a little too much tonight," Ilya says.

He steps back, putting a little distance between them as he looks Shane over, taking in the tear tracks on his face, the way he is trying so hard to hold himself together.

"Take off your boxers and put them in your mouth. I do not want to hear another word until I say you can speak."

Shane looks up abruptly. "Sir."

"Not. another. word. Are you too dumb to understand English now?"

Shane wipes the tear from his face, sniffing, and slowly he unzips his pants. He pushes everything down in one go, trying to not overthink the ask, and steps out of them.

Silently Shane takes out his boxers from the pile, folds them neatly once and again, and with a low moan, he puts them into his mouth.

Ilya looks at him calmly, trying hard to ignore his cock that's growing excitedly in his pants. When Shane puts the pants back on, Ilya steps closer and shoves the boxers in more, Shane gags at the sensation, his eyes turning a little wetter.

Ilya turns without a word. He cuts through the woods with practiced ease, following the path back toward the golf cart waiting at the edge of the trees. Behind him, Shane hurries to follow, his steps quiet and careful.

They walk in silence.

The sun has nearly disappeared by the time they reach the edge of the woods. Shadows stretch longer between the trees, and the path grows darker with every step. Ilya turns on the flashlight on his phone, the beam cutting through the fading light, then reaches back and takes Shane by the arm, guiding him forward.

"If no one finds you tonight, what are you going to do?" Ilya says as he points the flashlight to the path directly in front of Shane.

"You don't have a key. You don't have food. You don't know this land." His grip remains firm as he leads Shane along. "Were you planning to sleep outside? Hide under trees? Cover yourself with leaves?"

He tightens his hold.

"Dumb little sub."

His grip on Shane's arm is firm, and Shane definitely will be bruised tomorrow, but both of them know this isn't part of the real punishment.

Once they get to the golf cart, Ilya pushes Shane in from one side, before getting to the driver's seat himself.

He calls Troy as they drive back.

"Did everyone leave?"

"Good. No, don't wait for us. You go home as well."

Another pause.

"See you tomorrow morning. I don't want anyone waiting when we get back."

He ends the call and glances toward Shane. Some of the tension has left his body. The knowledge that no one will be watching or asking questions, no one will be there to witness this moment makes him relax slightly.

The mansion appears in the last fading light of dusk, every window glowing warmly against the darkening sky. As they approach in the golf cart, Ilya suddenly realizes how different it feels now.

It was always a house. It becomes a home only when Shane is sitting beside him. A home that he has not had since he was twelve.

Ilya lets his gaze linger on him for a moment, taking in the obedience, the way Shane sits with his hands folded neatly in his lap, the faint tear tracks still drying on his face, the dripping boxers stuffed in his mouth.

And then it hits him with a sudden clarity.

It's not just that Shane will lose everything if Ilya lets him go - though that is true, painfully so - but that Ilya will too.

Because he can no longer walk away from Shane without tearing something vital out of himself. Shane is not just someone under his care. He is the home Ilya did not think he would ever have again.

And if Shane slips away from him... Ilya does not let himself finish the thought.

Because he cannot let that happen.

Kink Notes for This Chapter

Bratting

Shane's behavior (arguing, pushing, acting out emotionally) isn't "disobedience" in a simple sense. In kink dynamics, *bratting* can be a way a submissive seeks attention, reassurance, or emotional engagement from their dominant. It often comes from a need to be "handled," seen, or corrected in a way that reaffirms the connection.

Primal Play (the chase through the forest)

The chase element falls under *primal play*, which taps into instinctive dynamics like predator/prey, pursuit/escape. This kind of play can be very intense because it engages adrenaline, fear, and vulnerability.

In a healthy dynamic, this is negotiated beforehand and built on a foundation of trust - because while it may feel chaotic in the moment, it is actually carefully held. In this chapter, Shane's fear isn't just about being caught, but about being *left*, and Ilya's active pursuit reverses that.

Humiliation play (boxers in mouth)

The use of the boxers here functions as a form of humiliation / degradation play, but more importantly, it is a punishment that directly fits the behavior - Ilya is responding to Shane "running his mouth" by taking away his ability to speak.

At the same time, it serves a grounding purpose. Shane is overwhelmed, spiraling, and speaking from a place of panic rather than clarity, and Ilya anticipates that continuing to talk would only escalate him further. By removing that option, he is not just asserting control, but giving Shane a way to *stop* and settle and come back into his body without needing to keep explaining or defending himself.

And yes, this is also a small indulgent nod to that *Vegas* moment where many of us collectively thought: *put those boxers in his mouth!*

Chapter End Notes

Harris: My dad would lose his mind if I disappeared like that.

Shane: Must be nice.

Harris: He'd come find me in, like, five minutes.

Ilya: I did.

Shane: That's why I never want to leave you!

Ilya: So you left me instead?

Shane: You make me sound stupid when you put it like that.

Shane: Okay yeah I get it.

Chapter 17: The punishment

Chapter Notes

I am posting more frequently than usual because I can't edge you all with this hot punishment scene! Also, the chapter count went up a little #sorrynotsorry

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

Ilya opens up the front door, with Shane following him obediently. The boxers in his mouth is soaked through now, a thin line of saliva drooping from the corner of his mouth.

“Go clean yourself, you have fifteen minutes. Meet me in the playroom.” Ilya doesn't look at Shane, he walks straight into the house, turns the corner around the kitchen, and gets into the basement.

He takes his shirt off and pulls on his boxing gloves. Without much of a warmup, he starts punching the bag, fast and brutal, the dull impact echoing through the empty gym.

He needs to get it out before he goes back to Shane.

All the emotions that tore through him today - the anger, the fear, the heartbreak, the overwhelming relief of seeing Shane sitting safely by the lake - are still tangled together inside him, pushing him dangerously close to a place where instinct could take over.

He needs control. He needs to discipline Shane. But he can never harm him. Not when Shane trusts him like this.

Well.

Shane trusts him enough that he did not immediately drop to his knees and beg for his life when Ilya cornered him in the woods. He trusts him enough to look at him and still see something safe beneath the anger.

But not enough to understand that Ilya would never look at him like a burden, or send him away like some liability he no longer wants to carry.

Ilya throws another hard punch into the bag.

He has made so much progress.

Ilya reminds himself of that, because he needs to remember it. Healing does not happen all at once. Trust does not appear overnight. Shane spent years learning that kindness always came with conditions, that his sweet presence can be used against him like a leverage.

Ilya will teach him something different. He will guide him, care for him, heal him. One step at a time.

He throws a few more heavy punches, letting the last of the tension leave his body, before finally stepping away from the bag and walking out of the gym.

Ilya takes his time in the shower, letting the hot water run longer than necessary, forcing his body and mind back under control before he steps into the playroom.

When he finally opens the door, Shane is exactly where he told him to be, kneeling in the center of the room, hands clasped behind his back, the only fabric on his body is the pair of black boxers still stuffed in his mouth, a small puddle of drool gathering beneath him on the padded floor.

Ilya walks over unhurriedly, like the panic from earlier never existed, and reaches down to pull the boxer from Shane's mouth, tossing it aside without a second thought. Shane's lips close immediately, his throat working as he swallows, eyes fixed obediently on the floor.

Ilya lets his fingers trace along the sharp line of Shane's jaw.

"Sore?" he asks.

Shane nods, then answers softly, "Yes, sir."

Ilya tilts his face up with that same finger, studying him.

"Are you hungry?"

Shane hesitates, biting his lip before answering, his voice small but steady, "A little... but I want to wait. Until after, sir. If that's okay."

Ilya smiles, his thumb brushing once across Shane's lower lip before he lets his hand fall away.

There will be an after. Shane knows with certainty that no matter what happens tonight, he will be put back together, cleaned, fed, held if he needs it.

That trust presses somewhere deep in Ilya's chest.

He turns away before it can soften him.

Ilya returns with something in his hand and drops it in front of Shane. "Swap your collar with this one."

It's a thick black collar studded with spikes, one Shane has never seen before tonight.

Shane's hands come up to the thin brown strip around his neck, the one he has worn religiously since the first day. "No, sir. Please. I don't want to take this off." His voice is as desperate as he can make it, his hands moving forward to find Ilya's feet in a pleading gesture.

"I'm not asking," Ilya says evenly. Slowly, he steps back, just out of Shane's reach. His hand extends. "Give me the one you're wearing."

Shane's body shakes visibly. His hands come to his throat, but they tremble so badly his fingers can't even find the twist lock.

Ilya finally takes pity on him. "You can have it back after we're done tonight."

With that, Shane finally moves to unscrew the small lock and remove the collar, the strip coming undone with a soft swish against his skin. He lays it across his palms, looking at it deeply, fondly, before raising his hands in front of him until his arms are lifted above his head.

Ilya enjoys the view of Shane presenting it - obediently, almost reverently, like an offering - before he reaches out and fastens it around his own wrist. It feels like a lifetime ago since he last wore it there, a small reminder of how far he and Shane have come.

Shane takes the heavy collar next and fastens it around his neck. The metal spikes press against his fingers, and the inside is brushed leather, not as soft as the smooth collar he was just wearing. Still, it is far better than the metal one he used to wear, the one that dragged his neck down and bruised his skin.

“Do you know why you have to wear a different one tonight?” Ilya asks.

Shane lowers his head, then answers reluctantly, “Because only a good boy gets to wear your collar, sir.” His eyes linger on Ilya’s wrist, almost jealously.

“Smart little sub,” Ilya says.

The praise does nothing to cheer Shane. He is still stewing over *his* collar.

Crossing to the wall, Ilya pulls the large crate forward, the metal scraping softly against the padded floor as it slides into place between them.

It’s not very spacious - long enough, but only hip high, forcing the body in it into a contained, folded position, the kind that demands awareness with every passing second.

Ilya crouches briefly to adjust the thin padding inside, making sure the metal bars won’t press directly into Shane’s knees. Then he opens the door.

“Get in.”

Shane looks at the crate, his face a little pale. “Sir. I - please.” His body is shaking faintly.

Ilya knows exactly what it is. The fear of being confined. Of being left.

But this isn’t meant to be comfortable for Shane. And he will not be left.

“I don’t like repeating myself, Shane. Especially not tonight.”

Ilya’s voice stays even as he taps his knuckles once against the metal bar, the sharp clang cutting cleanly through the room.

“Get in.”

Shane swallows hard, then moves.

He crawls inside slowly, carefully arranging himself into a low kneeling position, hips resting back on his heels, hands placed in front of his knees, like he is trying to do it right.

His eyes shine, blinking too quickly as he tries to hold the tears back, but he still lifts his head to look at Ilya.

Ilya reaches through the bars, fingers tangling into Shane's hair, tugging just enough to tilt his face higher.

"Talking is a good thing, isn't it, Shane?" His tone is mild, almost conversational. "You had a lot to say tonight. All the things you kept to yourself instead of bringing them to me... all that time you spent inside your own head before you decided running away was the better option."

Shane's composure cracks, he swallows a sob as he looks up pleadingly.

"Sir... I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have."

Ilya releases his hair.

"So if you don't like to talk," he says evenly, already stepping back, "then we won't talk."

He lifts his wrist slightly, showing Shane the face of his watch. "Thirty minutes."

He pauses to look Shane in the eyes.

"I'll be here. You won't be alone." His voice stays calm, stripped of warmth now, controlled to the point of distance. "But you will not have my attention. Because my attention is for my good boy Shane."

Silence settles after that.

"Do you understand?"

Shane nods quickly, relief flickering through his expression before he can hide it. "Thank you. Thank you, sir."

Of course. Shane is thanking him for not leaving when he is locked in, for simply staying in the room. For not doing something that's on his hard limit list.

Shane shifts slightly, then leans forward just enough, trying to brush his lips against Ilya's hand. It's a small and instinctive gesture, a quiet reach for reassurance.

Ilya withdraws the hand before he can make contact. He leaves Shane frozen there, lips parted slightly, his body trapped inside the cold cage.

"Your number, Shane."

"Three, sir," he says shakily, his eyes following Ilya as he walks away toward the door, suddenly full of quiet, creeping despair.

But Ilya doesn't go to the door.

Instead, he turns and stops in front of the large chest of drawers that holds his tools and toys, as if Shane is no longer something that requires his attention at all.

He opens the second layer, the one that holds the restraints.

Slowly he takes out one item after another: the soft leather wrist cuffs and ankle cuffs, the heavily padded ones meant for their longer sessions, and then the ropes and the space bar.

Ilya inspects each piece carefully, his hands methodical as he checks for cracked leather, loosened stitching, hardware that might be corroded or sharp in the wrong place, and when everything passes his scrutiny, he reaches for the leather conditioner and a microfiber cloth, working it into each piece with the same focus.

Shane chews on his lip as he watches Ilya's back, eyes burning, tears gathering again despite himself.

He remembers the night he fell asleep on the couch after an intense scene, how he woke sometime later to find Ilya standing nearby doing this exact same thing, conditioning leather, polishing buckles, his attention completely absorbed.

When Shane asked what he was doing, Ilya had brought one of the cuffs over, bending down beside the couch, showing him every detail that mattered.

"I'm cleaning them and making sure all the linkages are smooth and tight. Because they touch you."

"Sir, I can clean them later. You don't have to," Shane offers now, his voice small and fragile from inside the crate. He is trying to be useful, trying to do something to make up for what he's done.

Ilya doesn't turn. He doesn't acknowledge him. He continues working as if he is alone in the room, as if Shane's voice never existed at all.

Shane's face crumples.

A soft sniffle escapes him as he lowers his gaze to the black padding beneath his knees, the space around him suddenly feeling much smaller than before.

Ilya moves on to the next drawer, the one that holds the impact tools.

He takes out the whip, running his fingers along it section by section, inspecting, conditioning, restoring, before testing it with a precise flick of his wrist, listening to the sound it makes through the air, then again, just as controlled.

Heat rises in Shane's body at that sound.

He loves it when Ilya uses the whip on him, he loves the way Ilya looks when he does it, so focused, his eyes so clear, without the hunger or cruelty Shane had seen so often in others, without that ugly, eager excitement that always made his stomach twist.

With Ilya, there is only intention and control. His attention zoning in, only on Shane.

A soft, almost unconscious whimper slips out of Shane as he shifts slightly, his hips brushing against the side of the crate, his breath catching as Ilya reaches for the crop next, tapping it lightly against his own palm to test the weight, the evenness of the strike.

Shane loves that too.

But Ilya doesn't turn. He puts each tool back exactly where it belongs once he's finished with it. And then finally he straightens and turns around.

Shane's head lifts immediately, his entire body reacting before he can stop it.

He shifts back onto his heels, straightening his arms in front of him, pushing his chest forward, presenting himself the way Ilya likes, the way that usually earns him a word of praise.

But of course, there is nothing. Ilya walks past the crate without so much as looking at him, continuing toward the back of the room, where there is a faint shuffle of movement before the soft sound of him sitting down on the couch.

Shane's eyes sting.

His heart rate spikes as Ilya disappears from view, panic curling low in his chest, but he forces himself to take a slow breath, then another, reminding himself that Ilya is still there, just out of sight.

It doesn't help as much as he wants it to.

He wants to turn, to check, to see him, but the crate is too tight, his body too confined to shift in any meaningful way.

"Sir...?" he asks quietly, unable to stop himself.

He knows Ilya has to be there. But the silence is thick now, pressing in on him, almost suffocating.

"Sir, please." He is a little panicky now, his breath hitching. He burrows his head down into his arms for warmth.

He remembered resolving to this form when he needed the comfort that was never given to him in the previous houses. Hugging himself in a fugitive gesture, pretending it's protection and care. He hasn't needed to do that at all with Ilya, who gives him all the attention and care he needs when his body or mind starts to get overwhelmed, until tonight.

He cries quietly, tears slipping onto his arm and wetting the padding beneath him. "I know you are mad at me, sir. Please. I'm sorry. I'm scared."

He mumbles to himself, not sure exactly what he is asking for - the forgiveness, the attention, or even a hug that he knows for sure he doesn't deserve now.

A small sound answers him instead, the soft pop of a bottle being opened, followed by the sound of Ilya drinking water, and that alone is the evidence Shane needs, proof that he is not locked in a place alone with no way out.

He still isn't getting any direct response, but it's okay. He tells himself firmly that Ilya will not abandon him, he will not leave him alone.

Then it comes to him all at once, with a sudden clarity, that this is what Ilya wants him to learn. That Ilya may be angry, may lock him up, may ignore him completely, but he is not leaving him alone, and even out of Shane's sight he is still there, watching, listening, protecting.

Shane's tears fall again, but for a different reason, and quietly, to the empty space in front of him, he whispers, "Sir, I know. I know you won't abandon me. I'm sorry... I was stupid to think that."

From somewhere behind him, he hears a quiet exhale.

Still no answer, but the bottle is set down, then after a while lifted again, the small sounds coming at carefully spaced intervals, each one a reminder that there is another presence in the room with him, a steady presence that, even in silence, makes him feel safe.

After a while, the strain in his body begins to settle in, his knees ache from the metal bar beneath the thin padding, and he finally curls into himself as much as the crate allows, blinking slowly at the metal bars in front of him as he reaches out to trace the smooth surface with his finger.

He knows Ilya cleans and oils these metal bars too, even if they have never used the crate before today. He knows that no one else is ever allowed in the playroom, that Ilya takes care of anything that might touch him, anything that could hurt him if neglected, and that he takes it all very, very seriously.

The thought settles over him like a warm blanket, and he curls in a little more, his fingers wrapping around the bar as he lets himself imagine, just for a moment, that it isn't metal at all but Ilya's hand in his, and the feeling that follows is soft and steady and enough to quiet the remorse inside him.

The sound of approaching footsteps pulls him out of it, grounding him again as a metal bowl is slid into the crate through the small opening, and Ilya bends down in front of him, close now, real again, tilting the water bottle to fill it.

"Drink."

Shane scrambles to obey, leaning down immediately, lapping at the water with quick, eager movements, the action unfamiliar after months and yet deeply remembered at the same time, muscle memory taking over before he can think about it.

Only after the bowl is empty does he realize how thirsty he was, how dry his throat has been this entire time. He hasn't had a single drop of water since this morning when he left home.

"Thank you, sir." He says quietly, his tongue tracing a droplet on his lip.

"Now come out and get on all fours." Ilya opens the crate, pointing to the space in front of the couch.

Shane scrambles to obey. He will do anything - anything that gets him out of this crate.

He crawls out and makes his way slowly toward the couch, hips swaying in a way he knows will make Ilya stare, deliberately taking his time. Once he gets there, he sits back on his heels, extending his arms forward in a child pose, lifting his hips high as he twists slightly.

"I said all fours." Ilya's voice comes from above. Shane doesn't miss the slight tremor in it, the hint of control slipping despite Ilya's effort, and he bites down a smile.

He quickly shifts into position. "Sorry, sir, I just wanted to stretch a little." he says innocently. He lifts one arm as if to demonstrate, rotating his wrist. "It was getting a little stiff."

Ilya doesn't respond. He walks behind Shane, and there's a faint shuffle of fabric as he lowers himself into place.

Two lubed fingers press into him without ceremony, making Shane gasp. There is no gentleness, just a direct push inside, circling a few times, efficiently opening him up.

“Hurts, sir,” Shane complains.

It doesn't hurt that much, but he finds himself craving the gentler, more attentive version of Ilya, still unsettled by the way Ilya took his collar and ignored him for a full thirty minutes.

“Number.” Ilya's voice is calm again, stripped of emotion.

“...One,” Shane says, defeated. No matter how badly he wants the attention, he can't afford to lie about his numbers.

A sharp slap lands on his ass, making him jolt. “So dramatic, little sub.” At least the voice is a little warmer now; Shane exhales and takes what he can get.

A small, oval object is pushed into him next, a thin, long tail attached to it is left outside of his body, draping down his thigh. Shane moans at the sensation, his body lighting up, but once it settles, it does very little - it's too small to offer real pressure, too still to stimulate him. He wiggles his hips slightly, trying to feel more.

Another sharp slap. “Stay still.”

“Sorry, sir,” Shane says, lowering his head as he tightens his core, trying to coax sensation from it.

Ilya dangles something in front of him next.

An anal hook, the metal shiny and smooth in the evening light. Three beads sit at the end, each one slightly larger than the one before it.

Shane swallows nervously. He narrows his eyes, studying the beads. They look smooth and carefully maintained, with no sharp edges that could hurt him. Not like the bad ones he had experienced before.

“Get it wet,” Ilya says.

Shane opens his mouth obediently and runs his tongue over the beads one by one before tilting his head and taking the metal rod between his lips. He doesn't know how far Ilya intends to push it, so he tries to take more of it into his mouth, working his jaw and making sure it is properly prepared.

The end of the rod presses against his throat slightly, enough to make his eyes water. And Shane's thoughts wander to how much he wishes this were Ilya instead. He lets out a small whimper at the thought, because he is fairly certain Ilya will not give him that tonight. Not when he reserves that for his good boy.

“That's enough. It's not my cock. You're working too hard on it.”

As if Ilya can read his mind, he grips Shane's chin to force his mouth open, taking the rod away.

Shane draws in a breath when Ilya begins to position the hook inside his body. It isn't thick, probably about the size of an index finger, but the metal does not give, and he feels every part of it distinctly. From the way Ilya adjusts it, Shane knows the first bead and the small object already inside him will settle in a place where he will be very aware of them.

The handle rests flat against Shane's back, the cool metal pressing along his spine. Ilya gently rotates it once the hook is in place, and Shane lets out a startled sound when the movement presses

against that sensitive point, his entire body shaking.

“Right there.” Ilya sounds pleased.

Then he moves around and lowers himself in front of Shane, looking directly into his eyes.

“Any pinching or sharpness?”

Shane shakes his head. He is panting slightly, but his body is already adjusting now that everything has stopped moving.

“Good. And what’s your number?”

Shane raises his eyes to meet Ilya’s. His heart beats a little faster at the check-in, just like it always does. The question itself makes him feel safer immediately.

“One, sir.”

“Good boy.”

Ilya reaches over Shane’s shoulder and begins attaching a rope to the end of the handle. Once it is secured, he draws the rope over Shane’s back and shoulder, showing him the other end in his hand.

“This connects to the hook now. And when I pull -”

He tightens his hold slightly, and Shane reacts immediately, gasping at the sudden stimulation.

“- the hook presses further in.”

Shane feels sweat gathering at his forehead. He nods once.

“But I won’t pull it. Because today is about your decision, not mine.”

At that, Shane raises his head, blinking nervously.

Ilya smiles.

Shane really doesn’t like that smile. Well, maybe he does, but it is definitely not the gentle, reassuring smile that makes him feel instantly warm and safe. It is the smile that says, *I’m your smart Dom, and you’re my dumb little sub, and I like having you exactly where I want you.*

“Here. Open your mouth.”

When Shane obeys, Ilya places the rope between his teeth, then gently closes Shane’s jaw.

“Keep the rope in. Don’t let go unless you need to say your safeword. Do you understand?”

Shane nods a tiny nod, trying his hardest not to pull on the rope and move the hook deeper by accident.

“Good boy. Now these.”

The nipple clamps. Ilya loves them. And Ilya knows Shane loves them too. Shane lets out a muffled whine around the rope.

The clamps are applied quickly. The tension isn't too much; Ilya has adjusted them carefully so they won't hurt more than intended. His fingers catch the chain between them and tug playfully, drawing another sound from Shane.

"Now here is the fun part."

Ilya smiles that smile again - the one Shane doesn't like but also somehow likes - the one that makes him want to hide from him and cling to him at the same time.

He pulls the chain upward and places it between Shane's teeth alongside the rope.

The chain is taut now. Shane inhales sharply through his nose as the sensation pulls at his chest, and instinctively he lowers his head to ease the tension.

But the movement tightens the rope behind him, driving the anal hook in.

"Emf!" Shane makes a muffled noise, and he immediately understands what this is about.

There is no way to relieve the tension on both ends. With the rope and the chain held between his teeth, he is caught between the choice of easing the pull on his nipples or the pressure from the anal hook inside his body.

Today is about your decision.

He shuts his eyes and lets out a resigned breath through his nose.

Slowly, Shane raises his head until he reaches a neutral position, his eyes fixed on the floor below. There is tension pulling in both directions now, but at least it feels balanced. Nothing is too much.

"Hmm. That's a smart decision, Shane."

Ilya casually sits down on the couch in front of him. When Shane keeps his head neutral, all he can see are Ilya's feet.

"Only if you were as smart earlier and didn't run away. We wouldn't have to be here now."

Shane stares at those socked feet, the way they are spaced wide apart. He imagines Ilya sitting on the couch, looking down at him, his thighs spread wide, his cock...

Shane squeezes his eyes shut and forces himself not to go there.

Something inside his body suddenly starts vibrating.

Shane's eyes widen, and his head jerks upward instinctively to look at Ilya -

He makes a pained sound immediately.

The chain between his teeth pulls the nipple clamps high and tight in that one second, and his whole body sways as he struggles to find his balance.

But in that brief moment, he catches a glimpse of Ilya's face.

Ilya is smiling, a remote control held loosely in his hand.

He is enjoying this far too much.

Shane forces himself back into the neutral position, his back as flat as possible, his neck and head aligned parallel to the floor. The vibrator inside his body, the small thing that had almost disappeared from his awareness, is now moving at a steady rhythm, each pulse pressing the beads at the end of the anal hook into his sensitive prostate.

It is humiliating, having so many things on and inside his body, with the choice given to him and the tension pulled between his own teeth. It is overwhelming, a little too much, but it doesn't feel scary.

If anything, it is a little fun.

Or at least his dick seems to think so.

Shane's breathing quickens as he realizes his cock is growing with that steady, pulsing pressure against his prostate, and the pained moan he had been holding back slowly turns into something far more appreciative.

"Oh, you're liking it." Ilya says. "I'll give you more. Because I'm nice like that."

The vibrator suddenly moves at a much faster speed.

"Nnh...!"

Shane's cock becomes far too eager all of a sudden. The stimulation is so strong that it is almost unbearable. Instinctively, he curves his back downward and raises his head, trying to release the tension from the anal hook as much as possible.

And of course, that comes at the cost of the clamps being pulled taut.

But this is the only thing he can do to escape even a little from the relentless stimulation.

It is a decision he has to make again, a trade-off that gives him a sharp, pinching pain in his chest but at least some tiny relief from the pressure inside him, his body desperately reacting to every sensation.

Tears fill his eyes.

With his head raised, he can see Ilya's face now, and he puts on his best pleading expression, mouthing a trembling "please" as he tries his hardest to keep both things held between his teeth.

"Please, you said?" Ilya asks.

He leans forward, looking interested. "Do you want me to take it down a notch?"

He waves the small remote in front of Shane's face.

Shane gives tiny nods again, his body is torn between pain and pleasure, trembling, shivering, the metal against his skin giving off soft, uneven clinks.

"And what's your number?"

Shane sobs.

He tries to shake his head, but stops after the first attempt. The vertical pulling is already a lot, and if he moves that thing inside him any more, he is fairly certain he will lose control without warning.

“Well, you have to give me something, Shane. Otherwise, how can I help you?” Ilya says, looking at him patiently.

His foot comes up, catching the chain in front of Shane’s chest and tugging it slightly, sending another sharp wave of painful pleasure through his body.

Shane’s fat tears roll down his face, falling onto the padded floor beneath him with tiny splashes. Shakily, he lifts one hand and shows Ilya a single finger.

“Ah,” Ilya says.

The vibration inside him speeds up without warning.

Shane nearly collapses, barely holding himself together through sheer willpower.

He knows it will happen the moment he shows his number. He knows Ilya has been waiting for that confirmation, that this is all part of the little performance he is putting on. He knows Ilya enjoys seeing him like this - caught between pain and pleasure, between the desperate need to obey and the equally desperate need to surrender to what his body wants.

He knows he enjoys this too. A little too much, maybe. And he knows Ilya won’t shame him for it. Ilya always gives what he needs, no matter how debauched it is, letting the pleasure and pain flow free of judgements.

He shuts his eyes and bites down harder on the rope between his teeth, his scream trapped in the back of his throat.

His cock is getting far too excited from the stimulation, and that is going to become a problem, because -

“Don’t you dare come.”

The words cut through him.

He needs the relief. He needs it so badly.

There is almost nothing stopping him anymore, nothing except the genuine attempt to be good for Sir and not make an even bigger mistake today.

With the last bit of strength he has left, Shane shuffles forward on all fours. His hands find Ilya’s shin, and with his whole body trembling, he lowers himself down until his forehead presses against Ilya’s foot.

The change in position increases the pressure inside him, making him shudder uncontrollably, but Shane doesn’t care.

If he cannot stop the orgasm building deep inside him, then at least he can come like this, making the gesture he knows Ilya understands - a plea for mercy, an apology, a reminder that he is still

trying.

The vibration slows down.

It takes Shane a moment to realize it, because his entire body has been pulled so tight with tension that he almost cannot feel anything else.

Slowly, he raises his head, wincing at the pull against his chest, then lowers it again, nudging his forehead against Ilya's foot in a gesture of gratitude.

Once. Twice. He does it three times.

Ilya hums.

"Good decision again. You didn't forget your manners." Ilya sounds pleased.

Shane shifts back onto all fours, returning to that neutral position that puts the least amount of strain on his body. Although his cock is still painfully hard, and any additional touch right now will likely push him over the edge, he forces himself to stay steady.

"See? You are a smart little sub. Why did you make such a dumb choice today?" Ilya asks.

Shane cannot answer, not with the rope and chain still held between his teeth.

But even if he could, he isn't sure he has a good answer.

He cannot explain how his thoughts immediately went to abandonment when he heard Ilya was looking for his parents. He cannot explain that he does not want a life before this, that he only wants to be Ilya's little sub, his plaything, his dumb little puppy who lives in his big mansion, eats his food, and sleeps in his bed.

He makes a weak whining sound as the tension slowly begins building in his body again, waves of sensation threatening to push him over the edge.

Ilya sighs. "Probably because you're just a dumb little puppy sometimes, yes?"

Shane raises his head at that.

He doesn't even care about the pinching pull anymore. He wants to come so badly.

Eagerly, he nods.

He was Ilya's dumb little pup when they first met at Master Manny's house, and he is that again today.

Because being Ilya's pup means he can forget about everything beyond this small world they share together. It means he does not have to think about before, or after, or anything outside of the two of them.

It means he can simply be *his*.

Owned. Protected. Cared for.

Ilya smiles at him, not the teasing, cruel smile from before, but the one that makes Shane feel warm and soft every time he sees it.

“Okay, pup. You can hump my leg.”

Relief floods through Shane’s body so quickly that he almost collapses right there.

Just as he is about to straighten himself, Ilya’s hand catches his shoulder.

Ilya’s finger slides into Shane’s mouth, pulling the rope out of his mouth as his other hand slowly removes the anal hook from his body. Shane exhales shakily as that pressure buried deep inside him is finally released, at least somewhat.

“This one stays in.”

Ilya takes the chain connecting to the clamps and places it back between Shane’s teeth.

“Now you can hump. Pup.”

Shane shifts forward again, kneeling with his thighs on either side of Ilya’s shin, and grinds against Ilya’s leg.

He tilts his head up to look at Ilya, the chain pulled taut between his teeth, but he almost presents it like an offering. The pain doesn’t matter. He wants Ilya to see how good he can be, how obedient he can be, how the chain jingles softly as he snaps his hips forward once, then again.

Warmth blooms in his chest when he sees those green eyes fixed on his face, almost mesmerized.

The vibrator inside him presses against his most sensitive spot, the chain pulled by his teeth sends pain radiating from his chest, and his cock grinds against Ilya’s muscular leg, the hair there brushing roughly against his sensitive skin.

And those green eyes.

Shane is drowning in them, the pain on his body dulls and eventually morphs into pleasure, wrapping around him like syrup. Time slows down a lot too, he is chasing his orgasm in a slow-motion, and he is so close to coming, one last thrust maybe, when the leg he is humping on suddenly retracts and he is grinding into air.

Shane lets out a frustrated moan. His eyes are wet as he looks up at Ilya, still dreaming of that orgasm that’s so, so close, his mind lagging behind.

But he knows distantly that he is not getting it today. Ilya controls his orgasm. And although he is fair and kind most of the time, letting him enjoy an orgasm when the time feels right, there are days when everything goes well but Ilya decides he doesn’t get to come after all.

And today is definitely not a day when everything went well.

Big hands find his waist next. He is getting pushed to kneel in front of the couch with his upper body pressed onto the seat.

“Do you think you should come today?”

Shane drops the chain between his teeth and quietly mumbles, “No, sir.”

“Smart little pup.” Ilya presses a kiss to Shane’s shoulder blade.

“I will use you now. And you will control yourself. Don’t you dare come like an untrained, messy pup. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Shane whimpers. He wants Ilya in his body so much. He doesn’t care he doesn’t get to come. As long as Ilya still uses him, wants him.

“Ask me nicely.”

“Please use your pup. Sir. Please.”

“Good pup.” Ilya presses himself in.

It is forceful, punishing even, and Shane has not been stretched fully. It hurts deliciously.

Shane tilts his head back, his mouth forming a silent scream, but no sound comes out. He is too far gone in the pain and pleasure, not able to form even a word or a sound.

The vibrator is still humming somewhere inside his body, the rhythm out of sync with how Ilya is thrusting into him now - determined, predatory, stripped of the usual care.

Shane feels Ilya’s hand threading through his hair and lets himself be dragged up, his arms bracing on the couch cushion, his head tilting back, and his back arches into a deep curve to tilt his hips up, letting Ilya take him from behind completely.

Every thrust opens him up more in a way that he didn’t know was possible, pushing the vibrator deeper into his body until he feels it in his stomach, and maybe even deeper inside.

He is so full, so thoroughly used, and so completely owned.

There is only the heated slapping of skin against skin and Ilya’s low grunt echoing in the playroom now. Shane has lost his voice a while ago, his mind is blank as he lets himself be used completely.

But he doesn’t feel empty like he used to, the hands holding his hips steadily in place are warm and strong, the thumbs rubbing into his back in gentle circles, as if trying to ground and sooth Shane with that gesture, even though everything else is not gentle at all. Ilya presses himself close to Shane’s body when he is close, and he says something rough and unfiltered in Shane’s ears, something he doesn’t understand, but it is so full of emotion that Shane gets it - it’s a possessive claim, a command for him to never leave again, a promise to keep him safe and near.

Yes, yours. Shane whispers in his mind. *Always yours. I will never leave again. Please don’t let me leave again.*

Shane has to squeeze his own cock tight between his fingers at that thought, feeling dangerously close to coming without permission. He feels the pulse inside him soon after, and then the weight collapsing on top of him, warm body covering his back, soft kisses pressed to the back of his neck and then the soft flesh behind his ears.

Shane tilts his head so he can look Ilya in the eyes now. He looks rumpled, his eyes landing on him with so much emotion that his heart aches. Shane tilts his chin up so he can press a kiss on Ilya’s

jawline, the salty taste lingering in his mouth. Ilya lowers his head further to kiss him on his lips. It's no longer possessive, just a chaste one, while their bodies still connect unbearably tight from behind.

Ilya pulls out next, holding Shane's body down as he stands up, "Stay."

Shane buries his head in his arms resting on the couch as he remains kneeling in front of it. He hears the running water in the bathroom, and then the footsteps return. The vibrator is dragged out of his body, making him hiss, and a warm towel is quickly pressed to his hole, wiping the cum dripping out of it.

Shane clenches instinctively, he turns his head and pouts, "no, want to keep your cum inside, sir."

Ilya smiles at that, the gentle, indulgent smile that makes Shane warm and fuzzy instantly. "Silly little pup." He continues to clean Shane up with that towel, before his fingers gently brush over Shane's cock. Shane moans at that.

"Still so hard, baby." Ilya teases.

"It will calm down." Shane mumbles defeatedly. He doesn't mind not coming. He loves how Ilya controls when and how he can come.

When Ilya stands up, Shane turns and shuffles to kneel in front of him, his hands finding Ilya's thighs.

"Can I have it back, sir?" he asks, his eyes pleading as he nudges his head against Ilya's wrist, the one still wearing the collar.

"Please?"

Ilya looks like him deeply for a long time.

His hands reach to cup Shane's face, his hazel-green eyes lingering over Shane's eyes, his freckles, his mouth. Then, finally, his hands move down to the heavy collar and begin to unbuckle it.

Shane straightens himself as much as he can, suddenly realizing how unsteady his body feels now that all his strength seems to have disappeared.

He kneels up, places his hands behind his head, and tilts his chin upward, exposing his throat.

Just like the first time Ilya put the collar on him.

"Do you want to wear my collar, little sub?" Ilya finally asks. The same question he asked when he first gave Shane this collar.

"Yes, sir. It's the only thing I want. Please." Shane's answer is certain this time.

Ilya smiles. He quickly removes the leather wrapped around his wrist and bends to place it back around Shane's neck.

"You look pretty wearing my collar," Ilya says, his voice catching slightly. Shane remembers Ilya saying something like that the first time too.

Shane smiles dreamily at him. "Thank you, sir."

Then, after a quiet moment, he adds, "Could I cuddle with you, sir?"

Ilya guides him up from the floor and onto the couch, moving slowly enough that Shane does not have to think about balancing his own body anymore.

He has done a lot today.

He walked a long walk through the lawn and then the woods to the cottage, every step carrying the weight of fear and sadness he could not name. He sat on that rock facing the lake for an entire day, watching the water move while feeling completely lost, convinced that he was already being left behind. Then came the chase, the panic, the drive back, the emotional crash afterward, and finally the punishment.

It has been a very long day.

A day where Shane's body has been pushed to its limit, but more importantly, a day where his heart has been pulled in every direction possible.

Ilya helps him lie on his side, his head resting against Ilya's thigh. The moment he settles there, Shane feels something inside him finally unclench.

Slowly, carefully, Ilya begins removing the clamps still attached on Shane's body. Shane only lets out quiet little whimpers with each movement, too exhausted to do anything more than breathe and trust him. His body feels heavy, almost disconnected, like he is floating somewhere far away from himself.

But it is a safe place. A warm place.

He is lying somewhere soft, feeling protected.

His eyelids grow heavier and heavier until he can barely keep them open. All he wants is to close his eyes and sleep, right here, exactly like this.

Ilya drapes a blanket over him, tucking it around his body before resting his hand on top of it.

Just the weight of his palm is enough.

That gentle pressure, that steady reminder that Ilya is there, that he is not going anywhere, always makes something inside Shane settle.

"Take a nap now, baby. I'll wake you up for food later."

Shane hums in acknowledgment, barely awake.

Of course Ilya will feed him.

He knew that when he sat on the rock by the lake, feeling abandoned and forgotten.

He knew that when he ran through those woods, pretending he could actually get away from Ilya.

He knew that when he knelt in the playroom, waiting for his punishment.

No matter how scared he was, no matter how badly his thoughts spiraled, some part of him always knew.

Ilya would bring him home.

Strangely, Shane doesn't feel hungry right now.

He doesn't want anything except this. The warmth of Ilya beneath his head. The weight of Ilya's hand over the blanket. The familiar scent of him surrounding Shane.

He just wants to stay here, curled up in Ilya's lap, forever.

Author's Note (Kink Bits & Safety)

This chapter leans pretty heavily into punishment dynamics, so I wanted to talk a little about the "why" behind what's happening here.

Punishments should fit the "crime"

For Shane, punishment isn't always about pain. If anything, (controlled, safe) pain lands a little too close to pleasure for him, which is why it wouldn't actually correct the behavior that caused the issue in the first place.

What he did - running away instead of communicating - came from fear of abandonment, so Ilya's response targets exactly that, but in a controlled, intentional way. He uses silence and distance, and the temporary removal of affection. It feels like what Shane fears, but it's carefully bound. There's a time limit. There are constant, quiet reassurances that he hasn't actually been left. It's meant to correct, not to harm.

No contact punishments

Things like silence treatment (used here), taking away a comfort item (the collar, in this case, or even something like no ice cream for a month), or something as mundane as writing lines are all about creating space for reflection without physically punishing the submissive in ways that don't serve the dynamic.

If used correctly, they can be more effective than impact punishments, especially for someone like Shane who enjoys pain play a little too much :)

Funishments

You'll notice that after the punishment comes something very different in tone - the anal hook and the nipple clamps and how Shane is trapped between choosing his own poisons. Ilya understands Shane well enough to build something that walks that edge: still intense, still shows Ilya's control, but giving Shane an outlet to release some of the tension. It's a reminder that even in discipline, the care never goes away.

One quick note on the more intense toy used in this chapter: **anal hooks**. These are one of those things that look simple but can be risky if handled carelessly. The biggest rule is to avoid attaching

them to anything that could pull with force or sudden movement - especially anything connected to the neck or spine (like collars). Slow movement, constant awareness, and easy release are key.

Chapter End Notes

Shane: You took my collar away. It was traumatizing

Ilya: Dramatic little sub.

Shane: I think I deserve compensation.

Ilya: What do you want?

Shane: Extra cuddles?

Separate note: do we think I should add the Mean Dom Ilya Rozanov tag or is he still a very good Dom? 🐈🥰

Chapter 18: Three words

Chapter Notes

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

The house is quiet the next day.

Harris takes a sick day. When Troy comes in, he doesn't explain why, and Ilya doesn't ask. None of the house staff mention what happened the night before. Marta has already whipped them into shape, a firm, unspoken rule against gossiping about anyone's personal matters.

Shane stays in bed most of the day. At first, he claims he's just recovering from how intense everything was, but after he skips both breakfast and lunch, Ilya comes upstairs, presses a hand to his forehead, and immediately frowns.

"You are burning up."

Shane knows. He feels wrong all over - hot and cold at the same time, his body aching deep in his bones. The familiar dread curls in his stomach, the old instinct to push through it and pretend everything is fine, because getting sick was never something he could afford.

But today, he's wrapped in a warm blanket. Ilya leaves the room and soon comes back with water, medicine, and something light to eat.

And it feels... so, so nice. To just lie there. To look at the man in front of him and know that this kind of vulnerability won't be used against him.

"Sorry for the trouble," Shane murmurs, voice rough and thin, his throat burning with every word.

He hates being sick. It used to hurt too much, being used like that, when his body was already struggling, the soreness spreading from his muscles into his bones, leaving him nauseous and hollow after.

But maybe... it will be different with Ilya. Just like how everything else is different with Ilya.

He slips one hand out from under the blanket, shivering slightly as the cool air hits him, despite the heat trapped around him, and rests it lightly against Ilya's leg.

"Would you like to fuck me, Ilya?" he asks, simple and earnest. He's too tired to seduce and he has no strength to put up a performance or tease, so he just offers.

He knows Ilya will take care of him after. He doesn't mind the ache, the nausea - none of it really matters, as long as he can give Ilya something good.

Ilya's expression hardens instantly.

The shift is so sharp that Shane flinches, pulling his hand back like he's been burned and burrowing under the sheet.

"Shane, I swear, if you try to hurt yourself again, I am going to give you a proper lesson." His voice is controlled, but there's real anger in it. Real fear, too. Shane pokes his head out at that tone.

The next moment, a cool, damp cloth is pressed to Shane's forehead, and the relief is immediate, so soothing that Shane almost purrs.

"I'm not trying to hurt myself," Shane protests weakly. "I heard it feels very good... when I'm very warm inside."

Ilya just scowls.

Shane shrinks under that gaze, and slowly he drags the cover over his head. "I'm just trying to be helpful, Ilya," he mumbles from under the covers. "Don't be so mad."

The blanket is tugged down almost immediately, tucked back under his chin with firm, careful hands.

Shane goes for it again, because he can't help it - "How would you give me the proper lesson, Sir?" He doesn't sound sexy at all, his voice way too hoarse, but he bats his eyes at Ilya and he knows Ilya always gets it.

"I think you should stop talking," Ilya says, voice flat. "Stupid little sub."

His hands are still so gentle though, wiping his face, neck and palm in slow strokes, giving him the much welcomed relief from the cold sweat.

Shane pouts, "Do you think I became more stupid, Ilya?"

His eyes linger on Ilya's face - it might be the fever, but somehow Ilya looks more handsome today, the hard lines of his jaw and his face forming something that almost looks unreal. Shane didn't think it was possible. "You call me that a lot lately."

"Do you not like it?"

"No, I kind of like it. I just want to know." Shane smiles shyly. Admitting it doesn't cost him much, if he can just be stupid and let Ilya take care of him, he would happily do it.

"No, I think you are very smart." Ilya says after a while, "But sometimes you make silly little decisions. Only makes you cute."

Shane is sure he is grinning like a silly little sub. He sighs contently, ready to close his eyes as the exhaustion pulls on him again.

But Ilya doesn't let him, he nudges the edge of the cover. "Sit up."

Shane blinks his eyes open, sluggish. "Don't wanna."

"I know." Ilya's voice softens, just a little. "Still need to."

Shane lets himself be pulled upright, swaying slightly before Ilya steadies him with a firm hand at his back. The room tilts unpleasantly, and he makes a small noise of complaint, pressing his face briefly into Ilya's shoulder without really thinking about it.

Ilya exhales. After a brief moment, one arm comes up to support him properly, solid and warm.

"Easy," he murmurs.

A glass is pressed into Shane's hand, but when his fingers don't quite cooperate, Ilya takes it back without comment and tips it carefully to his lips instead.

"Drink."

Shane obeys, swallowing slowly. Some of it dribbles at the corner of his mouth. He tries to raise his hand to wipe it away, but his arms are so heavy.

Ilya presses a kiss there and licks the water off his face.

"Ilya -" Shane says. He must be using that voice again because he clearly sees somewhere below Ilya's waist, something gets *very* interested all of a sudden.

"Just trying to help." Ilya says in his most even voice. Shane realizes those were his words not long ago, and Ilya is mocking him. He scrunches his nose and pretends mad. That earns him another soft kiss right on the tip of the nose.

Getting sick is so, so nice now. He can do this forever.

But then Ilya reaches for the tray on the nightstand. "You have to eat something."

Shane makes a face. "Feel sick."

"I know. You will feel worse if you don't eat." And then after a while, "Marta will give me a hard time if this is not empty when I bring it down."

Shane smiles weakly as he obeys. The food tastes bland and is easy to eat. Ilya lifts spoonful after spoonful, waiting patiently for Shane to finish each bite. Shane has to pause a few times because keeping food down is hard now. He had learned the lessons the hard way before he met Ilya, a few times after making a mess because he was too sick.

He knows Ilya wouldn't mind if he makes a mess now. But he also doesn't want to worry him. So he tries his best to keep the food down, taking breaks as he eats. Ilya is so patient. His eyes land on Shane so gentle like he is fragile, and he carefully blows the steam away before he lifts the spoon each time.

"This is nice." Shane mumbles as he finally finishes the food. "I didn't know getting sick could be so nice. I want to get sick more."

Ilya squeezes his arm once, "You are being silly again."

He puts the bowl away, wiping the cool cloth against Shane's forehead once more, "I need to deal with some work. Take a nap? Call me or Marta if you need anything." Ilya points to the house phone that he has moved to the nightstand.

Shane nods as he slides down to lie on the bed, content that he is finally allowed to go back to sleep. But before Ilya goes, he reaches one arm from under the blanket and grabs at him, "Hug. Ilya."

Ilya has this indulgent expression on his face that makes Shane's heart flutter every time. He turns back and sits down by the edge of the bed again, and gently he hovers over Shane, wrapping his body in his long arms, pressing a kiss on top of his head.

Shane sleeps fitfully through the afternoon.

He wakes often, never fully, drifting in and out like he's caught between tides. Each time his eyes open, he turns his head just enough to catch the window, watching the leaves outside shift as the light changes, from a flat, blinding white to a warmer and softer gold.

He sips on the water Ilya left for him from time to time, trying to seek the relief for his burning throat.

Eventually, the dryness in his throat pulls him under for real.

He reaches for the bottle, tilts it, empty. Shane frowns faintly at it, like it's betrayed him.

He licks at his lips, winces, then reaches for the house phone, pressing 1 with slow, clumsy fingers. It clicks, connecting immediately.

"Marta?" he asks, his voice so hoarse it startles himself. He swallows, tries again. "Could you bring some water? Sorry for..."

The line disconnects before he can finish. He stares at the receiver for a second, confused.

Then - there are footsteps on the stairs.

They are firm and fast. Purposeful. Not like Ilya's measured stride, but even more decisive.

Shane lets his head sink back into the pillow just as the door opens.

Marta walks in with a jar of water in one hand and a plate of freshly cut fruits in the other. She smells faintly of citrus and melons, her apron still tied around her waist.

Shane blinks up at her, a little dazed.

"Thank you," he murmurs. "I know you must be busy with dinner..."

Marta ignores that completely. She sets everything down, then drags a chair closer to the bed with a quiet scrape and sits, like she's decided this is where she belongs for now.

"Never lie about getting sick again, Shane," she says firmly as she refills Shane's water bottle. "It always comes back to you and actually makes you sick."

Shane huffs a weak little laugh. "Okay, Marta. My mom used to say that too..."

The words slip out easily. Shane stills as the meaning of them hits him a second later.

And then his chest tightens sharply, like a thread pulled too hard.

Marta falls quiet. She picks up the cloth from the nightstand and presses it gently under his eyes just as the first tears spill over, catching them before they can disappear into his hair.

"Oh, Shane," she murmurs, her other hand settling steady against his forehead. "What else do you remember about her?"

Shane shakes his head at first, too overwhelmed by the sudden flash of memories. But the memories come anyway, small, disjointed, but *vivid*.

“She... cuts fruit for me too,” he manages, voice breaking apart. “Just like this, small pieces. She always,” he gestures weakly toward the plate, fingers trembling, “she takes the seeds out. Even when I don’t mind at all.”

Marta’s hand shifts, thumb brushing lightly along his temple, grounding.

“And when I’m sick,” Shane continues, the tears coming harder now, “she sits next to me. Like you are.”

His chest heaves, the emotion too big, too sudden.

“I think,” he chokes, clutching at the blanket, “I think she used to hum. I can’t hear it, but...” he presses a hand against his sternum, “I can feel it. Here.”

Marta doesn’t interrupt. She just stays still. One hand on his forehead, the other steadying the cloth, letting him unravel without rushing him to stop.

“That’s good,” she says quietly after a moment. “That’s very good, Shane.”

Her voice is so warm, like she is proud of Shane for remembering snippets. A tone that even Shane has not heard from her before today.

Shane cries harder at that.

“I can’t see her face,” he whispers, almost ashamed. “I don’t know what she looks like.”

Marta leans in slightly, her expression softening.

“That’s alright,” she says. “You don’t have to remember everything at once.” Her thumb brushes once more against his temple, slow and reassuring.

“You remember how she loved you,” she adds gently. “That’s the part that matters.”

He nods with his eyes closed again, tears still slipping down into his hair.

*

Shane’s fever breaks the next day. When Ilya asks him whether he feels well enough to go downstairs for breakfast, he coyly shakes his head and asks Ilya to bring it to him.

“Please?” He asks with his eyes wide, and nudges into Ilya’s palm when he ruffles his hair indulgently, giving him a quiet “sure.”

He then enjoys his breakfast handfed by Ilya, licking Ilya’s fingers playfully until Ilya puts down the plate on the nightstand and tackles him into the bed. His strong body presses into Shane’s, their lips only inches apart.

Shane raises his head to give a quick peck on Ilya’s cheek. “You missed your chance Ilya. I think my internal temperature is back to normal now.”

Ilya kisses his neck, “is that so?”, his hips rutting against Shane’s, drawing out moan after moan from Shane. “Why do you feel warm again?” He says, smirking as he looks at Shane squirm beneath him.

“I, ah...” Shane can’t form a coherent sentence anymore. But before he can do more, the body pressed on him straightens, leaving him panting on the bed.

“Ilya- ” he tries that voice again, his eyes turning misty. But Ilya doesn’t bite. “No sex until you are fully recovered.”

Shane pouts, “You are missing out.”

Ilya leans down and kisses him, “So be it.”

They cuddle a bit more, their conversation from last night still vivid, and both of them feel closer now they finally talked through what Shane’s memories mean, the topic they have danced around so far.

“Call the Study if you need me.” Ilya says as he kisses Shane more, just a chaste one on the lips but so so good. And then he raises, going over to the dresser to bring over something he left there earlier, “I brought you the books you were reading from the library.”

All three of them.

Shane grins up. He holds his arms out for one more hug before he lets Ilya go. Then he settles comfortably in bed, sipping on the electrolyte that Ilya brought him, jumping into his books.

There are a few knocks on the door after a while. Shane raises his head from the book, curious about those soft knocks. “Yes?”

Harris pokes his head in.

“Harris!” Shane exclaims. He drops his book immediately, swinging his legs over the bed, only to pause, gripping the mattress as a wave of dizziness hits him.

Harris is at his side in seconds, already reaching for his hand. He looks a little pale, not quite as bright as usual, his eyes a little swollen.

Shane frowns. “Harris, are you okay? Did you get sick too?”

Harris hesitates. “Yes. But I’m fine today.” Then he lowers himself to kneel by the bed, still holding onto Shane’s hand. “How are you feeling?”

Shane’s frown deepens. “Use that chair, Harris. This makes me feel like... I’m dying.”

That draws a startled laugh out of Harris. “I, um, I can just stand.” He raises, his body a little stiff with that movement.

Shane tilts his head back to look at him properly, and the realization hits.

Oh. He opens his mouth, about to say something, but Harris’s expression closes off just enough, so Shane lets it go.

“I feel better today,” Shane says instead. “I should be able to get back to the garden with you tomorrow.”

Harris nods, but there’s still something careful in the way he watches him. “You’re not mad at me?”

“No, of course not. Harris.” Shane rushes the words out, shaking his head. “I should be the one apologizing. Sorry for... getting you into trouble.”

There’s no need to say more. They both understand.

“I crossed a line,” Harris says quietly. “It wasn’t something for me to tell.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.” Shane gives him a small, reassuring smile. “I talked it through with Sir-Ilya. We’re all good now.”

Harris exhales, relief softening his shoulders. “Oh. That’s great.” He hesitates, “Um... did you tell him to stop looking?”

Shane shakes his head slowly. “It’s a long story. But before, I didn’t want him to look, because I was scared that... my family gave me up.”

He chews on his lip, gaze drifting.

“I thought if Ilya found them, it would just prove they never wanted me. Or worse...” He exhales shakily. “They might take me away from Ilya and... give me away again somehow.”

Harris’s mouth falls open slightly.

Shane smiles sadly. He knows Harris would never think like that, his world has always been safer and warmer. But Shane didn’t have that luxury in his life. He didn’t really learn to trust anyone until Ilya.

And even the idea of “family” never meant much, not until yesterday when Marta sat by his bed, her presence so steady and warm, and he starts to remember.

“Um, if you’re not going to sit,” Shane adds, pointing toward the opposite wall, “can you at least stand over there? My neck’s hurting from looking up at you like this.”

That earns him another laugh, and Shane grins, pleased. Harris is usually the one making him laugh, it feels good to return it.

Harris moves, leaning against the wall with his elbow propped on the dresser.

“But somehow being sick helped me remember more,” Shane continues, “And the memories are... sweet. So thank you, Harris.”

Harris perks up at that.

“We talked more last night,” he adds. “Ilya says he’ll keep looking, but if we find them, we’ll only reach out if I’m sure.”

“Oh my goodness, that’s great, Shane.” Harris looks much more brightened now compared to when he just walked in. “What are they like?”

“It’s just snippets,” Shane says quietly. “But I remember my mom taking care of me when I was sick. She’s kind of like Marta.”

Harris frowns slightly. “Oh... so, very strict?”

Shane smiles, shaking his head. “No. She’s very loving. Just like Marta.”

His smile widens when Harris looks even more confused.

“But yes,” Shane adds, a little amused, “she’s dominant. And I think my dad was there too...” His brows knit together as he reaches for it. “He’s quieter. I have this feeling he’s the one who taught me how to cook.”

Harris’s expression softens, he has the look like when he looks at new blossoms in the garden.

“That’s wonderful.”

Shane nods, though the feeling shifts slightly.

“But Ilya says he already checked missing persons reports, and there isn’t one for me.” His brows crease. “So either they’re so far away that Ilya’s search doesn’t reach... or they’re not looking.”

“Hey, we don’t know that.” Harris pushes off the wall immediately, coming back to him, taking his hand again like it’s instinct. “You should trust them, okay? Your parents, and Ilya and Troy.”

He pauses, then adds with sudden conviction, “They’re really good at what they do. Troy once...” He hesitates, flushing. “found out something about me that was *very* private.”

Shane perks up. “Really?”

Harris groans softly. “Yes. Really. We are not talking about it.”

Shane snorts.

“I just... wish we didn’t both get sick,” Harris mutters, trying to recover. “I was looking forward to going shopping. And helping you pick out glasses.” He glances at the books by Shane’s bed. “You really shouldn’t read so much until you get them. It’s not good to keep squinting like that.”

“I can survive a few more days,” Shane says with a small smile. “But maybe we can go next week?”

Harris nods eagerly. “Yes. I need to get the flower bed ready for the winter anyway. I’ll start, and maybe you can help tomorrow if you’re feeling better.”

Shane nods. Then, quietly he says, “Thank you, Harris. For being a good friend.”

Harris immediately flushes. “Stop it, Shane,” he mumbles. “I’m just glad we’re not mad at each other.”

*

Two weeks later

“Ilya, can I come in please?” The soft voice sounds at the door.

Ilya’s mood is lifted instantly, he still keeps his focus on the screen as he says, “Yes, Shane.”

Shane opens the door gently with his elbow, balancing two cups of tea.

“I brought you...” he starts, then pauses when he sees Ilya hasn’t looked up. “a break, ideally.”

Ilya’s eyes are still trained on his screen. Some of these reports coming in for a new case just don’t add up. And he has spent the past few nights working instead of with Shane, to his dismay.

“Hey, baby.” He jots down something in the notebook before lifting his head, “I need another...”

His voice trails off.

Shane is wearing a soft looking blue button down shirt, the top few buttons are undone, showing a span of soft skin beneath. A pair of black frame glasses sit on his nosebridge, sliding down slightly as he leans to put down the teacup.

Shane adjusts the saucer so the handle of the teacup faces Ilya’s hand, before he raises his head to give Ilya the most breathtaking smile.

“I brought my book.” He takes it from under his arm and waves it slightly, “Can I just read here?”

Ilya’s eyes can’t move away from Shane’s face. The glasses are doing something to his brain... and to another part of his body that’s less decent.

“When did you get those?” Ilya finally asks, his throat feels dry. He taps at his own temple.

“Oh.” Shane smiles again, “Harris took me shopping last week? The glasses came in today.” He adjusts the frame with his thumb and index fingers,

“I don’t know how I survived without them before, they make such a big difference.”

Ilya wants to say the same thing.

He turns to his screen, and remembers the reports he needs to read through and the instructions he needs to send out before the next morning.

“Yes, sit here and read.” He finally says.

He points at the heavy armchair on the other side of the desk that Troy usually uses when he works here, one with a solid wood frame and comfortable leather cushions at the bottom and on the back.

Shane looks so soft under the evening light. He slips into the chair, tucking one leg under himself. And he reads.

Ilya only has to tilt his head slightly past his screen to look straight at Shane’s face. That straight nose, that delicate jawline, freckles, and those damn glasses. He forces his eyes back.

There is a soft gasp. Shane’s eyes get wider as he reads something, his fingers coming up to cover his mouth, and then absent-mindedly he brushes his index finger over his plump upper lip, tracing the perfect curve.

He then nimbles on that index finger before darting his tongue out, wetting his lips. A moment later, he swallows when he reads something, his throat bobbing.

Ilya narrows his eyes to double check the cover. Shane is reading a thriller, but he might as well be reading something erotic, his cheeks are flushed pink.

Shane then whispers under his breath, reading a line out as if he couldn't help it. His lips remain parted after he finishes, two perfectly soft, plush, pink things.

Just as Ilya is about to drag his eyes back to focus on his monitor, Shane shifts slightly in the chair, adjusting his positions, and *giving himself a quick rub* in between his legs.

"What is the book about?" Ilya finally gives up pretending he is working.

"Huh?" Shane's head snaps up from the book, and he stutters, "It's, uh, about this investigative journalist who gets pulled into a series of mysteries."

He shifts slightly, parting his legs and lifting his hips a little, like he's trying to get comfortable. Ilya's eyes narrow at that movement.

"They're all connected to this one reclusive guy," Shane continues, pushing his glasses up his nose again. "He... likes to study people, not hurt them, I think? It's not clear yet. And because this journalist gets too close, he gets taken to this cabin in the woods..."

His voice gets smaller as Ilya stands up, walks around the desk, and slowly stands in front of him.

"And that makes you excited?" Ilya smirks, wiggling an eyebrow at him.

"I, no, no it doesn't. It's just tense." Shane is so flustered when he lies, Ilya smiles at that. Shane then tries for a calmer tone, "I thought you had work."

"I do, and you being here is very distracting." Ilya leans down to straighten Shane's glasses slightly before taking the book away from him. Shane gasps at that contact.

Shane looks up through his lashes, his voice quiet, "Would you like me to go away?"

Ilya shakes his head, "No. Never want you to go away." He half kneels in front of the armchair, "Although, I want you to be still, and less distracting."

"I, I can do that." Shane leans back into the armchair, his face is flushed red.

"Can you?" Ilya says, his palm landing in between Shane's leg, drawing out a shaky inhale. "I think you might need a little help, to stay put. Just like the journalist."

Shane shivers at that contact. Ilya brings Shane's right leg up, draping it over the arm of the chair, then he does the same to the left leg. He smiles as he looks at Shane laid out in front of him, legs open wide.

"What do you think? Do you think you would need the help, to stay still and be a good boy?"

Shane gulps visibly. With a voice just above whisper, "Yes, please, sir. I- I would like some help."

Ilya smiles, he opens a drawer under the desk and pulls out two ties he keeps in there. Slowly he wraps one tie around Shane's ankle and ties it onto the leg of the chair, before doing the same on the other side.

"Lift your hips."

Shane closes his eyes briefly, and then obeys without a word.

Ilya pulls Shane's pants and boxers off just enough to free Shane's cock, which has gotten very excited since Ilya pulled out the ties. It springs out, bouncing lightly against Shane's stomach. "Gonna let it breathe out here, it doesn't look comfortable getting trapped inside."

The top of the pants and boxers now sit high up on Shane's thighs, constraining him more while his legs are being pulled apart.

Ilya looks at him smittenly. He turns around to bring the book back. "Now you can read while I work instead of shuffling like a little bunny." He steps back, smiling contently at the sight, "Don't make more noises, unless you want me to help here too?" His fingers brush lightly across Shane's lips.

Shane's body trembles as he shakes his head, "I can keep quiet, sir."

"Good boy."

Ilya pushes through the documents and finalizes the set of instructions for his agents within the next twenty minutes. And then he just pretends to be busy.

Because if Shane can pretend he was reading instead of being devastatingly cute and sexy, in his little button down shirt and his black framed glasses, he can pretend too.

He takes in the view slowly as he looks from behind his screen.

The heat still sits high on Shane's cheeks. His shirt sits a little skewed, showing his left collarbone and the skin beneath it. If it opens more, it would show Shane's left nipple, the more sensitive one.

Beside the little skin that's shown beneath the shirt, Shane's body from waist up is completely proper. His arms popped on either side of the armchair, holding the book in front of his chest. His glasses sit just a little lower on his nose, and his long lashes brush against the glass as he blinks. He looks like a diligent student, or an academic, a journalist perhaps...

But waist down, it's a completely different picture. His legs are spread wide and held up by the chair arms, his ankles tied tightly to the legs of the chair, and just beneath the hem of his shirt, his cock erects fully, showing a darkish pink against his stomach, leaking a small patch of wetness on his shirt.

Ilya stands up then, slowly he walks towards Shane, who nervously puts the book against his chest now, his eyes looking up at Ilya with that helpless expression.

"So, what happened to that journalist?" Ilya leans down and brushes his lips on Shane's ears. He shivers.

"He got taken to the cabin..."

“Yes, I know that already, what happened after?” Ilya sniffs Shane’s hair, he smells so good.

“The mysterious guy captured him... and tied him up to a chair.” Shane whispers.

“Ah, so it is a bad guy?” Ilya curls a corner of his mouth.

“No, he isn’t bad. He is so...” Shane swallows, “strong, and his voice so low and sexy, and his hands are big, and firm.”

“Hmm, like this?” Ilya flattens his palms against either side of Shane’s thighs, and grabs a handful of those lean muscles. His grip is firm, bordering bruising.

Shane whimpers, “Yes, just like that.”

“And then what?” Ilya continues, his hands groping Shane’s thighs up and down.

“He interrogates the journalist.” Shane’s barely able to keep his voice steady.

“Oh.” Ilya moves one hand cup Shane’s face, the other gently tracing his freckles on the other half. And Shane knows. He closes his eyes, leaning into the cupping hand.

A slap lands on the opposite cheek, tipping his head further into the hand that’s cupping his face, a crisp crack echoing in the study.

“Like this?”

Shane snuffles, a haze quickly rolls over his eyes, his glasses sit skewed.

Ilya gives him a few pats on the face before straightening his glasses.

His hands then move down to Shane’s shirt, his fingers tighten, and in a single pull, the shirt gives way, buttons snapping loose, skittering across the floor as Shane’s chest lays bared.

He gives both nipples a sharp twist, before slapping across his chest.

“Or like this?”

Shane’s eyes are watery now. He whimpers softly, his teeth sinking into his bottom lips.

“Ah, tough little journalist.” Ilya’s hands move further down, one hand wrapping around Shane’s cock, closing slightly.

“What brings a pretty little thing like you to my humble cabin, hm?”

Shane shakes his head weakly, “I got lost. Please, please just let me go. Ah-!”

Shane cries out as Ilya tightens his hand around Shane’s cock and twists.

“Got lost, huh?” Ilya reaches his free hand up to wipe the single teardrop that escaped, his other hand still wrapped around Shane’s cock, loosened, but threatening. “What were you looking for when you got lost? Maybe I can help.”

Shane’s expression changes. He looks calm and serene all of a sudden, his breathing evening out. Slowly he blinks up to Ilya behind those glasses, “I was looking for my Dom. Have you seen

him?”

He bites his lip, like he’s trying not to smile, and crosses his arms loosely over his chest, more shy than defensive, fingertips brushing absently over his bare skin. “He is... really good looking, kind, and so strong.”

He smiles up to Ilya as his eyes linger on him, “He has these dark blond curls, and the most beautiful green eyes. And he is the best Dom that I could ever dream of... His name is Ilya.” Shane says *Ilya* with that little lilt in the end, those pink lips remain open as if they are still tasting the name after saying it.

Ilya just... stares. He is about to melt on the spot, right in the middle of a role play where he is supposed to be dangerous and mean. Before he can slip out of character, he drags a slow breath and pulls it together.

“Too bad Ilya is not the one who found you tonight, I did.” He snarls as he gives Shane a few brutal strokes. “And we will see if I will let you go back to him after I’m done.”

“Please, please let me go. I will do anything to go back to him, please.” Shane begs weakly, his breath hitching.

How is he so good at begging? Ilya suddenly gets jealous of Shane’s Dom, until he realizes that he *is* Ilya, and he is the Dom that Shane is giving everything to go back to... and he is almost undone by that thought.

He shakes the thought away. He is not Ilya tonight. He can’t be.

“Anything, you said.”

Shane nods shakily, his eyes are so full with emotions that it almost hurts to look.

Ilya gives Shane’s collar a little tug, smirking as Shane’s eyes widen with fear, his hands coming up to hold onto it instinctively.

“I’m not taking it away.” He smiles cruelly at that visible relief in Shane’s shoulder, “yet.”

“Open yourself up, if your little hole isn’t ready by the time I come back, I will rip that flimsy thing off your neck and chain you to the wall. Show you what a real Dom is like.”

Shane snuffles, his hands coming up to Ilya’s forearm pleadingly, “Could I have some lube, please.”

Ilya “tsks” a few times, squeezing on Shane’s cheeks to force his mouth open. “Your good Dom Ilya always uses lube with you? What a softie.” He shoves a finger in, “no such thing in my cabin, use your mouth or I fuck you dry.”

Shane whimpers more loudly now. Hastily he puts two fingers into his mouth, getting them wet before reaching down to his hole. He tilts his hips up to show it more. Ilya gulps at that pink little thing that winks at him, shaking and clenching as if Shane couldn’t help it.

He turns and rushes out to gather things from his playroom. One step onto the stairs, Ilya realizes his cock is now too painfully trapped for him to walk upstairs comfortably. He unzips himself, rushes up there, rammages through his chest of drawers, and heads back down.

Ilya is back at the door of his study in no time. He takes a steadying breath before getting back in.

Shane has two fingers in himself, the sitting position is hard for him to reach, and his fingers are clearly not slick enough, his movement a little jerky with pain.

He sees Ilya approach and shivers hard, "I'm, I'm almost ready. Please."

Ilya bends to untie Shane's ankles from the chair to force his legs further apart. He slaps on Shane's hands and shows him the dildo he brought back.

"You had your time to open up. Fuck yourself with this. Now."

Shakily Shane accepts the dildo. His eyes widen as he notices it's all lubed up.

Ilya is a softie after all.

Slowly he pushes it in. It's a large one with a flat base - almost as big as Ilya. Shane throws his head back on the chair, his mouth falls open as he creases his brows to get the dildo further in.

"It's too big." Shane whimpers, "I can't get it in - it's too big."

"You better." Ilya leers, "Because I'm bigger than that." He smiles smugly as Shane lets out a soft moan at that.

Ilya's hand finds that flat base and pushes it in, steady and against some resistance, he feels Shane's body shifting to accommodate the intrusion. What starts as moans breaks down into uneven, desperate sounds, half-cry, half-breath.

"Pretty little journalist, shouldn't have wandered into my cabin if your tight little hole can't handle this."

"Please..." Shane blinks up through the skewed glasses, holding onto his role, "please don't break me." He sniffles, "Ilya is waiting for me."

Ilya growls. The large dildo is mostly in, but it's too big for Shane's body to hold, and Shane's hole is pushing it out bits by bits, trying desperately to rid himself of it.

Ilya flattens his palm and smacks the base of the dildo, thrusting it in as he slaps the sensitive skins around.

"Ahh, Ahhh!" Shane wails, the sound raw and strangely beautiful, a sound he never lets out when he's holding his pain in check. Today, he's let go of the rhythm, the controlled breaths, the instinct to brace. Instead, he lets it all rise and spill over.

His body is wracked with tremors, his head lolling to one side, eyes clouded with that familiar haze where pain and pleasure blur and he slips into it.

Ilya stays where he is, taking it in. It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Shane laid out on the chair, open like an offering, his body shaking under the flux of emotions and sensations. His little hole clenches helplessly, trying to hold the dildo in, but despite his efforts it's sliding out bit by bit.

"Aww, does that hurt?" Ilya coos gently. Shane nods, his tears are finally rolling down his cheeks.

“Good, I like that sound you make in pain.” Ilya hovers his hand over, and smacks Shane’s hole - and the dildo inside - again, harder this time.

Shane howls. His one hand scrambles to find Ilya’s body, trying to hold onto something. Ilya grabs onto his hand and gives him a firm squeeze, his attention zeroing in.

He lets out a breath he is holding as he sees Shane shakily close his other fingers, leaving an index finger pointing in his palm. One.

“This will help you remember, to not venture into places you don’t belong again. Pretty thing.” Ilya’s smile widens, his hand hovering again, waiting for Shane’s body to push it out more before he can strike.

Shane tries hard to hold it in this time, he has lost his words, his body trembles violently, but he keeps his legs open on either side of the armchair, his hips tilted up to show his clenching hole. The most obedient, beautiful thing.

Slowly the dildo slides out just enough, and Ilya spanks his hole again, pushing it in.

“Ahh! Please!” Shane’s a mess, trembling from head to toe. His hole and the skins near it are a delicious shade of pink. His hands settle on his knees, an effort to pull himself open, to force away the instinct to close on the pain.

When Ilya raises his hand again, Shane pleads through tears, “I will hold it in, please, please don’t spank me more. Hurts.” His hand reaches down to cover his hole, pushing and keeping the dildo in.

“Ah, now you behave.” Ilya says. “But no, I think you deserve a few more to learn.”

“I can’t, I can’t take any more.” Shane’s voice breaks on it. He sniffs, dragging a hand across his face, smearing tears as he pushes his glasses back up. He looks wrecked, wet-eyed, shaking, like a big puppy desperate to please, trembling with pain and excitement, his tail tucked right between his legs, trying to cover the sensitive skin there.

“Move your hand,” Ilya says.

Shane’s fingers curl, then uncurl, pulling back inch by inch like he’s fighting himself the whole way. His body is already shaky, bracing for what he knows is coming, for the sharp flare that will drag every nerve awake.

Ilya doesn’t make him wait. The strike lands right in between his butt cheeks, a loud crack.

Shane breaks on the sound, a sharp, ragged cry tearing out of him, the kind he almost never lets slip.

Ilya is satisfied. The tears, the sound, and Shane’s shaky obedience flowing into his blood vessels like drugs, sharpening his attention where his whole world zeros into Shane.

“Fuck yourself with it.”

Shane bites his lips as he starts doing just what he’s told. His hand moves the dildo in shallow thrusts, each time making lewd wet noise as it slides into his body.

“Emm... not enough. Want...” He whimpers as pink shades climb onto his cheek, darkening the freckles against the reddish backdrop, his brows creasing together as he keeps the dildo moving, “Want my Ilya.”

Fuck Ilya. He should only be wanting me. Ilya thinks. The logic is murky in his mind now, a burning sense of possessiveness rolls through his head.

“Turn around, knees on the chair, now.” Ilya snarls. He is done playing. Ilya or whoever he is now, he is fucking this hot journalist wearing his sexy glasses with his cute little freckles on his cheek. He is done waiting.

Shakily Shane pulls his legs down from above the chair arms, Ilya catches his waist and flips him roughly, maneuvering until Shane is kneeling on the armchair with his hands on the back of the chair.

Ilya lines himself up and buries all the way to the hilt in one strong push, and he is glad that Shane moans so loudly that his own loud groan is mostly covered.

He uses that against Shane anyway. “You are so fucking loud, pretty boy.”

It must hurt for that sensitive flesh to be pounded so brutally, the skin has turned a pretty, bright red from the spanking. Shane gets louder and his voice is so thick with want.

Roughly Ilya shoves a few fingers into Shane’s mouth as he starts pumping inside him, his other hand gripping on Shane’s hip, his thumb dipping into that little back dimple that winks at him.

The one Ilya kisses many times whenever he puts Shane on his belly and fucks him from behind. The one that has a twin on the other side, just as cute, both fitting Ilya’s thumbs perfectly.

Shane’s Dom Ilya is such a lucky bastard. Ilya is so fucking jealous of himself.

He thrusts hard and fast, his hand covers Shane’s mouth to muffle his cries that’s getting louder and louder, there are hot tears spilling down into his palm.

“Do you want me to cum inside you?” Ilya asks, breathlessly. “Do you want to go back to your Dom with a belly full of my cum? Hm?”

Shane shakes his head, his tears flowing freely, and his abs are clenching hard - a sign that he is holding back his orgasm with just his willpower.

“Or maybe I should keep you here in my humble cabin, put a baby inside you.” Ilya lowers his volume as he thrusts in, emphasizing the ‘baby’ near Shane’s ear.

Shane mumbles something amid his cry.

“What did you say? Hm?”

“No, please.” Shane begs, his voice muffled behind Ilya’s palm holding over his mouth. “No. I will only have Ilya’s baby.”

That does it for Ilya. There is no more holding himself back after that.

Ilya spills his hot cum inside Shane with the next, deep thrust. Shane cries out, gasping for air as Ilya takes his hand off his mouth. His own cock bounces a few times, shooting streaks of milky releases onto himself and the back cushion.

Shane closes his eyes to even out his breath. Then he finally turns his head to look beyond his shoulder, his eyes are wet and a little timid when they land on Ilya.

Ilya melts right away.

“Oh baby.” He eases Shane off his kneeling position from the chair, then sits down in the armchair bare-assed, not minding the mess. He gently pulls Shane to sit in his lap, holding Shane’s head to rest on his shoulder.

“Shh. Baby. We are back. I’m here.” He whispers sweet nonsense as Shane snuffles quietly against his neck. “You did so well. You are so sweet, my Shane.”

Shane whimpers at that, his breathing slows down with the gentle voice and praise. He looks down to the mess on his belly, embarrassed. “Sorry I came, Ilya, without permission.”

“I wasn’t there to give you permission, was I?” Ilya wipes the tears off Shane’s face, and then straightens his glasses for the tenth time tonight.

Shane laughs quietly, his face still a little wet. “I came back to you, Ilya.” He nuzzles into the warm space beneath Ilya’s jaw, his voice barely above a whisper. “Found you. The best Dom I could ever dream of.”

Ilya kisses his top of head, then his neck, his jaw, and his cheek. “And you are the best little Sub. Shane.”

Ilya nudges their noses together, a grounding touch, before finally kissing him, slow and careful. When he pulls back from the kiss, he looks deeply into Shane’s eyes that are shining a little too brightly. There is a low, rumbling sound in his chest. Something he has to get out.

“I love you, Shane.”

It slips out like the easiest thing to say in the world.

He wanted to say it when Shane blinked up to him with those yearning eyes telling him he wants to go back to *his Dom, Ilya*.

He wanted to say it before that, when Shane’s eyes went wide at the first bite of ice cream he could remember, like the world had suddenly become kinder.

Or maybe before that, when he stood in the kitchen, sleeves rolled, completely focused on getting a recipe right just because Ilya loved it.

When he called him Ilya like the name is precious to hold between his tongue.

Maybe he wanted to say it way before all of that, when he saw those sad eyes filled with dread for the first time, when Shane was too wounded to want anything at all, and still curled up in his arms like he trusted Ilya with everything he had, which was just his body and his heart.

Shane's eyes widened. He looks at Ilya, a little surprised, a little hopeful. But there is also a flicker of uncertainty, like he knows this matters but doesn't fully understand why.

Too soon, maybe. Too much. Maybe Shane doesn't even understand the weight of this phrase and it would be selfish to expect him to return.

"Shane, I mean..." Ilya starts, ready to walk it back and make it easier, to give Shane an out.

But then, a smile breaks across Shane's face. Like dawn pushing through the dark, it brightens, so warm and certain and *full*.

"I love you, too." It comes out with such certainty that it loosens every doubt in Ilya's heart.

Ilya exhales, despite Shane sitting in his laps and his hands gripping onto Shane's waist, he feels more vulnerable than ever. He feels like a child, when he still had a home, when he was young and *loved*.

Shane's arms slide around Ilya's back, pulling him in without hesitation, holding him close. His cheek comes to rest on top of Ilya's head, the gesture so instinctively familiar like he's done it a hundred times before.

Ilya lets himself be held. He closes his eyes, breathing him in, the warmth of his skin, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, the quiet, grounding presence of Shane, his sub, his home.

"I love you so much," Ilya murmurs.

Shane's fingers slide up, threading gently into Ilya's curls, holding him there. "I know, Ilya. And I'm right here. With you. At home."

Author's notes: Kink-bits

The scene dips into Roleplay and **CNC**, or **consensual non-consent**. The important word is *consensual*. CNC is a negotiated fantasy where consenting partners agree beforehand to play with the appearance of resistance, force, or taking control, while actual consent remains firmly in place underneath the scene. For this to be safe, the fantasy needs to be discussed and agreed upon beforehand. Partners should know each other's hard limits, have a way to communicate if something needs to stop, and check in afterward. Consent can also be withdrawn at any point, even in the middle of a scene.

With Shane, this is especially important. His history makes anything resembling non-consent much more complicated, which is why I wanted to make it clear that he isn't simply tolerating CNC because Ilya wants it. He is actively choosing it. He brings the fantasy to Ilya, helps establish the boundaries, and knows their check-in system is always there if he needs to step out of the scene.

There is also something funny about Ilya trying very hard to be a terrifying villain while Shane keeps reminding him that he is, in fact, the best Dom in the world. Poor Ilya never stood a chance. And perhaps that is the sweetest part: they can play at being strangers because they are no longer strangers at all. They know each other too well, trust each other too deeply, and love each other too much for the fantasy to change what is underneath it. 💕

Chapter End Notes

Troy: What happened to my chair?

Ilya: Use the new one.

Troy: What happened to the old one?

Shane: It didn't survive.

Troy: ...Survive what?

Troy: Why are the chairs in this house dying?

Harris: Not my problem.

Harris: I won't be sitting for a while.

Chapter 19: Memory box

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoy this little montage of Shane's memories / their play! We are almost at the end - hoping to get the final chapter out by Thursday or Friday (I'm not crying 😭)

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

Soon after The Incident™, Shane receives a notebook from Ilya. It's an expensive-looking one, leather-bound with heavy-weight paper, much like the daily planner Ilya gave him a while ago.

"What's this for?" Shane flips through the blank pages, half expecting to find some even better tracking system to organize his days with, but it's just that, a blank notebook.

"It's homework," Ilya says. "I want you to write down your memories from before, as they come back to you. Nothing is too small."

Shane sighs. Ilya and his homework. It feels like they've come full circle, back to the day they first met, when Ilya handed him a notepad and told him to write down the three things he hated most.

He wants to push back. He wants to say the memories are his alone and private, and that he doesn't want to do this just because his Dom demands it. There's still that heavy reluctance, that dread of stepping into the unknown and accidentally uncovering something that might haunt him instead of bringing any real sense of closure.

"You don't have to show it to me if you aren't comfortable," Ilya says, as always anticipating Shane's reactions with an accuracy that borders on uncanny. "But you do have to tell me honestly whether you did your homework every day."

Before Shane can respond, Ilya looks him straight in the eyes. "Are you going to be a good boy and do it?"

Fuck. Shane swallows hard, heat rushing through him despite everything, and gives a small nod. "Okay, Ilya. I'll do it."

Ilya smiles widely at that, and when Shane shows him what he has on there that night - the ice cream memory, the time when Marta reminds him of his mom - Ilya beams so brightly and promises him a reward.

They retreat to the entertainment room after dinner, but instead of settling into the couch the way they usually do, Ilya tugs Shane down by the hair until he's kneeling between his legs, and makes Shane warm his cock with his mouth as he watches the movie.

Shane blinks up at him, catching the sharp line of Ilya's jaw in the dim light, the way his gaze stays fixed on the screen, his large hand resting warm and steady on the crown of Shane's head. The weight in his mouth is familiar, it's warm and musky, unmistakably Ilya, and Shane wouldn't trade

it for anything. He stays there obediently, mouth stretched, thoughts thinning out, dissolving into that slow, syrupy calm where everything else fades into irrelevance.

Halfway through the movie, Ilya pulls him up and drags him onto the couch, kissing him hard, slow at first and then not at all, teasing him relentlessly until Shane is reduced to a whimpering mess. Only then does he let Shane sink back down again, finishing what he started while the movie continues to play, Shane still painfully hard and left wanting.

Ilya leans back with his cool authority, arms draped along the back of the couch, legs spread, Shane between them, diligent and focused as he laps on the aftermath with reverent attention.

“Do you like the reward?” Ilya asks afterward as Shane curls against him, nibbling at slices of apple Ilya feeds him one by one. The warmth of the sun is almost still lingering on the fruit.

Shane nods eagerly.

“Good boy. Keep up with the memory logs, and you’ll earn more,” Ilya says, pressing a kiss to Shane’s forehead. It’s so, so gentle.

*

Shane actively searches for things in his life that might jolt his memories now. He may not want to do the homework at first, but once he begins, he is determined to do it well.

He asks Harris to tell him more about his family as they work in the greenhouse, where they spend a good chunk of the day now that it’s too cold to grow anything outside. Harris mentions his sisters and what it was like growing up - a boy with two girl siblings, all the small annoyances and unexpected comforts that came with it. Shane creases his brows, trying to search for any trace of a sibling within himself, but finds nothing.

“Maybe you’re an only child,” Harris suggests.

“Is that a good thing?” Shane wonders.

“I’d be bored out of my mind,” Harris says, “but I think it suits you. You seem to really enjoy your time alone. And you get all your parents’ attention, a double-edged sword, I’d say.”

Shane nods as he carefully spreads the seedlings out. Tender, soft things under his fingers, some still holding a small flick of soil from when the sprouts first broke through. They will go into the garden after the winter; for now, they enjoy the warm, humidity-controlled greenhouse under his gentle hands.

“Don’t baby them too much,” Harris glances over. “They need to harden up to survive in my garden.”

Shane gulps. A familiar voice sounds in his head, hushed, like it doesn’t want to reach him.

“He needs to harden up. He may be a Sub, but he needs to learn how to stand up for himself to succeed in life.”

Shane writes it down in his notebook. Next to it, he adds, *maybe from mother.*

That night, he tells Ilya he remembered something, but he doesn’t want to show him, if that’s okay.

“That’s okay, baby,” Ilya says. “Good job remembering.” He presses a vibrating plug into Shane’s body, one not quite large enough to touch his most sensitive spot.

“You can come today, but hands-free only.”

Shane’s eyes shine as he looks up at Ilya through his lashes, the plug humming low inside him. He hasn’t come all week, so the permission sounds really promising.

The evening drags in the most unbearable way. They eat dinner before retreating to the library, where Shane tries his best to focus on his book, only to be distracted by the desire coiling in his stomach. His cock is hard, dampening his underwear with a small wet patch, but it’s not enough. Every so often, the vibration ramps up, filling the bucket of want inside him inch by inch, only to drop again before it can tip over.

“Please, sir,” he finally gives in, voice soft as he slips down to the floor. His eyes blink up at Ilya. “Could you turn it up?”

“I could,” Ilya smiles. “But I won’t.” He winks. “I hope that’s okay.” His foot nudges against Shane’s cock, drawing a small whimper from him.

Shane presses his forehead against Ilya’s thigh, breathing in. He knows he’s probably not coming tonight. But that’s okay. He climbs back up to sit beside him, leaning in as he reads. His mind quiets when Ilya’s palm settles at the back of his neck, massaging the muscle there in slow, grounding strokes.

When Ilya finally removes the plug at the end of the evening, he bends Shane over the bathroom counter and takes him from behind.

“Keep your eyes on the mirror,” Ilya says, “and watch how I make you take it.”

Shane’s head snaps up. He sees his flushed cheeks, his bitten lips swollen and glistening under the warm light, and his body moving with each thrust from Ilya.

“So beautiful, Shane. So good for me,” Ilya murmurs, his pace turning sharper, more urgent. He pulls Shane’s wrists behind him, holding them firmly there. The pressure is strong and grounding. Shane feels constrained, but also held. He feels safe.

So what if he never hardens up? What if he never wants to stand up for himself, if all he wants is to be a good, obedient Sub for Ilya, feeling more protected than he ever has?

Shane comes hands-free after all. He thanks Ilya breathlessly when he turns around, his eyes glassy, rimmed with tears. Ilya gently kisses the corners of them and pulls him close.

*

Sometimes, safer memories come back to him, and he shows them to Ilya eagerly, beaming with pride.

“The place I lived used to snow a lot,” he tells Ilya the morning after the first snowfall in November. He sits by the window, watching the snow drift down from the sky, light, pure, flurrying things that float like tiny fairies.

He hasn't seen snowfall in a very long time. Winter had been his least favorite season in the previous houses, where the food was always icy cold and his sleeping area in the basement never lost its draft. Cleaning himself with freezing water had been torture. He got sick often. More than once, he almost didn't make it through.

But when the first snow comes this year, Ilya gives him a pair of snow boots, warm gloves, and a beanie, and wraps the softest, warmest scarf around Shane's neck. He watches him turn a little pink under the attention before finally letting him step outside.

Harris takes him walking through the orchards, where everything feels quieter under the snow, the branches are heavy with powdery whites, the ground hushed beneath it. When the snowfall eases, they shovel narrow paths through the garden and the rows of trees so they can keep up with maintenance, Harris offering pointers so Shane doesn't strain his back.

Shane smiles at him, a memory of his father saying similar things coming into his mind. The face is still blurred, but the voice is warm.

He shows Ilya his notebook that night.

Shoveling snow with Dad. He said, "Push when you can, don't lift too high."

Mom made hot drinks for us when we came back.

Stacking and rotating firewood, bringing it in for the fireplace. It smells good.

After reading it, Ilya takes Shane to the shed, and they each come back with an armful of firewood. They settle in front of the fireplace in the library, and Shane watches as Ilya stacks the logs with ease before adding a fire starter.

"That's a good fire," Shane says, a little awed. "I didn't know you were so good at this." He vaguely remembers the frustration of trying to build one himself, one that refused to catch. That will go into the notebook later.

Ilya tilts his head. "What, I don't look like I have useful survival skills? If we lived in the wild, I'd hunt to feed you and fight off bears for you." His voice is smug, teasing.

Later, they have slow, lazy sex in front of the fireplace, the warmth wrapping around Shane's body as the flames crackle softly.

Afterward, Ilya brings him a mug of hot chocolate and tucks a blanket around him. "Is this what your mom used to make?"

Shane takes a sip, eyes widening. "Yes, Ilya, how did you know?"

Ilya leans in to kiss him gently. "I think moms are alike, maybe."

*

The memories that come back to him are mostly safe, but sometimes, when he reaches for pieces of his previous life, the unwelcomed ones from the Ring slip through as well.

It's almost as if his mind cannot trace what was lost without retracing the path of how he lost it in the first place.

Shane writes them down anyway. It is blindingly painful, but he always feels lighter afterward.

He never shows Ilya those lines. Ilya doesn't need to know how he cried and cried when he was raped for the first time, too scared to comprehend what had happened, or how he dreamed of a warm hug night after night until the warmth in his dream dissolved into numbness that he didn't care to reach for anymore.

Ilya has proven to him that for every harm he got, he would heal it with a thousand kisses and hugs.

Once the early memories from the Ring come back, the ones leading up to it come back at startling clarity.

Taking a test. Marked as "highly compliant." Mom wasn't happy about that.

Mom found an immersive program that works on skills to build confidence and independence for Subs. Dad said I would be fine without it. They argued.

I said I would go. I wanted to make her happy.

Saying goodbye as they dropped me off at the camp. "See you in two weeks."

Waking up dizzy and nauseous. Not in my bed at the camp.

Shane's hand trembles as he finishes the last line. His head spins, thoughts colliding, fragments slotting together trying to piece into something more holistic - but what kind of picture are they forming?

Did they give him up because he was inferior? Too submissive to survive in the world?

But no... He remembers the kisses, the tight hugs at drop-off, the way his mother fussed over him, reminding him again and again to call home, to make friends, to eat properly, to sleep enough.

He pushes back from his desk, overwhelmed by the rush of it all, too many thoughts pressing in at once. The room feels like it's closing around him, and he feels small, powerless. He needs grounding. He needs those firm hands and that low voice telling him what to do.

He must look wrecked when he finds Ilya in the basement gym, because Ilya's attention snaps to him immediately, the weight lowering to the floor with a controlled thud.

"Shane?"

Shane realizes he's still clutching the pen and notebook, his whole body shaking despite himself. His vision blurs as tears spill over. Slowly, he sinks to the ground, the notebook slipping from his grasp. He curls inward, arms wrapping around himself.

Strong arms gather him up almost instantly, pulling him close. The faint scent of Ilya's sweat steadies him, anchoring his racing heart.

"I'm here, Shane. I've got you."

"Please, sir..." Shane shakes his head weakly, pressing into the embrace. "I don't want to think anymore."

“Shh. You don’t have to, little sub,” Ilya murmurs. “You’re with me. I’ll think for you.”

That sounds so, so good.

Shane nods, jerky and desperate, whispering another soft “please.”

Shane doesn’t know how he ends up in the playroom. He only knows he is curled up against Ilya on the couch, his body still trembling, but the contact alone already makes him feel a little better.

“Sir, could you hurt me, please?” he whispers, his gaze drifting toward the equipment in the room.

Ilya tilts Shane’s face up, his thumb brushing gently beneath his eyes to wipe away the tears. “I could,” he says calmly, “but you don’t tell me what to do, little sub. I will think for you. Remember?”

Shane nods quickly. “Yes, Sir. ’M sorry.” His voice shrinks, soft and small, and his heart begins to slow.

“Good. Strip and kneel.”

Ilya leans back into the couch as Shane scrambles to obey. Ilya’s eyes never leave him. Every time Shane glances up, he finds him watching.

Once he’s naked, Shane kneels with his legs spread wide, hands tucked behind his back.

“What made my little sub so sad?” Ilya’s voice drops low, that voice Shane can never resist.

Shane squeezes his eyes shut, snuffles, and then quietly admits, “I know what got me into hell, sir. I’m too submissive. I’m not good enough.”

Ilya says nothing at first. He simply tilts his head, rising to his feet. Slowly, he pushes down the joggers he had been wearing for his workout and steps forward. Without ceremony, he guides Shane’s head forward until it presses against his crotch.

Shane inhales deeply, taking in Ilya’s scent, that musky, warm, grounding scent, before he tentatively flicks his tongue out in a soft, testing lick.

“Behave, little sub.” Ilya flicks sharply against his tongue, making him flinch. “Did I say you could taste?” His hand tightens at the back of Shane’s head, holding him firmly in place.

“Sorry, sir,” Shane says, his voice muffled.

“You are not good enough for what?” Ilya asks, his tone even, conversational, like they’re sitting at the dinner table instead of like this, Shane’s face pressed inches away from his cock.

“For life.” Shane snuffles again, nudging his forehead closer into Ilya. “I think my parents sent me to that camp to fix it. And from there... I somehow ended up in hell.”

“Do you think you are not good enough for life here? Being my sub?” Ilya says, his fingers drifting to scratch slowly at the back of Shane’s head.

Shane swallows hard, holding back another sob. He loves his life here. He doesn’t even want to imagine anything else, anything from before. But Ilya gave him the homework to remember, and he

obeyed.

“I asked you a question, Shane.” Ilya’s hand slides to the back of his neck, squeezing tightly, like how one holds up a puppy.

“I think...” Shane whispers carefully. He glances up through his lashes, his face still pressed close. “I think I’m doing okay as your sub, sir. I want to be better for you.”

Ilya hums softly. He steps back, taking his cock in hand before gripping Shane’s cheek, pressing his mouth open. Slowly he feeds it into him, holding him there.

“Listen carefully, little sub,” Ilya says. “You are the best, sweetest little sub I have ever known. And I know many.” He shifts slightly, pressing to the side of Shane’s mouth so it shows against his cheek.

Shane blinks up at him, dazed, the praise softening the sharp ache in his chest, easing something raw inside him.

“You are so brave,” Ilya continues. “You still dare to trust after everything you went through. You’re careful, but when you’re sure, you give completely.”

Shane’s eyes flutter slowly. His thoughts lag behind, distant and hazy, and he’s grateful his mouth is full because he wouldn’t know what to say. He just wants Ilya to keep talking, because his words steady him, quiet the storm inside him like nothing else.

Ilya thrusts a few times, deeper each time, as Shane relaxes and takes him further in.

“Do you like this life?” Ilya asks, holding him there.

Shane nods eagerly, choking slightly as he moves.

Ilya pulls out, tapping Shane’s cheek with his cock. “Say ‘yes sir’.”

“Yes, sir,” Shane gasps. “I love this life, sir. I love being used by you.” His face burns as he adds, “I love you.”

Ilya bends down, cupping Shane’s face in his hand.

“I love you too, little sub.”

They remain still and stare into each others’ eyes. Nothing else matters in this world, when all they care is to hold and to cherish, savoring this life that feels impossible but also real.

Then Ilya shifts. Finally he gives Shane the pain he wanted. He always gives Shane what he needs in the end, sometimes before Shane knows what he needs himself.

He drapes Shane over his thighs and spanks him with his large palm until both of his butt cheeks turn bright red, Shane’s cock jerking with every impact. His other hand presses firmly against Shane’s back, holding him steady, grounding him there, not letting him spiral any further.

Ilya then makes him crawl to the chest that stores all his tools and bring the paddle back in his mouth. It’s a heavy leather thing that Shane can barely hold between his teeth, and he drops it twice

over the short distance back because crawling sends sharp waves of pain through his bottom, making him wince. His cock drips as he crawls, leaving a thin, wet trail behind him on the floor.

Ilya drapes Shane over his thighs again and uses the paddle this time, each strike sending a sharp wave of pain through already sensitive flesh. Shane is sobbing, tears and snot and sweat mixing together on his face, but somehow he feels lighter than he has been in a long time.

When Ilya finally stops, he makes Shane kneel on all fours across Ilya's thighs and starts jerking him off like that, the paddle resting across Shane's flat back. Shane is painfully hard by then, and Ilya doesn't make him beg for his release.

Shane finally collapses back down onto Ilya's thighs, completely wrung out but floating at the same time. Ilya gently threads his fingers through Shane's hair, wiping the mess from his body with the same care he uses every time.

"You are submissive and sweet, baby," Ilya says in a low, calm voice. "You are so perfect for me."

Shane makes a hurt sound in the back of his throat. "But they sent me away because of it."

"They feared the world would hurt you," Ilya replies. "They were right about that."

Shane flinches.

"But I think they made a mistake," Ilya continues. "You didn't need to be changed. You needed to be protected. Being soft, trusting, and submissive only becomes a weakness when someone cruel gets their hands on it."

"And you ended up in the worst possible hands," Ilya says, his voice roughening at the edges.

The irony is almost unbearable. There wasn't a better place on earth to find vulnerable, highly obedient Subs than a camp that promised it could teach them how to stand up for themselves.

A cold darkness curls inside Ilya. He is rarely violent. He always prefers quiet control. But now, for the first time in a long while, he wants blood.

Shane closes his eyes and sobs. He shifts lower until he can bury his face against Ilya's thigh, his fingers curling around the strong muscle beneath his hands like he needs something solid to hold onto.

"I wish I wasn't so obedient that I needed to be fixed."

"It's not a flaw, baby," Ilya says patiently. "It simply means you need the right person to cherish you."

A small whine escapes from the back of Shane's throat.

He wants that. And he knows he has that. Somehow, impossibly, he has ended up with the perfect Dom, the one who sees exactly who he is and wants to protect him, not harm him.

His heart feels so, so full.

"You are not too much of anything," Ilya says softly, walking himself back from the edge of fury. "And you are not lacking anything either. You are perfect for me."

Ilya gently flips Shane onto his side instead of leaving him face down, so their eyes can meet directly.

“Thank you, sir. For the homework,” Shane whispers. “Why do you want me to remember?”

Shane understands now what the Ring was trying to do. It wasn’t just taking away his memories. It was erasing him as a person, leaving him with no past to return to, no people who could remind him who he was, no one who could stand between him and the people who claimed and leashed him.

But Ilya wants the opposite.

“Because you deserve to be loved, baby.”

Ilya gently runs the side of his index finger down Shane’s nose, indulging him with a tenderness that aches his heart.

“Are you not worried that I’ll have somewhere to run to? That I might leave?”

Shane searches Ilya’s face and catches a hint of hesitation there before quickly adding, “I don’t want to. I’m just asking because... it’s a possibility, right?”

“Do you remember what this means?” Ilya gently tugs at Shane’s collar.

“Yes. You will always protect me, sir.” Shane never gets tired of saying it aloud. The words offer a reassurance so deep it fills his chest with warmth and comfort every time.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “And part of protecting you is making sure you have your people, friends and family you can trust.”

His thumb brushes over Shane’s collar. “I’m responsible for you, little sub. I don’t own you. I would never want you to feel like an island with just one lonely bridge to me.”

*

December rolls around, and every day seems a little more festive than the one before. The doors and stair rails are decorated with wreaths and garlands, all made from fresh pine branches and cedar with small clusters of red berries tucked between the greenery. Harris sifts through large piles of plants before picking the best ones for decoration.

The scent of pine follows Shane through the house, sharp and clean and wonderfully wintery, mixing with the smell of whatever Marta has baking in the kitchen.

Every year, sometime in the middle of December, Ilya hosts a Christmas party for his friends.

It is not a particularly formal affair despite the size of the house, more of a yearly tradition that has grown around the people Ilya actually likes having around.

Harris tells Shane that the dinner used to be much bigger, filled with Ilya’s business partners and friends, but this year Ilya has trimmed the roster to just a few close ones.

They go through the roster together one afternoon, when the yard work is slow now it’s the peak of the winter. There will be Jackie and Hayden and their FOUR children. “Can you imagine having

that many?" Harris asks. Shane smiles and shakes his head, he can't imagine having even one. He knows Jackie from that brief doctor visit, and although he doesn't have much experience with children, Shane doesn't feel too nervous about it.

Harris assures him that although Hayden is a Dom, he isn't threatening at all, "*nothing like Ilya or Troy*". Shane nods, he still doesn't understand exactly what makes Ilya threatening, but he doesn't need to have that debate with Harris again.

There will be Svetlana, the most intense Domme that Shane has met since he started his life with Ilya. She has come over for dinner twice, and although Shane still feels like he wants to shrink under her easy tease and sharp tongue, she doesn't radiate threats like any of the Dom in Shane's nightmare. She is bringing her girlfriend Rose, who neither Shane or Harris has met yet. Shane secretly prays that she is a Sub. She has such a nice name.

"And then there will be me and Troy." Harris says, "You can always come find me if it gets too much. I will take you to a critical mission in the greenhouse and we can escape for a bit." Shane smiles gratefully at that.

Shane spends most of the afternoon helping Marta with the last preparations, although she eventually shoos him out of the kitchen when she decides he needs to get ready to play host instead of cook. By the time the guests arrive, the house is glowing with warm lights and firelight, the dining table crowded with food and candles and enough glasses to make Shane wonder if they are expecting twice as many people.

He is nervous.

Not the kind that sends him searching for the nearest exit or the least threatening person in the room, but enough that he keeps smoothing down the front of his sweater and checking where Ilya is every few minutes.

"I'll be here with you," Ilya tells him before the first guests arrive, his hand settling at the back of Shane's neck. "The entire evening."

Shane looks up at him.

"If it becomes too much, you tap my wrist twice." Ilya circles his palm around Shane's wrist and moves his thumb twice to demonstrate, "We can go upstairs, or to the library, anywhere you want. You don't have to stay."

"Wouldn't that be rude?"

"I'm hosting and you are my boyfriend. You get to do whatever you want."

Shane squeezes Ilya's hand in a gesture of gratitude.

The evening passes more easily than he expects.

Jackie greets him like they have known each other for years instead of just that one time as a doctor and her patient, pulling him into conversation almost immediately. Shane could tell that Hayden is a Dom, but he speaks gently and has kind, large eyes that smile before his lips curl. He bounces the youngest baby on his hip at ease while he talks to Shane, occasionally lowering his head to make a

soothing sound when she starts to fuss. Shane really doesn't understand why Ilya likes roasting Hayden that much.

The children are fascinated by the house, particularly the enormous Christmas tree, and one of them - the young boy - asks Shane whether he lives there too.

Shane glances at Ilya, then answers with a small smile.

"Yes. This is my home."

Svetlana still radiates such strong Domme energy that makes Shane instinctively want to hide away. She wears a huge smile as she enters, "Ilyusha, and Shane! What is he feeding you? You look amazing." Her fingers are already wrapping around Shane's forearms as she leans in for a peck on the cheek. Shane stands frozen as Ilya pries her away to shield the kiss for Shane.

"Oh, so possessive." She rolls her large, beautiful eyes. "No wonder you look so good Shane, Ilyusha showering you with all the LOVE."

Shane would turn around and hide if Ilya's hand wasn't resting at his lower back, grounding him.

Svetlana introduces Rose, a pretty girl with the prettiest lace collar Shane has ever seen. She compliments the house, the decorations, and the amazing vibe in the most graceful and genuine way. And when Svetlana throws out five questions before Shane can answer, Rose squeezes her on the arm before turning to Shane, "Would you show me the library? I heard you did a wonderful project there, and I need some inspiration for our new house."

Shane blushes. He doesn't know Ilya talks to other people about him, let alone something so trivial as moving the furniture around and adding a few shelves for the new books that Ilya keeps buying him.

He gives Rose the tour and likes her immediately. She is thoughtful and kind, keeping the conversation going but offers a thoughtful distance so as to not corner him. When they come back to the sitting room, she walks him to the couch instead of back to Svetlana, to his relief.

"If you are interested, I will connect you to my agent." She offers after complimenting Shane again how good he looks in that outfit - the one Ilya picks for him, "You are practically a model! I'm sure all you need to do is a simple photoshoot to make some comp cards and you will get many calls."

Shane just nods. He wants to ask Ilya about it later, not to get permission, but to discuss what it may be like to work outside of the house. He has a hunch that Ilya probably likes it more than he does, for him to explore and expand his world. But he needs some time to process what that means first.

The conversations seem to morph and develop into different shapes and circles in the sitting room. Shane settles on the couch and allows people to move around him. He listens mostly, and occasionally leans into Ilya when the room gets particularly loud.

Harris pops by frequently enough and Shane is grateful that he always directs the conversations to something easy for him to participate in. Nobody seems bothered by his quietness. Nobody asks him to perform.

At some point, the Pike twins Amber and Jade crawl onto the couch beside him and start showing him a collection of Christmas ornaments they have apparently stolen from the tree for closer inspection.

Shane takes each one seriously, asking questions about how they deem which ones should progress to the next round of the Best Ornament Contest, and looking to be appropriately impressed when they announce the winner.

“Which one is your favorite?” One of the girls asks.

“I love all of them.” Shane says. “This is the best Christmas tree I have ever had.”

“You have to pick one.” The other girl insists.

“The one with the picture of Ilya and I, then.” He says shyly. Harris told him they make one every year, and Shane had asked Ilya whether they could take a picture together so he could make one as well. Ilya was so excited and they spent the entire evening taking pictures using a real, large camera on a tripod, and finally after rounds and rounds of shortlisting, they settled on one that was a candid shot - Ilya kissing Shane’s cheek as he smiles shyly, both of their eyes closed, the sweetness locked in that moment.

“Awww.” One girl coos.

“That’s kind of boring.” The other girl pouts.

“Your dad is boring.” Ilya sits down right next to Shane as he throws his arm around Shane’s shoulder. “Don’t call my boyfriend that.”

And before the girl can fight back, he points to the direction of the dining room, “Marta says she has special cookies for you.”

The girls are gone in the next second.

“Everything okay?” Ilya leans close, his knee presses firmly into Shane’s.

“Yes, Ilya. This is great.” Shane smiles as he leans his head on Ilya’s shoulder, he feels the arm around him tightened right away.

A few more things go into his notebook that night.

Hanging ornaments with Mom. She told me the tree had a “front.” I went with what she wanted. She was happy with the result.

A family friend said I was a sweet boy at a holiday dinner. Mom and Dad exchanged a look, a little worried.

In the kitchen with Dad. He said I didn’t have to do everything perfectly to make good food.

Shane closes the notebook and places it on the nightstand before turning to Ilya, who is looking at something on his phone but quickly shifts his attention to him.

“Thank you for staying by my side tonight, Ilya.” Shane rests his head against Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya wraps an arm around him, the familiar scent of *their* bed surrounding him. “It was good. I think.”

“You did great, baby.” Ilya drops a kiss onto his head. “So brave. So charming.”

“Did you find more information about who I am and where my parents are?” Shane asks after a while. He had asked Ilya not to tell him anything unless he asked for it himself.

Ilya is quiet for a moment before finally asking, “Do you think you’re ready to reach out?”

Shane takes a shaky breath.

“Seeing the Pikes’ children with them made me realize...” He swallows. “I was a child once. And I was loved by my parents too.” His voice dips down. “It must have broken their hearts.”

Ilya nods, his thumb rubbing slow circles over Shane’s shoulder. “No parent should have to lose their child.”

He pauses, then asks gently, “But how do *you* feel?”

Shane looks up at Ilya. He looks a little helpless, like he wants Ilya to guide him through this too.

“Could you tell me about them?” he asks. “You know who they are?”

Ilya nods. He unlocks his phone and pulls something up on the screen.

Teen Presumed Dead After Fire at Leadership Camp; Parents File Lawsuit

A 17-year-old teenager from Ottawa suburb is presumed dead following a fire at a private leadership camp earlier this summer, as his parents file a lawsuit demanding answers about the program’s safety protocols.

The teenager [Name Withheld], described by family members as quiet and academically gifted, had been enrolled in the camp earlier this summer. Marketed as an intensive program focused on discipline, resilience, and leadership development, the camp operates in a remote area and maintains a limited-contact policy between participants and their families during sessions.

Officials say the structure was largely destroyed, complicating recovery efforts. Small remains have been found and tested to confirm the victim’s identity.

The camp has described the incident as a “tragic accident” and maintains that emergency procedures were followed.

The teenager’s parents dispute that account.

The lawsuit seeks full disclosure of safety measures, staff response protocols, and all records related to the incident, including emergency communications and evacuation procedures.

Authorities have confirmed an investigation is ongoing. The camp has not provided further comment.

“The police wouldn’t reopen the case. They kept probing for a while, but it’s been seven years,” Ilya says as Shane lowers the phone onto his chest, his breathing uneven. “The camp eventually shut down, which is why it didn’t come up in our initial search. But we recently investigated another trafficking case that was linked to some similar programs, so I went back and looked through them in more detail, and I found this.”

“Do you have any pictures of them?” Shane asks, his voice a little shaky.

Ilya nods. “They are very private, and there wasn’t a memorial service or a website. They never got their closure. But here are some pictures we found.”

He pulls up an email thread with a few pictures attached and lets Shane take the phone into his palm.

The first is probably a yearbook photograph. He is young, dressed in a suit that seems intended to make him look older but somehow does the opposite. The stiff collar and neatly combed hair only emphasize how young his face still is. He sits straight, looking directly at the camera with a small, careful smile.

Shane only gives his younger self a quick glance before closing the picture, as if he doesn’t quite have the courage to meet the boy he used to be, back when his life was still simple.

He stares at the second picture when it opens.

It is a fall photoshoot of the three of them. Shane is standing between his parents beneath a canopy of orange and red leaves, his mother’s arm wrapped around him while his father stands close on his other side. Shane is smiling properly this time, his expression relaxed but a little shy.

Tears fill his eyes as he looks at the three smiling faces that once made a family.

He remembers now.

The fog in his mind finally lifts, giving him a clear view of what he once had. He traces one finger shakily across his mom’s face, then his dad’s.

Ilya silently hands him a tissue, his arm tightening around Shane’s shoulder.

Shane takes a deep breath before opening the third.

It was taken outside the courthouse. His father has one hand on his mother’s shoulder as they walk inside. His mother looks thinner than she does in the family photograph, her face drawn with exhaustion, but her head is held high and her expression is solemn. His father looks equally grim, keeping close beside her.

“Their life is ruined,” Shane whispers. “It’s my fault.”

“Shane, baby. Don’t start.” Ilya’s voice drops firmly. He takes the phone back and pulls Shane against his chest, his arms wrapping tightly around his back. “You know it’s not true.”

“It is true because I didn’t want to find them. I’ve been hiding, cowardly, not thinking about them at all.” Shane’s voice breaks as he sobs into Ilya’s shirt.

“You needed your time. I needed time to find them too,” Ilya says simply. “You are so brave already, sweetheart.”

When Shane raises his head from Ilya’s chest, there is something in his expression that is new to Ilya.

The lines of his face have hardened, his lips pressed into a thin line. Suddenly he doesn’t look like the soft, pliant Sub that Ilya has grown so attached to.

He looks resolved.

The softness is still there but the hesitation is lifted. His eyes are clear now, his jaw set with a quiet determination that makes him look older somehow, like he has finally made a decision and is not going to let fear take it away from him again.

“Can I call them now?” Shane asks.

A wide smile spreads across Ilya’s face. He looks so proud, and so tenderly happy, that it fills Shane’s chest with warmth.

“Of course, baby. I can give you some privacy.”

“No, please stay with me?” Shane reaches over to take his hand. “You are my family, Ilya.”

Ilya hugs Shane tightly and gives him a firm kiss on the lips before leaning back, his fingers moving quickly as he searches for the information on his phone.

He enters a number and hands the phone over, the green call button waiting to be pressed.

It’s late, but neither of them suggests waiting until morning. They both know Shane’s parents have been waiting for far too long.

Shane presses the button.

The line connects after just two rings, as if whoever is on the other side has been waiting for this call, no matter the day or the hour.

“Hello, Hollander residence.” A woman’s voice, quiet and solemn, the same voice that once gave Shane warm praise, gentle scolding, and firm guidance.

Shane takes a deep breath, his eyes stinging again before he can say anything.

“Hello?” The woman’s voice comes again, less certain this time, as if she can sense something developing on the other side of the line.

“Hi, Mom.”

Shane barely manages to get the words out before he breaks into a sob.

A little note on the D/s relationship in this chapter: In a Dom/sub relationship, submission doesn't mean that the Dom is simply there to give orders while the sub follows them. At least in the kind of dynamic I'm writing, both people can actively help the other grow, and the daily structure of their relationship can be mutually beneficial.

That's what Ilya is trying to do with the memory journal. He could simply demand that Shane tell him everything he remembers, but that would take away the little bit of control Shane still has over something that is deeply personal and frightening to him. Instead, Ilya gives him a task: write the memories down as they come back, even if they seem insignificant, but Shane gets to decide what, when, and how much he actually shares.

I firmly believe that a good, healthy Dom/sub relationship should make both people's lives better. The power exchange can be kinky, intense, and deeply unequal within the dynamic, while the relationship itself is still built around trust, care, and wanting the other person to thrive.

For Ilya, taking care of Shane doesn't mean keeping him dependent on him forever. It means helping Shane become more secure, more confident, and more connected to the life and people he had before Ilya, even if that eventually means Shane becomes less dependent on him and has more agency to leave freely if he desires.

Chapter End Notes

Jade: Why do you always do what he says?

Shane: Umm... because he is my Dom?

Jade: My mom doesn't always do what my dad says.

Amber: What else does he make you do?

Shane: Just what to eat and what to wear.

Jade: Oh. So he's like your daddy.

Shane: Please don't say that.

Amber: Does he make you do homework and tell you to go to bed early?

Shane: ...

Shane: Yeah.

Amber: So he is your daddy!

Ilya: Smart kid. You must have gotten that from your mom.

Chapter 20: Happy box (Final chapter)

Chapter Notes

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

There is a long pause on the other side. Not silence, but a quiet “oh my god” under her breath, some faint shuffling, perhaps a door opening, all while Shane fights his tears, trying to say something but failing.

Ilya pulls Shane close, one hand handing him a tissue which Shane squeezes tightly in his palm.

“Shane. Baby.” The woman’s voice comes again. Her composure is gone, her voice trembling terribly. There is a man’s low voice somewhere near her. “Say something, baby... It is you, I know.”

Shane only manages to let out a choked sound when he opens his mouth. He looks up, blinking quickly to hold back the tears. Ilya has never seen him like this. With Ilya, his tears always flow freely, almost like an invitation for him to ruin Shane even more.

“Shane? Is that really you?” The man’s voice this time, urgent and hopeful. “Where are you? We are coming to you. Don’t be scared, Shane.”

Shane is still too emotional to say anything. The voice on the other side grows tense, although he still tries to maintain a calm tone, as if afraid of spooking him.

“Are you hurt, baby? Can you talk to us?”

Shane shakes his head. “No, no, Dad. I’m okay. I’m good.” He haphazardly wipes away a tear that escapes before saying, “I’m so sorry.”

His voice breaks again. Shane shoves the phone toward Ilya before burying his head in his hands.

“Could you...? Sorry,” he whispers.

Ilya keeps one arm around Shane as he brings the phone closer. “Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander,” he says.

Before the people on the other side can panic any further, he adds, “Shane is with me. He is safe and well. He has been staying with me for a couple of months now, but we only just found your contact.”

There is a shaky inhale on the other side before the man’s voice comes through. “Oh my... Thank you. Thank you, Mr...”

“Just Ilya, please,” Ilya says, feeling Shane finally break down beside him, his tears soaking through Ilya’s shirt. He tightens his hold.

“I can send you our address. It’s a long drive, seven hours or so, but you can also take the first flight tomorrow morning.”

“We will drive. Thank you, Ilya. Shane, we will be there soon, okay? We are coming. We will bring you home.”

Shane raises his head at that. He snatches the phone from Ilya's hand in a gesture firmer than anything Ilya has seen from him before.

"I'm not..." He stops himself, swallowing hard. "I want to stay here, Dad and Mom. I'm sorry, but I can't..."

His voice breaks again.

Ilya gently pats his back to calm him.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, this isn't easy for Shane. Shane has suffered some memory loss and a... rather difficult time. It took us a while to trace his past. Could you bring photos and memorable objects? They might help."

Another pause before the man responds.

"Of course, we will do that. Shane, we are so glad you found your way back to us. Everything will be okay."

The woman's voice finally comes back, muffled and wet. "Shane, baby. Are you okay? Were you hurt?"

Shane bites his lip for a long moment before he says, "I'm okay, Mom. I am very safe now, with Ilya."

There is a sob on the other end, followed by the man's gentle, soothing voice murmuring something they can't make out.

"We will start packing and leave soon. Thank you. Thank you, Ilya, for keeping him safe. We owe you everything. Shane, baby, we are going to be there soon, okay?"

Shane nods before catching himself, remembering they can't see him. "Okay, Dad and Mom. See you soon."

"We love you, Shane."

"I... me too. Drive safely," Shane says quietly.

Shane throws himself into Ilya's arms after the call disconnects. His breath is uneven, the muscles in his shoulders tense.

"I will be there for you, baby, until you feel comfortable being alone with them, okay?"

Shane nods into Ilya's chest.

"So brave, baby. I want you to sleep for a bit now. They will be less worried if you look rested." Ilya scratches lightly through Shane's hair, a gesture he knows will calm his nerves.

Shane just curls into his side. After a while, he looks up through his lashes. "I love you, Ilya. Please don't make me leave."

"I never will, baby," Ilya says, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

He rests his fingers gently against Shane's lips, and Shane responds instinctively, letting the familiar pressure settle him.

"Just like that. Close your eyes. Everything will be all right." Ilya gives the command in his comforting voice.

Shane closes his eyes and lets his world drift away, until all he feels is that familiar, gentle pressure, guiding him toward a dreamless slumber.

*

Yuna and David arrive at dawn, just before the sun breaks through the heavy clouds that signal another day of snow. None of the house employees are here yet.

Ilya wakes Shane half an hour before the notification from the front gate comes through, and they share slow, reverent kisses all over each other's bodies, a quiet promise that they will continue to have many, many mornings together like this.

Shane puts on a soft cashmere sweater with a pair of khakis and matching blue socks. He doesn't know what he used to dress like, so he opts for something a little more formal, an attempt to look put together. It feels less like meeting his parents and more like meeting someone he needs to impress.

He frowns at the thought.

It is nerve-wracking waiting outside the mansion with Ilya, who holds his hand after adjusting his scarf to make sure the chilly morning air doesn't slip in through the neckline. The fog of their breath mingles in the cold air.

It feels like waiting for a new life, when in reality he is trying to trace his way back to the old one he once had.

A gray SUV pulls up to the front of the house. Shane's eyes lock with the man in the driver's seat, whose body visibly shakes as he gets a good look at Shane's face.

He looks so much older. Not seven years older than the face surfacing in Shane's memories. More like fifteen. His hair is almost completely gray now, lines carving into his face the way they do on a farmer or a fisherman, making him look weathered but stoic.

Shane moves his eyes to the passenger seat. The woman sitting there is undoubtedly his mother. He remembers those eyes too well: the way they used to look at him fondly whenever he achieved something, the way they turned worried whenever he "misbehaved" because he was too pliant under authority.

Tears are rolling down her cheeks as her mouth falls open. She covers her face with both hands, her shoulders shaking.

Shane moves then. He gives Ilya's hand a squeeze before walking toward the passenger-side door. Before he reaches it, the door flies open, and Yuna stumbles out, stopping a few steps away from him.

“Shane. It’s you,” she whispers, her eyes shining with tears as she takes in his figure frantically, as if he might disappear again if she is too slow.

“You have grown.” She tilts her head up slightly, as if gauging just how tall her son has become. And then, as if she can’t help herself, she extends her arms toward him shakily, but stops just before they reach Shane.

“Oh my god,” she whispers, her voice breaking completely now. “Is it real?” Shane takes a few steps to close the final gap. He leans down slightly and wraps his arms around Yuna without putting too much pressure on her.

Yuna stiffens. Then her whole body shakes before finally relaxing, the tension slipping away along with the strength holding her upright.

“You are real. You didn’t…” Her voice breaks. “I’m touching you, and you are still here.”

Her arms tighten around Shane’s back, holding him with so much force that it almost hurts. Her fingers clutch at his coat, the material too thick for her to get a proper grip, but she refuses to let go.

“It is me. Mom. I’m sorry I kept you waiting for so long,” Shane says quietly. Strangely, he doesn’t feel like crying anymore. He is calm and certain that this woman he is holding needs him to stay strong, to reassure her that he will never just vanish again.

Yuna raises her face toward him. She shakes her head slowly, and there is so much pain in her expression.

“No, baby. You have nothing, nothing to apologize for.”

Shakily, she whispers, “I’m so sorry, Shane.”

Shane opens his mouth to tell her it’s okay. But nothing comes out.

The forgiveness feels too vast and too complicated, almost too pale to fit into words like this.

Yuna looks at him intently through her tears, and Shane notices for the first time that her eyes are the same warm brown as his own. He remembers looking into those warm shades of brown when he was a young child, feeling loved and at ease.

He doesn’t know when David comes to stand beside them. One moment it is just him and his mother, and the next his father’s arms are wrapping around both of them, pulling them into a tight, clumsy circle.

Shane is held between them, his face pressed against his mother’s shoulder, his father’s hand firm and warm against his back.

For a long moment, none of them says anything. They just hold on to each other, as if the years between them can be made smaller by the simple act of refusing to let go. Something shifts quietly inside Shane. His body remembers before his mind does. This is what it feels like to be held by his family.

After a while, Shane raises his head from the huddle. “Um, Mom and Dad,” he says, turning slightly to gesture toward Ilya, who is still standing a little way back near the house, watching the tears and the hugs in silence.

“This is Ilya. My...” Shane hesitates, suddenly shy. “My boyfriend, and my Dom.” He says the last part quietly, his eyes flickering nervously toward his mother.

“He found me when I was in a really bad place. He saved me.” Shane keeps it simple, because that is the truth. Ilya is the reason he is still here, alive and healthy in this particularly cold winter. He is the reason Shane has his memories back, the reason he has a home to return to, and the reason he is standing here now with his parents' arms around him.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya says with a small smile. He looks nervous, almost a little awkward. It is a look Shane has never really seen on his face before.

“Oh, just Yuna and David, please.” Yuna steps forward.

Ilya has one hand extended for a handshake, but she ignores it completely and goes straight in for a hug. His eyes widen as Yuna, the small woman who looks almost fragile beneath the deep sorrow she carries, wraps her arms around him with surprising force.

“Thank you, Ilya,” she whispers against his shoulder. “For bringing our baby back.” Ilya's arms slowly come up around her.

Yuna finally releases him, wiping quickly at her face as David steps forward. He gives Ilya a firm handshake. He doesn't say much, but his grip lingers for a moment, and Ilya can see all the gratitude in his eyes. He doesn't need to say more.

The two men exchange a quiet look, each understanding something the other doesn't need to explain: the love they have for Shane, and the promise to protect him.

“Umm, should we all go in?” Shane says, suddenly feeling very conscious as three pairs of eyes fixed on him the moment he opens his mouth. *Three* people that all love him deeply. A concept that feels too foreign to him.

“Yes, baby. You must be cold.” Yuna rushes back to him, rubbing his arms rapidly as if trying to warm him through that very warm overcoat he is wearing. “Let's eat breakfast. I brought some.”

“You brought breakfast?” Shane's eyes widened.

“Your favorite.” She smiles, her eyes still a little wet as she opens the car door again and digs out a stacked bento box wrapped carefully in cloth with checker pattern. “I was too overwhelmed to pack, so I cooked when your dad packed last night.”

Ilya opens the door for everyone, “You can leave everything else in the car. I will have them sent up to your room later.” He says, back to his composed self now.

Sitting around the breakfast nook surrounded by *his* people feels surreal. Shane stands up nervously, trying to keep himself busy. He asks his parents whether they want coffee or tea, but before he makes his way to the kitchen, Ilya is already standing up and walking him over, his palm resting at his lower back.

Ilya braces Shane against the counter when they are both in the kitchen, his eyes tender as they look at Shane taking deep breaths in and out. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

Shane bites his lips, "I don't know. Good, maybe? I should feel good right?" Shane's eyes flicker up. "I remember a lot now, and I know them... But it also feels kind of strange? Like they are strangers but I somehow know them very well."

"It's been a long time, sweetheart." Ilya says, his arms bracketing Shane to keep him from swaying. "It's normal to feel a little foreign. But I think you will warm up soon. I can tell they love you deeply. And you are doing great."

"Do you... like them?" Shane asks quietly, biting down his lips.

"Yes. I like how they look at you. I like knowing that they love you with all they have." Ilya's answer makes Shane's eyes sting. He has held up very well this morning, not shedding any tears in front of his parents. But with Ilya, he doesn't feel the need to hold up a strong appearance.

Ilya drops a kiss on his cheek, followed by a fond brush over his freckles. "Now let's make the coffee and go back to being good hosts."

Yuna already laid out the layers of bento boxes when Shane and Ilya came back. In the center of it is the rolled omelet, bright yellow and dewy looking, the familiar name surfacing on Shane's tongue.

"Oh, the tama..." the name of the dish was almost there, catching somewhere in his mind.

"Tamagoyaki." Yuna says gently. "You used to love this for both breakfast and in your lunchbox." Shane knows now why seeing eggs at breakfast always gives him a ticklish sense of comfort now - like a warm memory trapped somewhere deep in his brain. He also knows why he never fully finds the eggs he eats here satisfying, no matter how many different ways Marta made them.

"You also brought rice and soup?" Shane gasps as he looks into the other layers. His parents are at Ilya's doorstep within seven hours since they hung up - how did they prepare all the food while the drive itself takes seven hours?

"I didn't know what you have here! I wanted to make sure you can eat food from home." Yuna's eyes rim red as her voice dips.

David wraps an arm around her, rubbing her upper arm gently. "Your mom always makes extra..." Yuna closes her eyes and lightly pats on David's hand, as if trying to stop him from saying more.

Ilya nudges Shane's elbow as he breaks the silence, "Show me how to eat this? Do I use my hand like when I eat sushi?" He leans over those perfect oval egg rolls, his fingers hovering readily.

Shane smiles as he holds onto Ilya's hand, "No, Ilya. You use chopsticks." He raises slightly to the pile of chopsticks that's still sitting near the bento boxes and distributes them to David and Yuna on the other side of the table, before putting a pair directly in Ilya's hand.

Ilya wiggles his eyebrow at Shane, "You go first." He quickly glances across the table, "Yuna made this for you. You get the first bite."

It feels weird eating his once-favorite breakfast item made by his mom in his boyfriend's house, with all three people watching him intently, almost holding their breath, as he takes the first bite. Shane nods seriously and quickly shoves the rest of the roll into his mouth, and all three of them relax at his overt display of approval, as if something important has been confirmed.

They eat in silence for a while. Yuna and David don't even touch the food that much. They hold onto their coffee and take small sips occasionally, but most of the time, they stare at Shane as he eats, too hungry to let go of this view that they have been dreaming for too long.

Ilya refills their coffee and breaks the silence. "So, Shane and I were wondering - would you like to stay for a few days, perhaps through the New Year if your schedules allow?" He asks as he puts his hand on Shane's knee, which has been bouncing nervously under the table for a while. "It's almost Christmas, it would be nice to celebrate as a family."

David and Yuna exchange a look as tension slips through their body with that invitation. That's two full weeks with their son, they can spend all that time tracing back memories and holding him and looking at him as much as possible.

"So kind of you to let us stay," Yuna says.

She doesn't miss the way Shane glances at Ilya. It is only a brief look, but she recognizes it now: the small hesitation and then the relief when Ilya speaks for him. Shane wants them to stay. Yuna can tell. He simply doesn't know how to ask for it, not while everything is still so overwhelming.

And Ilya knows, maybe before Shane realizes that. He doesn't ask Shane to make the decision himself just to prove that he can. He simply sees what Shane wants and takes the lead when Shane needs him to.

"We would love to. Thank you, Ilya."

Ilya's smile grows wide. "Of course. Let us show you to your room? You had a long drive. Shane will still be here after you rest, I will see to it myself." He tilts his head to wink at Shane, who immediately stares into his lap and blushes.

*

They gather in the sitting room around a small square game table after a late lunch. David is still smugly proud of Shane remembering his secret recipe, and Yuna gives him side-eye after he casually brings up how good the pasta was for the third time. Ilya, however, only gives firmer and firmer affirmation, telling an anecdote about how it drives Marta mad because Shane won't give up his little secret sauce, and how Ilya has to exercise significant self-control not to go for a third serving whenever Shane makes it.

Shane blushes deeply under the praise. He glances at Ilya, who glows with affection as he tells the story, then smiles as he looks down at his lap. When Ilya goes on and on, Shane glances at him again, mouthing a quiet, "*Enough, Ilya.*"

Finally, after David and Ilya have bonded sufficiently over the pasta, they settle into what they had originally planned to do: going through a few albums that David packed haphazardly the night before.

Yuna picks an old-looking one. The pattern on the cover has faded over time, and the spine is cracked from years of use.

Shane as a baby. Dark hair and huge brown eyes, his face round like a full moon.

His first steps, Yuna smiling so proudly in the background as he reaches one hand forward toward whoever was behind the camera.

Chubby face and chubby arms, holding onto a piece of carrot in one hand and a fistful of fries in the other, while his mouth is already full of food like a little munchkin.

Ilya laughs out loud at that one, his finger brushing over it carefully before he takes out his phone.

"I need to keep a copy of this."

Shane groans in embarrassment, but he doesn't stop him. His own eyes linger on the photo a second too long, taking in a childhood that seems so foreign it might as well belong to someone else.

Yuna smiles fondly. "You were such a good baby. Always quiet and well-behaved, never really fussed, not even when you bumped your head or scraped your knees. You loved being hugged." She points to one where Shane clings to Yuna like a little koala bear.

"Until you were hungry." She chuckles. "You hated being hungry. You threw such tantrums that even hugs couldn't calm you down. The food had to be ready right then and there."

Shane swallows.

Next to him, Ilya goes very still. The smile fades from his face, his eyes turning pained before something darker flashes through them. Shane reaches out under the table and squeezes Ilya's hand lightly, bringing him back.

I'm safe, and fed, and so, so happy with you.

He looks at Ilya deeply until the corners of Ilya's lips curl into a tight smile. He looks back at Shane, his eyes tenderly sad.

Shane clears his throat. "Could we see some pictures when I'm more fully dressed?" He waves at the page filled with pictures of his round belly and chubby legs, many of them showing him wearing nothing but a diaper.

Yuna chuckles as she reaches into the pile and pulls out one that looks slightly newer.

"This is school age," she says as she turns the pages to reveal Shane, gap-toothed and lanky, smiling shyly at the camera in his school uniform. "You were always so neat and organized for your age."

"And smart and talented, too," David chimes in, pointing to a picture of nine-year-old Shane holding up an award on a stage. "This one was a science project where you won first place."

Then there are pictures of Shane winning reading awards, writing competitions, even one where he holds up a little crystal trophy in front of a grand piano.

"We're going to get a piano for this sitting room," Ilya declares. He points to the center of the room. "Right there. Piano recital every day."

Shane just smiles as he gently holds Ilya's finger in his hand.

"Ilya," he says quietly in that voice Ilya likes, hoping to distract him enough that he won't tease him any more.

Ilya looks at him so fondly that Shane thinks he is going to lean in for a kiss, but Ilya gathers himself and turns toward David and Yuna instead. "I always knew Shane was smart. He goes through books like I go through pasta. We've added two full shelves since he got here."

Ilya doesn't stop telling Yuna and David how brilliant Shane is, as if he is personally invested in making sure they see all the things he sees in their son. The intelligence, the diligence, the way Shane throws himself into anything he cares about and patiently works at it until he gets it right. He talks about these things with such obvious pride and fondness that Yuna finds herself smiling despite the ache in her chest.

And then she understands. Ilya isn't telling them that Shane has changed. He is telling them that he has always been this person, and that these are the things worth loving about him.

Things she had once worried weren't enough.

Yuna looks at the two of them, at the way Ilya's thumb strokes absently over Shane's knuckles while he talks, and she feels a weight in her chest settle. Her son had never needed to become someone else. He had only needed to find people who could see him clearly.

Shane just blushes as he looks down at their interlaced fingers.

The albums are time capsules, capturing Shane's journey from a quiet kid into a well-behaved teenager and almost a promising young adult, until it all ends abruptly at the age of seventeen, so close to finishing high school and heading into a future that promises endless possibilities.

Shane's smile dims as he gets older.

There are pictures of school events and competitions where Shane continues to hold up awards, but he mostly stands in the back now as other kids step forward to give speeches. He looks particularly unhappy in the debate team photograph, curling into himself as he hides on the side, half a step behind everyone else.

Yuna furrows her brows. "I got worried. I told you to get up front so many times." Her voice is full of dread. "I was afraid you would spend your whole life standing at the back while louder people decided things for you."

Ilya gives Shane a squeeze of his hand. *I will do the loud talking and make decisions for you.*

Shane squeezes him back. *I know, Ilya.*

Her hand shakes as she turns the page to pictures of Shane smiling a little more when he is photographed doing things he likes: helping David in the kitchen, reading a book on the lawn with one hand thrown across his forehead, planting herbs in their small backyard garden.

David wraps an arm around Yuna then, trying to say something, but her words rush out.

"I should have known. You were so much happier being yourself. But I was selfish. I wanted you to do big things and go against your nature so you could be 'successful.' And you did it over and over again, for me."

Her voice breaks completely as she lowers her head into her hands, her shoulders trembling. For a few seconds, nobody says anything.

Then Yuna pushes herself to her feet. “I just need a second,” she whispers before heading out of the room.

David glances toward Shane and Ilya as he gets up to follow, but Shane is already moving. “Um. I’ll go, Dad.” Shane follows the footsteps until he hears the front door click softly shut. He opens the entryway closet to find Yuna’s jacket, then puts on his own and follows her outside.

Yuna is standing a few steps away from the entrance. She quickly glances over her shoulder, a flicker of surprise crossing her face when she sees Shane following her.

Shane holds the jacket out for her. “It’s cold out here, Mom.”

Yuna sniffles at that. She quickly wipes her face. “I didn’t think I would ever be called ‘Mom’ again. In real life, I mean. I heard that all the time in my dreams.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. It took me so long to reach out.” Shane wraps his own scarf around Yuna’s neck, tucking it in carefully.

Yuna just shakes her head as her hands come up to cup Shane’s face. “I’m sorry that I signed you up for that camp, Shane. It’s all my fault. I lost you...”

Her face crumbles as she pulls him into a tight hug. Her arms are firm and her embrace warm, and despite her smaller figure, Shane feels like he is a child again, falling easily into the warmth of her hug, shielded from all the worries and pains of the world.

“I lost my mind when I read the news last month about them busting another camp like that for human trafficking.” Her voice breaks into uneven breaths. “And I told your dad that I had a hunch...”

She takes a deep, shaky breath. “Please forgive me, Shane. I’m so sorry.”

Shane lowers his head to lean on Yuna’s shoulder. “I forgive you, Mom. I’m okay now.”

Yuna cries into his chest, her tears soaking through the layers of warm clothing. Shane can feel the wetness spreading even through his sweater. After a while, she says quietly, “Shane. This is the best day of my life. I’ve got my baby back. My brave, amazing baby.”

Shane rubs his palm up and down Yuna’s back. The soothing gesture comes instinctively to him, probably because Ilya has held him through so many breakdowns like this.

When she finally leans back, she takes a long look at Shane’s face, basked in the golden afternoon sunlight. “You look better than before, Shane. You are happy.”

It is a plain and simple observation, a relieved statement from a mother who has been given the best thing in the world: having her baby back in her life.

“I think so too, Mom. I’m happy.” Shane smiles before looking down at his own feet. “I’ll try to do more to get my life together. I met this person who might introduce me to some jobs outside of the house...”

“Baby.” Yuna looks pained, her fingers curling tightly around Shane’s arms. “You have a life now. I will never push you to be someone you are not again. I’m sorry.”

“No more sorry, please,” Shane says gently. “It’s not our fault that evil found our weakness and decided to exploit it.”

*

Gift exchange happens a few days before Christmas, when all the long-term workers in the house gather around the giant Christmas tree to open gifts. It’s a big event that also marks the final working day of the year, when everyone takes their mandatory vacation before coming back for the New Year.

They are doing a white elephant as usual, each preparing a gift, dropping it off anonymously at the tree, and then picking one blindly from the pile.

Shane, however, prepares a gift for everyone.

“You don’t have to do that,” Ilya tells him at dinner a few days before. “I give them a big year-end bonus so they can buy their own Christmas gifts.”

“No, but I want to.” Shane smiles, a little embarrassed. “I have money that I never had a chance to use. And they took me in when I first got here, treated me like family.”

Yuna smiles fondly at that. She had just spent an entire day picking out the gifts with Shane in the city, and she saw how much effort he put into choosing the most fitting gift for each person, all while telling her little stories about his friendship with each of them.

Her boy has grown so much.

He is still quiet and blushes so easily, but he has built his life here, and from the short time she has been staying, she can already see how he thrives in this house, where everyone treats him kindly.

The years she spent teaching him to be harder and more aggressive seem absurd now. It comes to her belatedly that what he needed wasn’t a stronger appearance, but to find the people who could see how lovable Shane is as he is, and cherish that.

For the thousandth time since she got here, she feels that same mixture of relief, regret, and happiness.

The white elephant gets really loud and competitive. Everyone is eyeing the expensive vodka that clearly came from Ilya, because he ignores the upper limit on gift value every year, as well as a mysterious package wrapped in an unnecessarily large box that has already attracted enough attention to become the unofficial prize of the evening.

Shane sits curled up on the couch between Ilya and Yuna, watching the chaos with a smile.

“That’s mine,” Troy declares as someone reaches for the bottle of vodka.

“You need to wait for your turn,” the guy who works in maintenance protests.

“I’m going to steal it. Just watch me.” He says it with a big grin on his face, and everyone groans because they all know that when Troy is after something, he bends the rules and bribes the rule-

setter, Ilya, to make it happen.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not the one stealing it,” Ilya says, wearing an innocent expression.

A few people laugh, and Ilya merely raises his glass with a grin. His other hand settles on Shane’s knee, rubbing a slow circle there to keep it warm.

Shane giggles quietly, resting his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

Yuna watches him instead. He looks so at ease, his body language more relaxed than ever. Shane clearly knows where his place is in this room.

When the white elephant finally ends, with Troy somehow walking away with the vodka and Marta ending up with a ridiculous heated foot warmer that she immediately threatens to return, the attention shifts toward the pile of gifts still unopened on the other side of the tree.

Shane gets to his feet, rubbing his palms against his trousers once before he makes his way to the Christmas tree and looks around the room.

“I have something too. I know it’s usually just the white elephant, but...” He glances briefly at Ilya, then back at everyone. “I wanted to give everyone something this year.”

He takes a breath as all the attention in the room falls on him.

“You were all very kind to me when I first came here. I didn’t know anyone. I didn’t know how to do much of anything.” A small smile touches his mouth. “And you all made it feel like I belonged here anyway.”

His cheeks turn pink.

“So I wanted to say thank you. Merry Christmas. And please don’t tell me if you don’t like my gift.”

Harris rushes forward and hugs Shane the next second, knocking a surprised “oof” out of him.

“You are the best gift to us!” Harris exclaims, grinning brightly as others agree with him. He looks at the big pile and says, “This is so much. You really didn’t have to.” as he already moves toward it, peeking through the pile to find his name.

Shane laughs quietly at him, picking out the one for Harris and Troy.

Harris tears through the wrapping paper and finds two pairs of matching leather gloves, each with their initials embroidered on them.

“Wow, these are so nice. Shane! And they aren’t gardening gloves!” Harris turns them over in his hands. “These are so sexy-looking. I feel like a big bad bodyguard.”

He puts one on and makes a cocking gesture with his hand, winking toward Troy.

Troy just laughs and gently pats Shane on the back. “Thank you, Shane. You should have told us. We didn’t get you anything.”

Shane shakes his head. "No, you trusted me enough and didn't exile me because of my mysterious identity. It's the best gift."

Troy gasps, turning his head toward Ilya. "You told him!?" Before palming his face, he adds, "That's so embarrassing."

Ilya just shrugs. "I tell him everything. Your secrets are not safe with me. I share them with Shane to get brownie points." He swipes a finger across the room, pointing at everyone around them. "Everyone's secrets are fair game."

A few more boxes are opened. Shane smiles and explains each gift, offering little awkward sideways hugs with each person. Ilya lays back on the couch, feeling his heart melt a little at the sight.

Marta's gift comes next.

She opens it more carefully than everyone else, taking her time with the wrapping paper until she reveals a soft cashmere shawl in a deep burgundy color.

She wraps it around her shoulders immediately, then frowns. "How much did this cost you? I never need something this nice in the kitchen!"

Shane shakes his head. "No, but you can wear it when you're not in the kitchen. On your dates maybe." He says the last part quietly. He then gestures toward Yuna on the couch, who is smiling in the same shawl in a beige color. "I bought you the same one I bought Mom. I figured you might like this wine color because... you like wine."

He tries hard to not tear up at Marta's expression, which turns far too soft the moment he mentions *Mom*.

Marta looks at him for a long moment before pulling him into a hug. "Don't you ever buy things this expensive for me. I don't need it."

She squeezes him firmly enough that Shane lets out a little squeak. "Thank you, sweetheart," she whispers before letting him go.

The room slowly settles as the last few gifts are opened, paper gathering across the carpet beneath the tree.

Shane thinks that must be everything. Then Ilya reaches behind the couch. "I have one more." He tilts his head towards Shane.

Shane looks at him in surprise. "For me?"

They had agreed that they would exchange family gifts on Christmas Eve. Tonight was supposed to be just for the staff.

Shane takes the very small box from Ilya. It isn't wrapped in anything extravagant, just glossy navy paper tied with a simple silver ribbon. He looks at it for a moment before carefully opening it.

Inside are two keys. One large and heavy-looking, the other smaller.

"They're the keys to the house and the cottage," Ilya says simply. "This is your home. You should have keys."

Shane blinks quickly before his eyes flicker up at Ilya.

He knows why Ilya is giving them to him here, in front of everyone. The simple announcement, *this is your home*, tells the entire household who Shane is now. He is not a guest anymore, and definitely not Ilya's rescue project. He is not even simply Ilya's boyfriend.

He is family. He shares Ilya's life, belongs in this house and he can come and go without asking permission because this is his home, too.

And Ilya wants everyone to know it.

But then Shane looks across the room at his parents, and he realizes that isn't the only reason.

Ilya wants them to know it, too.

He wants Shane's parents to see that their son has somewhere safe to come home to. That he has a warm house, people who love him, and a place where he will never again be treated less than what he deserves.

And perhaps more than anything, Ilya wants to give them the promise they have not been able to ask for. *Your son is safe*. Someone is watching over him now. Someone who knows how precious his gentleness is, who will never punish him for being too trusting or too pliant, and who will never let anyone hurt him again.

Shane looks down at the two keys in his palm, his fingers slowly curling around them. Not even a year ago, he owned nothing beyond his own thoughts. Now he has a house full of people who love him.

And two homes he can go back to. One with Ilya. And one with his parents.

He has a family. A future.

Shane hugs Ilya, using the embrace to silently wipe the wetness from his eyes onto Ilya's expensive sweater.

He breaks into a laugh when he hears Harris whispering to Troy not far away.

"You think Ilya will still let me sign Shane's timesheet?"

*

The house is quiet as it enters the Christmas break, but Shane's heart is fuller than ever.

Without the usual help from the house workers, there is a lot more Shane can do every day, and there is rarely a moment when Yuna and David leave him alone as they try to participate whenever he tends to the house, helps prepare meals, or simply sits and reads.

He doesn't feel suffocated, though. Their company gives him a sense of familiarity, slowly returning fragments of the life he once had in David and Yuna's house. And Shane understands what it must feel like for his parents to finally have him back in their lives after seven years of grief.

So even when he misses his quiet reading time, he makes a point of being around them for most of the day.

Ilya gives them more space once Shane becomes comfortable with his parents again. But he isn't shy about showing up either, showering Shane with so much affection that eventually Shane gives up on squirming away every time Ilya leans in for a kiss or slips an arm around his waist.

Yuna *giggles* whenever Ilya does it, which only makes Shane blush harder.

One afternoon, when Shane takes Yuna to the greenhouse to harvest winter greens for dinner that night, he asks quietly, "You don't seem to mind."

Yuna looks over at him, waiting. Shane adds, "Ilya... being a Dom. He makes decisions for me sometimes. And he talks for me. He lets me be soft."

Yuna raises her head at that. She pauses for a long time before finally says, "You are so much happier with him. And so much more confident, too."

"Am I?" Shane tilts his head curiously.

"Yes, baby." Yuna smiles. "That day when you spoke to a room full of people? You never would have done that before."

Shane blushes. "I know them well. They're friends."

Yuna hums, picking another handful of greens. "I think he makes you more at ease by taking the pressure of being more aggressive off your shoulders. You don't have to spend all your energy trying to be someone you're not. You're just... lighter around him."

She glances at Shane. "And that makes me really happy."

Shane smiles shyly. "Mom. I feel relaxed when I'm with him." He pauses, then adds quietly, "Just like when I'm with you and Dad."

Yuna's expression softens. "Exactly. That's how I know he's good for you." She reaches over and takes Shane's hands in hers. "Because it's hard to find love that lets you be completely yourself." She squeezes his fingers. "Please come visit us sometimes. But I think Ilya has been trying to make something very clear to us. He's been showing us how good your life is here. And there is nothing that makes a parent happier than knowing their son is happy."

"Mom." Shane smiles, a little embarrassed, but mostly relieved. He wraps his arms around Yuna's small figure. "Thank you, Mom. It means a lot to me. To know that you approve."

He looks down at his feet, blushing. "I guess I still care a lot about your approval. Even though you kept telling me that what other people think of me isn't the most important thing in the world."

Yuna shrugs. "Well, you should still care what your mother thinks. That's important."

Shane laughs.

*

When Shane curls against Ilya on Christmas Eve, his body is blissfully limp after their little session in the playroom, throughout which Ilya had patiently reminded him to keep his voice down ("*We have guests, Shane* "). His heart thumps a little faster when he works up the courage to say the words on his mind.

"Um. Ilya." He starts. "I have a little something for you." Something that wasn't part of the family gift exchange earlier that day.

Ilya smiles. "You got me something else? Mr. Rich Man."

Shane groans. Ilya will never stop teasing him whenever he uses his money.

"I didn't want to give you this in front of my parents! It's private."

Ilya's smile widens. "Oh, yes. I'm very interested. What does my little pup have in mind?" His hand is already going south toward Shane's tired cock - it's completely spent after the two orgasm Ilya coaxed out of him in the playroom.

"It's not anything like that!" he protests. "It's a little... sentimental. Is that okay?" He doesn't wait for Ilya's response before reaching into the drawer of his nightstand and pulling out a small leather notebook.

Ilya's expression straightens, the teasing smile fading as he takes the notebook from Shane.

"What is this, sweetheart?"

Shane clears his throat nervously. "Um. You remember I told you about how I used to put away my thoughts in different boxes? That's how I... was able to own anything, before you."

He bites his lip before continuing. "This is the happy box. It used to be very empty. I had maybe three things in there until we met..." He gives a small, embarrassed laugh. "And then it quickly became so full that my brain couldn't hold them all."

His eyes are a little wet now, and he can't look Ilya in the eyes because he knows he will cry for sure if he sees his expression. "So I started writing them down after I got here. Because I don't want to forget how happy I am. Every day I'm with you."

"Little sub." Ilya's voice is quiet and controlled, the voice he uses when he doesn't want to let too much emotion spill out, but Shane catches the small tremor in it anyway.

"Can I look at it now?"

"Yeah, sure." Shane hesitates. "Just maybe skip the first few pages. I was..." His cheeks turn pink. "It's a little embarrassing."

"Hmm." Ilya's voice turns teasing again, but there is so much gentleness underneath it. "But it's mine now, and I can read it all, right?"

He pats his shoulder until Shane leans his head against it, then turns his head to press a kiss to Shane's temple.

Ilya opens the notebook with such care, as if it were something fragile.

The first page simply reads:

Happy Box.

Things I want to remember.

Ilya traces his finger carefully across the words, as if tracing back through time to reach the Shane who had written them soon after he arrived at this house.

The next page is filled with simple sentences. The first entries are all from the same day, written in the same colored ink and careful handwriting that still looks a little rusty.

I saw a glimpse of horses when the master watched horse racing. They ran so free.

The new handler allowed me to spend twenty minutes in the garden every day when I'm good. The air out there smelled so nice.

I found a smooth stone in the garden. I held it in my hand for a while before I had to put it back. I wish I could keep it.

The blanket was warm tonight. I stayed very still so nobody would take it away.

A guest called me a good boy and let me sleep in his bed. Two days in a row.

He gave me warm meals too. I wish he would come back.

He said I could just be a pup for him. I want that so much. He said I'm allowed to want.

...

Sir gave me a collar. Said I look pretty in his collar. Said he would protect me. I have a Dom now.

...

Sir gave me a room with a lock. And a bathroom. There is a bed too. He said I don't need permission to use them.

We played. Sir fed me food. He showed me how to kiss.

I love our kiss. I want to be better at it.

I went to bed feeling so full.

"I told you you should skip the first few. They are silly," Shane says quietly. His fingers gently rest on Ilya's forearm as he looks up. "Are you tearing up?"

Ilya blinks a few times. “No. Never have I shedded a tear. Doms do not do this.”

Shane nuzzles into the space under his jaw. “Okay. Ilya.”

Ilya turns the page and the writings become less consistent, each paragraph written at a different time now.

—

Watched a movie with Sir in the evening. Movies are so fun. I hope we can watch more. Sir held my hand through it. His hand is so warm.

People in this house call me Shane. They are so kind to me. No one hurts me here. I walk around everywhere wearing clothes. Soft clothes that belong to me.

The food here tastes really good. I haven't felt hungry for many days now.

I own many things now. Ten t-shirts and pairs of pants, two button down shirts. A mug. A water bottle. A pair of shoes and a pair of slippers. This notebook. My collar.

...

The orchard smelled sweet and fresh. I spent an entire morning outdoors with Harris. He showed me how to pick peaches and how to tend to the overbearing branches. He told me many things about contract. He doesn't seem to mind that I don't know much.

Sir put a hand on my shoulder and kissed me when he walked past me today. I couldn't focus for the entire afternoon.

I fell asleep in the playroom and Sir carried me back to my room. I pretended to be asleep. I wish he would stay.

I forgot to lock the room last night, and that didn't scare me when I woke up.

...

I stopped counting my things today.

...

We found a strawberry plant in the flower bed, and Harris let me keep it even though it ruins the aesthetics.

Troy and Harris showed me a picture of their new puppy. He is so adorable. They said I could meet him if I wanted. I don't know if I'm ready, but maybe one day I will be.

Marta let me make coffee for Sir. She said I did a good job.

Sir showed me the library and told me I can use it whenever I want. I spent the entire day there and almost forgot about dinner. The books are out of order and he said I can organize them too! He is the best Dom ever.

—

Ilya laughs at that. “Really, this is what earned me the title?”

Shane blushes, “I was trying to find things I can do around the house and you gave me a full library of unorganized books. I was thrilled.”

—

Ilya let me sleep in his bed last night and he looked so happy when I called him Ilya.

Ilya let me sleep in his bed again. I feel safer than ever.

I made pasta for Ilya and he had three servings.

I slept in Ilya’s bed again. I didn’t have a bad dream the entire night.

Harris taught me to talk to a struggling tomato to cheer it up. “They do better when you show you care.”

Ilya had four servings of pasta. Marta said it’s my fault.

I slept in Ilya’s bed again. I had a dream that I was under the sun. This is the first time I dreamed of something that’s not from before.

—

The entries go on and on, reminding Ilya of so many of their firsts: the first time they watched the sunset together, the first time Shane took him to see his plants just as they began to flower, their first date, their first workout together when Ilya quickly realized Shane needed to learn how to pace himself, and the first time they talked about the past over wine, Shane laying out his deepest trauma in front of him while Ilya was once again heartbroken and awed by the bravery and resilience of Shane.

But he also gets to see many of Shane’s firsts that he never knew about.

The beauty of it is striking. Shane had come to him with nothing but a battered body that had never been treated with kindness, but he had slowly begun to explore and build a life in his careful, methodical way.

The first time he didn’t finish his food because he was full and convinced that there will be the next meal. The first time he initiated a conversation (with Marta, “Hi, I’m Shane. can I help?”). The first time he looked at the mirror and didn’t feel ashamed of his body.

The first time he laughed without being made to.

The first time he said no without apologizing.

The first time he realized he was allowed to want something simply because he wanted it.

Ilya turns the pages slowly, savoring every bit of it, until he reaches the final page.

—

I was told there were no limits to what I must accept.

Until you.

Now there are no limits to what I can want.

I love you.

—

The End

💕(Additional one-shots in following chapters)💕

Author's notes (not kink-related because this is a fluffy chapter!)

I'm feeling very emotional about finishing this fic. It started with a dark desire to write some messed-up Hollanov smut, but somehow turned into a fluffy fic and, along the way, a surprisingly serious BDSM research project. I guess I'm a softie after all, just like Ilya.

Some of you have asked how to find my future work, so I've added this fic to a series with my other two Hollanov fics. I'll continue adding to the same series if I write more in the future! I might also write one-shots for this universe and just add them as new chapters to this fic.

I started writing when I was a teenager, in a completely different language, and eventually stopped when that phase of my life passed. Now, many years have gone by. I have a family and what some people might consider a high-powered job, but somehow Heated Rivalry inspired me to start writing again, this time in a language that isn't my native one.

It has become such a wonderful escape for me, a way to relax, create something just for fun and not for shareholder value 😬, and connect with an incredible community of people who love these characters as much as I do.

Thank you all so much for reading, commenting, leaving kudos, subscribing, laughing, crying, and coming along for this entire journey with Shane and Ilya. It genuinely means more to me than I can put into words.

I hope our paths cross again. ❤️

Chapter End Notes

David and Yuna: Ilya, the keys. Does Shane own your place now?

Ilya: He doesn't own the place.

Ilya: He owns me.

Shane: Ilya.

...

Shane: Is this really the last chapter?

Ilya: Apparently.

Shane: What happens to us now?

Ilya: We live happily ever after.

Harris: Aww.

Troy: I'm going to be sick.

Chapter 21: One-shot: In good hands

Chapter Notes

Hi friends! I'm continued to be awed by how much love you are showing to this fic even after it's complete. Here is a one-shot as promised. Please do let me know if there are other plots / scenes you would like to see for future one-shots!

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

Harris glanced at the clock again. "They should have been back by now."

Shane looked up from the book in his lap. "Troy texted you twenty minutes ago. The drive is going to take forty."

"I know." Harris said. "It's never easy waiting for them coming back from a job though."

Shane closes the book and nudges the tea closer to Harris. "I know, and you had to do this a lot, on your own." He reaches out to pat Harris gently on the arm. "I'm glad now we get to wait together."

It is getting easier, waiting for Ilya.

There was a time when Shane would count every minute Ilya was away from the house, listening for every movement outside and wondering whether the next one would be his. Now he can sit in the sitting room with a book, half listening to Harris moving around the house, and trust that Ilya would come home when he is finished.

Ilya's business has been busier than ever, and with Shane comfortable enough to stay at the house by himself, Ilya has gradually started taking on more jobs himself again, despite Troy's protest.

Ilya has insisted that showing up is good for both safety and morale, and he still doesn't do jobs that require him being away for more than a few days. Shane hasn't minded. He likes knowing Ilya trusts him enough to leave him here.

The front door opens and Harris jumps to his feet.

Troy comes in first. There is a dark smear of blood along one sleeve, and before Harris has a chance to cry out, Troy waves the arm in the air, "not mine." Harris rushes over and hugs onto his arm right away, cradling it in front of his chest like it might disappear.

Behind him, Ilya stepped through the doorway, bringing in cold air with a hint of dark cloud hanging over him. His eyes sweep across Shane, his jaw loosening a little at the sight, but his face still looks grim. He closes the door heavily, not with a slam, but loud enough that Harris jumps still holding onto Troy's arm.

"Ilya." Troy frowns.

"Not now."

Shane steps over, eyes quickly moving between the two men with strong tensions between. He places himself in front of Ilya, half blocking Troy with his body. Gently he unzips Ilya's jacket and helps him take it off.

Troy takes a breath. "We made the right call. We couldn't abort once the client was inside. We had three people exposed and no clean exit. Getting him out was the priority."

"I know."

"And Luca knew it too."

Ilya's expression tightens at the mention of the name.

"He covered you because you were the closest person to the threat," Troy continues. "He saw the opening and took it. That's what he was trained to do."

"He got hurt because of me." Ilya shakes his head abruptly, like he wants to shake off the thought.

Troy stares at him. "Because he was doing his job. Shit like this happens, Ilya. People get hurt on jobs like this every day. You know that better than anyone. Luca knows it. Everyone on the team knows it."

Ilya's face is hard and unreadable.

Troy doesn't stop. "Some people fucking die on this job. We're already doing so much better than..."

"That's enough, Troy." Shane's voice is quiet, but it stops Troy cold. All three of them look at him. Harris's mouth actually falls open.

Shane doesn't seem to notice. He closes the door to the coat closet after hanging Ilya's jacket and walks back to Ilya's side, keeping his gaze on Troy.

"You both had a very long day," he says softly. "Perhaps this can wait until tomorrow, please?"

Troy exhales through his nose, but he nods after a while. "Fine. We'll head back."

"Thank you."

Troy turns toward the door, Harris following quickly behind him. He glances back at Shane and makes a small grimace. Shane presses his lips together and mouths, See you.

The house falls quiet when the front door closes. Shane reaches for Ilya's hand, his fingers brushing lightly over his knuckles.

"Are you hurt, Ilya?"

Ilya shakes his head and walks farther into the house without answering.

Shane follows.

In the kitchen, Ilya pulls out his phone, his eyebrows pinched together as he unlocks it on autopilot. Shane's hand covers the screen the next moment. Slowly, he lowers himself to his knees, his eyes

fixed on Ilya's face the entire time, looking up at him from where he kneels.

Ilya looks at him. Their ritual of greeting each other after they have been apart pulls him back to the present, where he has a home to come back to, a beautiful person waiting for him in the warm evening light.

It never feels old. Each time, Ilya feels something different, but there is always that warmth blooming deep in his chest. After a moment, he puts the phone on the counter and gently threads his fingers through Shane's hair. He sighs as the silky strands pass between his fingers.

They stay like that for a while. Shane is close enough that his breath hits Ilya's thigh, warm and ticklish.

After a while, Ilya bends to help Shane stand, and Shane wraps his arms around Ilya right away.

"It must be hard. Seeing your man take a hit for you." Shane's voice is quiet, his palms moving in gentle circles over Ilya's back. "How is he?"

Ilya closes his eyes and buries his nose in Shane's neck, breathing him in. "He will recover. It's a rather ugly hit," he says after a while.

"He has everything he needs?" Shane asks.

Ilya nods into Shane's shoulder. "He has the best care. We are flying his family in tonight."

"You always take care of your people, Ilya," Shane says quietly.

"Not enough." Ilya closes his eyes.

"Shh." Shane sways lightly as he hugs Ilya closer, like he is comforting a child. "I understand, Ilya. It must be so hard to feel like... you didn't protect your people."

Ilya hugs him back tightly. Shane doesn't tell him that it's part of the job, or that Luca was trained to do that, only that he understands. And somehow, that makes him feel better than everything Troy has told him tonight.

"Could I get you something to eat?" Shane asks quietly, his hands still rubbing circles on Ilya's back, and Ilya doesn't want him to stop.

"No. Not hungry."

Shane doesn't say more. He lets Ilya stay in his embrace for a while longer before gently pulling out a chair by the dining table.

"Just some water, then. Sit, please."

Ilya's jaw tightens again. "I have work."

"You have been working the entire day. Troy looked like he was ready to fall over when he walked out," Shane says patiently, putting a little pressure on Ilya's shoulder. "At least let me work out the knots in your shoulders. They are so tight."

He blinks prettily, his lips forming a little pout.

“Please, Ilya.”

Ilya sighs at the sight, sitting down and giving in all at once. Shane sets a glass of water in front of Ilya before moving behind the chair and starting to work on Ilya’s shoulders with his fingers. The pressure is just right, and Ilya feels the tension slowly bleed out, bit by bit.

“Is the job done?” Shane asks quietly. His hands don’t slow.

“Yes. We extracted the client. He is safe.”

“You finished the job well,” Shane says. “More would have been hurt if you hadn’t succeeded.”

“At a cost, though.” Ilya exhales as he downs the entire glass of water. “I need to use the gym and then go back to work.”

Shane hums. His hands slow down, and Ilya feels Shane lower his face until he is close to Ilya’s neck. A soft kiss is pressed there.

Warmth floods through Ilya like he is soaking in a hot bath, his eyes closing.

“You have made so many decisions today, Ilya,” Shane says, his breath warm against Ilya’s neck. “To strategize, to protect, to figure out what’s next...” He pauses for a beat.

“May I make one for you, Sir?”

Ilya opens his eyes, a flash of surprise crossing his face. “What?”

“I want you to take care of me, Sir. I will bring the scene to you. You don’t have to decide.”

Ilya exhales. He wants that, but he isn’t sure he is in the best place to do a scene now. What if he fails Shane? He already failed someone today. The gym is safe, just him with himself, no one that he can fail.

As if seeing through his thoughts, Shane lowers himself to the ground in front of Ilya, placing his hands on Ilya’s knees.

“I will tell you if something feels off, Sir. You trust me to take care of you, right? You always take such good care of me.”

Ilya’s lips curl into a small smile. He will never get tired of hearing Shane say how well he takes care of his little sub. The trust always settles deep in his heart.

“Maybe you want to shower first?” Shane asks, his brown eyes looking so warm in the evening light.

Ilya didn’t know how desperately he needed a shower until Shane asked him. He smells faintly of sweat and blood, bringing back unpleasant memories from the day.

He nods curtly.

Shane stands then, taking Ilya’s hand in his own as they walk toward the stairs.

When Ilya steps out of the bathroom, hot steam chasing away the tension remaining in his body, he pauses at the sight.

Shane is kneeling in front of their bed, knees apart as he sits on his heels. He is holding a black tray in his hands in front of his chest, a few things lying on top of it.

Ropes, a blindfold, and a safety knife.

He is wearing nothing but a tight pair of boxers and his collar, his muscles showing fine lines beneath the light, his posture impeccable as always.

Heat rises through Ilya's body. Shane knows him so well now. He is picking something that Ilya can do without much thinking, a scene that will require him to concentrate on his hands and quiet his mind, and he certainly knows how pretty Shane is going to look all tied up under Ilya's hands.

"The blindfold?" Ilya says quietly. They have not used that before, knowing Shane will likely panic without being able to see Ilya.

Shane blinks up at him. "Only if you want, sir." His eyelashes cast faint shadows on his face, a hint of blush kissing his cheeks. "I know your hands, sir. I won't be afraid even if I can't see."

I trust you.

Ilya feels the tightness in his chest loosen. He reaches a hand over, and Shane nudges his forehead into his palm before it reaches him.

"Could you tie me up, sir?" Shane speaks in a mesmerizing tone. "Maybe with my hands behind my back, and a diamond pattern down my chest."

He smiles when he notices Ilya's cock twitching behind his lounge pants. "Please?"

Ilya takes the tray from Shane's hands. "On the bed, little sub."

Ilya sets the rope down and comes to the end of the bed, where Shane is already kneeling, facing him. He takes the blindfold in his hand and reaches over to Shane's face. Those brown eyes track his movements with such fondness that his heart feels impossibly full. He kisses just below Shane's left eye, feeling those lashes trembling against his own face, before he puts the blindfold on.

Shane doesn't move. His lips are slightly parted, but his body is still, and his breathing even.

"Number, Shane."

"One, sir," Shane says steadily. "I can feel you, so close to me."

Ilya rewards him with a soft kiss. Shane hesitates for a second before his body catches up with the action, and he returns it with grace, making a soft noise as he relaxes.

Ilya pulls back to turn Shane's body so his back is facing him. For a moment, his hands are not quite steady. He takes a breath in and reaches for the rope.

"Hands behind your back, baby."

Shane obeys, bringing his arms behind him, wrists crossing at the small of his back. Ilya takes his wrists gently and adjusts their position, checking the angle before he begins.

The first loop is usually automatic. But tonight, his mind doesn't go there willingly. His fingers move, but with some resistance, the rope digging into Shane's wrist too harshly. Shane's fingers curl on instinct.

Ilya stops himself. He draws a slow breath before he resumes.

The rope slides through his fingers with a familiar roughness now. He feels the tension of Shane's muscles in his forearms beneath his hands, the small resistance when he adjusts his shoulders, the gradual release when Ilya finds the position that feels right.

"This okay?"

"Yes, sir. Not too tight."

"Your number?"

"One, sir. I will let you know if there is any numbness."

Ilya nods. He knows Shane can't see, but he is nodding to himself as he continues.

When Shane's wrists are tied securely behind his back, he turns Shane's body slowly until he faces him forward again. Shane adjusts his knees carefully on the bed as he turns, his body wobbly without the ability to see, but he leans into Ilya's hands, ever so trusting.

The next pass is slower. Ilya checks the tension with two fingers, then follows the line of the rope before moving on.

His breathing has begun to settle. The room is quiet except for the soft sound of rope moving through his hands. One knot forming, and then the next, bright red rope against Shane's beautiful, smooth skin.

Shane shifts slightly when Ilya draws the next section into place, his fingers brushing over Shane's nipple. Ilya stops immediately.

"Too much?"

Shane shakes his head. "No, sir. It feels good."

Ilya waits another second anyway.

Shane rolls his shoulders once, deliberately relaxing them. There are small beads of sweat gathering on his hairline now. The position isn't painful, but his arms are still pulled taut, and tension is building in his body. He exhales softly to let some of the tension out.

Ilya continues. The pattern begins to take shape, one diamond after another, as his attention narrows. He sees the rope. He sees Shane. He sees the place where the two meet, his fingers touching Shane's soft skin, the rope meeting resistance from the muscles beneath.

His fingers measure each section almost without conscious thought now.

He checks the spacing, adjusts a line by a fraction, follows it downward, then returns to the next crossing. It has to look perfect. Because Shane deserves nothing but perfect. Diamond-shaped crosses are forming across Shane's torso, draping him in the prettiest shade of red.

Shane makes small but pretty noises from time to time when Ilya's fingers brush against sensitive areas. His nipples are hard now, little brown goosebumps forming around them.

Ilya's breathing slows down to a meditative pace. He only realizes it when he takes a deep breath and finds that his chest no longer feels tight. His hands have stopped shaking. His mind is quieter than it has been all day.

He finishes the final diamond and lets his hands rest for a moment. Then he checks every section again, one by one, until everything settles into the place it belongs.

Ilya reaches out and rests his palm against Shane's chest.

"So beautiful, baby," Ilya murmurs, his finger tracing the rope from Shane's shoulder down, slowly gliding over his collarbone, then his pecs, and finally his tight abs. He presses his palm against Shane's boxers, pleased to hear a soft moan.

Shane truly looks like a piece of art now. He crooks his neck to one side, showing the elegant line of his neck. His lips part slightly as he half pants, half exhales, his muscles shifting beneath the ropes, showing the lean muscles built from his workouts.

Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's back so he can fully lean into him. Shane's body quickly finds its new equilibrium with his hands tied behind his back and his body held in Ilya's embrace. There is so much trust.

Ilya's heart is full as he looks at the beautiful sub in his arms. The blindfold, the criss-crossed ropes, and the collar all scream absolute submission at him, making him claw back the control that slipped through his hands when he saw his agent taking a shot for him.

Shane tilts his head and nuzzles lightly into Ilya's face, his lips finding Ilya's ear. With barely a whisper, he says, "I prepped for you, sir. Want you to use me."

Then he flicks out his tongue and traces slowly across the shape of Ilya's ear.

Ilya feels like a teenager seeing nudes in a magazine that got sneakily passed around. The heat pools in his belly so quickly that he has to steady himself against the bed.

He growls as his hands move downward, tracing Shane's back, sliding under the tight boxers. He freezes when he touches the plug. The metal is already warm from Shane's body temperature, and it shivers lightly with anticipation. Shane leans into him further now, his face burning with the most beautiful shade of crimson.

Ilya growls. "Little sub. You are going to ruin me."

His hands are quick to move. He flips Shane around, pulling his legs off the bed and bending his upper body onto the mattress. Shane's shoulders hit the mattress, but he goes so willingly, making little noises as Ilya manhandles him into place.

“Wider.” Ilya kicks at Shane’s foot, and Shane shifts his legs farther apart, his full body weight landing on his shoulder now.

Ilya grabs the rope harness that he carefully strung together just a few minutes ago and pulls him up, taking some of Shane’s weight in his hand. Shane hisses lightly as the rope digs into his body.

“Hurt?” Ilya stops moving Shane at once. He starts to press soft kisses on his back, in the carefully spaced gaps between the red ropes, his lips brushing Shane’s perfect skin, his tongue tasting the faint smell of Shane’s, his, body wash, and he can’t help biting the tender skin low on his neck.

“Yes, good hurt, sir,” Shane says, his hips pushing back, seeking friction.

“Taste so good, little sub.” Ilya presses his nose into Shane’s back and stays there for a while, until Shane starts squirming.

Shane mumbles something into the mattress. Ilya thinks he probably misheard. “What did you say, little sub?”

Shane tilts his head as if trying to look into Ilya’s eyes, even though he is blindfolded. He licks his lips and says it again, “Just fuck me already, stop being so gentle.”

And then, as if he needs to clarify, “You won’t break me. Sir.”

The “sir” sounds so deliberate that it feels less like respect and more like a challenge.

How Shane taunts so blatantly while in this ultimately powerless position is beyond Ilya. And it lights a fire that he didn’t know needed to be put out properly. His control was challenged today, and he needs to properly tame it and regain it before it burns him from the inside.

Ilya pulls the plug out in one smooth motion, drawing a surprised moan from Shane. He lines up, smears the lube that came out with the plug lightly around the swollen head of his cock, and slowly pushes in.

Shane makes a choked sound. His inside is indeed well prepped and slicked enough, but without extra lube, he is made absolutely aware of every one of the nine inches that’s about to split him open.

“Little sub is feeling so tough today that he doesn’t want gentle,” Ilya mumbles as he hits some resistance about halfway in. He pulls out slightly, his hands finding a hold on the harness at Shane’s sides, before he pushes in at a more determined pace.

“Emm-f…” Shane’s whole body jolts at the dominant intrusion, the half-pained yelp giving way to a moan as Ilya thrusts back and forth a little, rubbing over the sensitive spot.

“Too much?” Ilya coos as he leans down to press a kiss to Shane’s shoulder, content with how he shivers.

“Too much talking, sir.”

Ilya didn’t know that the sweet “sir” that Shane said thousands of times could challenge him like that. He needs to fuck it out of Shane, until he can no longer say it with that tone, until he can say nothing but “um”s and “ah”s and “please” with teary eyes. Ilya holds Shane’s shoulders and pushes in in a single motion until he bottoms out.

Shane's head jerks up. His lips part, but nothing comes out, only a ragged breath.

"Number, Shane." Ilya grits out between his clenched teeth, the tightness sending a white-hot flash through his body, almost tipping him over the edge.

Shane takes a ragged breath, then another. His voice is shaky but somehow comes out even more determined. "One, sir. You can do more than that."

That snaps the last trace of self-control that Ilya is holding. He starts to pump into Shane at a relentless speed. The friction is just a tad too much for him as well, making him drown in pleasure with a bite. Much like how Shane's submission comes with a bite tonight. It's challenging, mesmerizing, and so enticing.

Shane is promptly reduced to "Um"s and "Ah"s to Ilya's delight. His fingers shoot out in an attempt to hold onto something, only to curl themselves when nothing comes within reach.

Ilya hears the nasal sound of his moans and wonders if he is crying. He can't see Shane's face now, only the lean muscles in his back shifting in vain under the control of the rope.

"My little sub is so tough, I can be really rough with him. Huh?" Ilya says breathlessly. "Tell me, how tough are you?"

Shane is definitely crying. He makes a wet little whimper, his head shaking.

"What is it, little sub? You were running your mouth so much just now. What happened?" Ilya smirks as he sees Shane shiver with pleasure. His tears are definitely good tears. He knows Shane's every tiny reaction now like he knows the back of his hand.

When nothing cohesive comes out, Ilya pauses as he draws out, leaving only his cockhead in the hastily stretched hole. It's swollen and red now, spasming around his burning cock like a hungry little mouth. "Anytime now, sweetheart. Tell me, are you a tough little sub?"

"I'm not, not tough, sir." Shane finally opens his mouth as he realizes Ilya is not going to move without him saying something.

"What are you then?" Ilya grabs a handful of Shane's butt as he teasingly moves in another inch.

"M just your little sub, Sir. Can't, can't take your huge cock. Hurts. Sir."

The slew of "sir" this time around sounds so much better. Ilya hums approvingly as he bottoms out once again.

"And what if I want you to take it? Break that tight little hole with my cock?" Ilya returns to the rhythmic pounding as he asks, almost casually.

Shane tilts his head, his cheek and lips so pink, painting a sharp contrast against that black silky blindfold on his face.

"Then I, ah, take it, sir," he says shakily, words broken up by Ilya's pounding. "'M yours. Your s-sub. Ahh, your hole. Sir."

Ilya almost comes at that sweet declaration of submission. He growls as he pushes Shane into the bed, his palm pressing down on Shane's neck into the mattress, his other hand bracing Shane's

shoulder to take some of the strain off.

“Say it again.”

“I’m yours, sir.” Shane snuffles, his body trembling as pain and pleasure cruise through it. “Yours to use, to-to hurt, sir.”

Ilya pulses into Shane at that.

He growls deep from his chest as he holds the hardness tight between his fingers. He is in control. The most perfect sub submits beautifully beneath him, chest heaving, little whimpers still coming out of his mouth.

Ilya yanks the blindfold off, and the warm brown eyes find him right away. They are red-rimmed with tears, but there is so much care in them that it melts Ilya’s heart right away.

“Hi,” Shane says, still a little shaky. He looks almost shy. Like he didn’t just taunt Ilya so much that Ilya lost his mind five minutes ago.

“Hello, sweetheart.” Ilya can’t help but lean down to kiss him. He wants to hold him to his chest and never let him leave. He wants to care for him, kiss his chafed skin, caress his swollen hole, and say sweet things to him until he falls asleep in his arms.

But first, the ropes. Shane has stayed in the harness for more than twenty minutes, and Ilya can’t risk it any longer. His hands are quick to work, undoing the ties and knots and crossings until the red rope pools into a pile on the mattress and Shane sprawls out on the bed.

Ilya turns him gently, holding his wrist up to check for any marks. The skin is a little irritated but didn’t break. He kisses the red marks tenderly, already moving to get off the bed so he can get the necessities to care for Shane.

Long arms wrap around his waist from behind, holding him to the bed. “Stay, please,” Shane pleads. He pulls with surprising strength until Ilya lies back down, then scoops up to hold Ilya close to his chest.

Ilya takes a deep breath and drifts happily in Shane’s calming embrace.

They don’t hug like this often. Usually it’s Ilya holding Shane after an intense scene, whispering sweet nonsense as he puts Shane back together. But today Shane is holding him tight, his hand rubbing Ilya’s shoulder, his soft, plump lips lingering on Ilya’s face.

“Was it okay?” Ilya traces his fingers across Shane’s pec and can’t help but gently squeeze those perfectly rounded muscles.

“Yes, Ilya. It was very good,” Shane says, and then quickly, “How was it for you?”

“So hot.” Ilya smirks as he leans in to bite Shane’s chest playfully. “Love fucking that attitude out of my tough little sub.”

Shane just huffs a smile. “I figured... you might need that.” A blush comes up high on his cheek. “To burn some of the energy off. I didn’t... it wasn’t real, my attitude.” He says it so earnestly that Ilya melts a little more into the bed.

“Shh. Baby.” Ilya turns further to properly hug Shane back. “My sweetest Shane.”

“I will go clean up. I brought up some food and water for you. You should eat something even if you aren’t hungry,” Shane says as he slips out of the bed to bring the tray of water and food over to Ilya. It comes off so naturally, even though Ilya rarely allows Shane to do the aftercare. He talks himself into accepting it. He needs it after a long day.

When Shane walks towards the bathroom slowly, Ilya sees how he wobbles slightly before steadying himself. He did a number on him today, and Shane will definitely be sore tomorrow if not properly treated.

Ilya grabs the plate of fruit that Shane gave him and walks over to catch up with Shane, one arm wrapping around his waist. “We take a bath together, eat some fruits, and I need to tend to your tight little hole after,” he declares.

Shane blushes profusely like he didn’t just ask Ilya to destroy his tight little hole in bed, but leans some of his weight on Ilya without protest. Slowly, he sinks into the bathtub where the warm water is quickly filling up. He closes his eyes and lets out a little contented sigh.

*

Luca blinks his eyes open, and he thinks he must have died.

Because he is looking at an angel, who is sitting in the chair next to the... hospital monitor. Are there hospitals in heaven?

Luca frowns. His chest feels sore, and the mask on his face sits funny. He reaches a hand over to move the mask, but several tubes connecting to his arm drag it back down.

The movement catches the angel’s attention. He looks up from his book and takes off his glasses. Bright morning light bounces off his silky hair.

Luca clears his throat and puts on his best smile. “Hi. I’m Luca.”

He frowns after the words come out. He sounds weak and hoarse, not his usual confident self, not how he should greet the most beautiful person he has ever met.

“Hi, I’m Shane,” the angel says, flashing a gentle smile. Luca thinks he just died again. “I came with Ilya. He went to talk to the doctors.”

Oh, so he is alive. Thank God.

Then what is this angel doing here? How does he know Ilya?

“Do you work for Ilya too?” Luca tries to clear his throat and use his better voice this time.

Maybe Ilya will assign them jobs together. Maybe he will bug Ilya until he gives in and only assigns them together. Maybe he will shield Shane from all the dangers on the job and win him over with how brave and strong he is.

Ilya walks in, breaking the moment.

“Luca! You are awake.”

His boss sounds pleased. Luca beams. He half turns his head toward his boss, but has a hard time tearing his eyes away from the angel.

Ilya moves over to the other side of the bed, his arm wrapping around Shane as he leans over to kiss him on the cheek.

Shane is blushing as he bats his eyes at his boss. His collar catches the light when he tilts his chin up.

It all makes sense now.

How his boss never wants to be away for more than a few days. How he talks nonstop about his boyfriend with that drunk smile on his face.

Luca hears his heart break into pieces, not salvageable by any of the medications flushing through his system.

He feels like dying again.

Author's notes on kink bits:

Why bondage?

One thing I really wanted to play with here is Shane choosing something for Ilya that he knows well. Bondage is familiar territory for him, but it also requires concentration: placing the rope correctly, paying attention to tension, and staying present. After everything that has happened with work, it gives Ilya something concrete to focus on, keeping his hands and his mind busy with something he knows how to do well.

Active submission

Being submissive doesn't necessarily mean being passive or waiting around for the Dom to decide everything. A sub can absolutely have opinions, ask for things, push for more, and even deliberately challenge their Dom while still being the one choosing to submit.

Which is exactly what Shane is doing here. When he challenges Ilya not to go gentle on him, he isn't trying to take control away from Ilya. Quite the opposite. He knows Ilya is holding back because of what happened with Luca, and he's basically giving Ilya permission to stop second-guessing himself.

Early Shane submitted because submission was what he knew, because he needed someone else to make decisions, and because so much of his ability to choose had been taken away from him. He needed Ilya to tell him what was safe.

Now Shane knows exactly what he wants. He can say yes, no, more, enough. He can recognize when Ilya needs something from him and choose to offer it. He is still submissive, but he isn't helpless anymore.

And I think that's one of the most important distinctions in their relationship. Ilya doesn't love Shane because Shane needs him. Shane is able to choose Ilya because he no longer has to.

A quick note on bondage safety

Bondage involves more than just making pretty knots. Restraints can create risks involving

circulation, nerves, breathing, positioning, and falls, so safe bondage means paying attention throughout, communicating, and having a way to release the restraints quickly. Anything that causes numbness, tingling, unusual pain, or discoloration is a reason to stop and remove or loosen the restraint. And, obviously, the neck is not a place for restraints.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya: I need to go to the gym and work more tonight.

Shane: Okay. But how about a little massage first?

Ilya: Hmm. Nice.

Shane: Okay, now your turn. Blindfold me and tie me up. I will look pretty for you.

Ilya: Very tempting.

Shane: Oh, by the way, there's a little plug in my butt. And I will be an insufferable brat the entire time you fuck me.

Ilya: Who are you and what did you do to my Shane.

Chapter 22: One-shot: Safe enough to fall

Chapter Notes

This chapter touches on some heavier topics. Please click below if you'd like to know the potentially triggering topics before reading.

► TW

That said, this chapter also comes with the usual NLUH essentials: fluff, comfort, and Shane and Ilya being very, very loved. The heavy parts are here for a reason, but so is the healing. ❤️ Thank you all for all the love you show for this fic, and thank you @hypnotizedhollanov for submitting this as a one-shot idea! I will continue to take suggestions for future one-shots :)

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

It's day twelve. Twelve days since Shane last came, and how he has missed it.

There was a time when Shane didn't have the desire to come at all, when he had been denied and punished enough that even hearing the phrase "come for me" gave him a despairing chill instead of excitement.

But Ilya has changed that. Ilya has granted him more toe-curling orgasms than he can remember, and look at what that has done to him. He is completely spoiled, can't even last two weeks without being reduced to a completely useless, needy sub who begs Ilya and negotiates in all sorts of creative ways, just for a chance to come.

But Ilya has been saying no to him ever since that night when he messed up.

They were just having very normal sex. It was borderline vanilla, even, if not for how hot Ilya looked when he climbed over Shane and smirked as he leaned down to kiss him possessively, or for how firm his hand was when he held Shane's wrists above his head and pressed them firmly into the pillow, or for how sexy Ilya moaned as he mumbled endearments into Shane's ears while pounding relentlessly into that one spot that sent Shane's whole body arching off the bed.

So Shane came hands-free during this normal, borderline vanilla sex. And he realized a moment too late that he hadn't even thought about asking for permission. His mind was too happily floating in the clouds to remember the little rule Ilya had given him since he arrived at this house: he needs Ilya's permission to come.

He wasn't too worried, though. Ilya has been lenient with him. There were a few times when he accidentally came in the past, and nothing too serious really happened.

When he accidentally came with out permission for the first time, only two months after he started living with Ilya, Ilya had asked him how he should be punished. Shane had turned pale at the question, and after searching through all the threats and punishments he had received in his life before, he shakily offered to pierce his own cock with a needle (or two. He immediately upped the stakes when Ilya's brows pinched at that suggestion).

Ilya had stopped the scene right then and there.

Ever since then, for every slip-up Shane had, Ilya only gave him very light punishments, if they counted as punishments at all. Sometimes he was forced to have another one immediately after, crying through the overstimulation as he wrapped his own hand around his cock and masturbated in front of Ilya, legs spread wide and trembling as he tried to keep them there. Sometimes he was edged and put in a chastity belt, occasionally with a plug thrown into the mix, so he had to go about his days with the constant reminder of his burning desire and his ultimate inability to do anything about it.

But this time, the punishment has lasted twelve days. Shane has done everything he can think of: being absolutely good every day, giving Ilya the best blowjob he can pull off, wearing the thong Ilya gave him on Valentine's Day that he had been too shy to wear, and, in the end, resolving to outright beg. So much begging.

On his back in bed, one hand frantically circling his base as Ilya casually fucks into him. On his knees as he takes Ilya into his mouth, humping Ilya's leg but stopping himself just shy of the delicious edge. On the couch in the entertainment room, his breath shuddering as Ilya gently caresses his thigh, over and over again. He has said so many "please"s, promised so many things he would do, only if Ilya would let him.

But none of it worked. Every time he asked, Ilya just smiled at him and said, "Maybe tomorrow, little sub," before proceeding to kiss Shane like he wasn't brutally denying him, but instead offering him something sweet.

He got desperate enough that on Day Nine, he *threatened* Ilya: *I won't make pasta for you until you allow me to come.*

Ilya smirked and shrugged. *Okay, little sub. Let's see who lasts longer.*

He saw Ilya's eyes and immediately regretted it. He didn't know how long this stupid attempt had set back the clock on when his punishment would end, only that it must have.

It's Day Twelve, and it's dinner time, and Shane is ready to call a truce. Because he can't last two weeks without coming. This life has made him weak, and he knows Ilya likes him too much to really torture him like this. He hopes so, at least.

So he has made the best pasta he can make, spending twice as long in the kitchen until Marta almost kicked him out. And he wears a button-down shirt that Ilya can easily rip off, conveniently leaving two more buttons open than what's considered decent. When Ilya enters the dining room that night, instead of waiting for him at the table, Shane is kneeling next to Ilya's chair.

Ilya sits down and pats his hair, his hand ever so gentle. "What is this for, baby?"

Shane lowers his head and nuzzles his nose into Ilya's thigh. "I wanted to apologize, sir. I haven't been very good lately." He leans his face against Ilya's thigh so he can blink up prettily at Ilya. "Would you please forgive me?"

"Oh, nothing to apologize for, baby," Ilya says. "You are the most wonderful little sub. Go sit down and join me for dinner."

Shane stays on his knees. "I'm sorry for what I said about not making the pasta, sir. I shouldn't have."

Ilya nods. "Good, little sub. I see you made it tonight. It smells delicious. Now go sit down. I want to enjoy dinner with you, pretty."

Fine, so that didn't work, but Shane is patient. He can do what Ilya wants. Shane stands up as he keeps his eyes respectfully lowered to the floor, only rolling them when he turns his back to Ilya to walk to the other side of the table.

Ilya is humming under his breath as he eats. He is in a good mood. Shane is hopeful. He starts the conversation almost casually. "I had a call with Rose today."

Ilya tilts his head. "Oh? About the job she mentioned?"

Shane nods. "Yes. I don't know if I want to take it, though." He bites his lip prettily, looking at Ilya with his big eyes. "She says it's easy enough, just some photoshoots first, and then maybe some brands will reach out for me to do more shoots for them."

Ilya smiles. "I'm sure they will go crazy for you. My pretty little sub."

Shane blushes but shakes his head lightly. "I don't know if I'm ready to... be looked at like that. By many people, I mean. I don't know. Maybe I'm overthinking it."

Ilya puts down his fork as he extends a hand across the table. "Hey, Shane. That's totally okay. You don't have to do anything you don't feel comfortable doing. Now or ever. You can just be my little sub forever and nothing else, if you want."

Shane takes Ilya's hand and squeezes lightly, his heart thumping a little faster at that display of dominance that shows nothing but genuine love. "Thank you, Ilya." He tilts his head and smiles softly, the kind he knows Ilya can't resist. "I just... I only want you to look at me that way. Only for you, no one else."

He sees a quick flash of possessiveness in Ilya's eyes, his pupils growing slightly in the warm lighting. But Ilya quickly gathers himself. He strokes Shane's palm with his thumb and smiles, completely smitten. "My perfect little sub." He then lets go of the hand and gestures to their plates. "Eat more, baby," without signaling any intention to do anything more than just enjoy dinner together.

Shane stabs at the cherry tomatoes on his plate, his lips forming an annoyed pout that quickly morphs into a reluctant smile when he realizes Ilya is chewing and looking at him, still with that smitten expression on his face.

When Ilya asks Shane what he wants to do that night, playroom upstairs or TV downstairs, Shane answers as fast as possible, too worried that Ilya will take that option away. *Playroom, please, sir. Can we play?*

So now Ilya sits on the couch in the playroom, arms spread wide along the back of the couch, with Shane kneeling in front of him.

"My little sub is so eager to play today," Ilya says. "What do you want to do?"

I want to come, Shane thinks bitterly. But he kneels between Ilya's legs like the most obedient sub he is, blinking up with his big doe eyes. "Want to make you happy, sir. Whatever you want me to do."

Ilya hums. "Good little sub. Put on a show for me, then. Play with yourself. Show me how much you want me."

A blush appears on Shane's cheeks. He can do this. He can do this very well. And if he is good enough, maybe Ilya will let go of the little mishap and finally let him come.

He spreads his legs as he sits back on his heels, fingers moving down his torso, plucking his hardened nipples with some force. He bites his lip as he plays with them more, mimicking how Ilya likes to do it. A sharp pinch followed by gentle rubs between his thumb and index finger, and then a pinch again before the sensation ebbs. He continues like that a few times, until his nipples become so sensitive that every touch becomes unbearable. He does it more still, allowing his body to shiver before his fingers get there, and then moans fully as he rolls them more.

He steals a glance at Ilya, content to see his nonchalant smile shift into a more serious stare, his eyes fully trained on Shane's body.

"Emm... they are so sore now," Shane mumbles. "Sir, want your tongue on them. Want you to taste them." He rubs his pecs from the outside, showing off his reddened nipples to Ilya.

Ilya's throat bobs twice. "Good. Keep going." His voice is rather controlled, but there is a growling desire beneath it. His arms are still resting on the back of the couch, but he spreads his legs wider.

It's fine that Ilya doesn't touch him yet. He will just try harder. Shane slowly moves his hands down. They lightly glide over his tight abs, the muscles there shifting at the touch, before they tentatively brush over the patch of dark hair above his cock.

"May I, sir?" He holds his growing cock in one hand and lifts it slightly, showing Ilya the wet beads forming at the tip. His thumb slowly runs the length of it as he throws his head back, swallowing a wet moan.

A foot comes up to his cock, kicking his hand away. Shane whimpers at the sudden impact, his eyes snapping to Ilya, wet with desire.

"Play with your hole," Ilya says, his breathing heavy. "Leave this to me."

That's promising. Very promising, Shane thinks. Ilya will wrap his large hand around his length and stroke him up and down. And maybe, maybe he will even let him come if he puts up a good enough show.

"As you wish, sir," Shane says sweetly. He shifts his position so he is kneeling on all fours, with his hole facing Ilya. If Ilya wants a show, he will give him the best view possible. He looks over his shoulder, licking one finger slowly as he locks eyes with Ilya. He sees Ilya take a big breath at the sight. Slowly, he puts that finger in his mouth completely, before dragging it out with a wet pop, and then reaches behind, finger circling his rim.

Shane tries to put the finger in, but the angle and the friction make it hard to reach too deep, and he frowns at the discomfort of the intrusion. It's a small price to pay for the promise of coming, so he

can definitely take that. Biting his lip, he shoves his finger in more, hissing as his body complains. He really is getting too spoiled by this life.

Something lands next to his supporting hand with a dull thud. Shane turns his head and finds a tube of lube on the floor.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” Ilya’s voice is almost casual.

Shane mumbles a quiet thank you as he puts lube on his index and middle fingers, coating them generously before he resumes the show. The index finger goes in much easier now, quickly submerged in the warmth of his body. He thrusts it a few times, carefully avoiding the spot that will stimulate him too much. Just as his body adjusts to it, he adds the middle finger and starts moving them in shallow thrusts.

Shane looks over his shoulder, showing Ilya his wet eyes, his parted lips, and the crimson that floats high on his freckled cheeks. He lets his moan flow freely with increased urgency as his fingers jerk in and out at an increased speed.

“Do you, um, do you like this, sir?” he asks breathlessly as he looks up at Ilya. Ilya’s eyes are locked on him, sending a happy vibration down his spine. His left hand has moved down from the back of the couch and into his pants, giving himself a lazy rub.

“Come here, little sub.” Ilya’s voice is thicker now, vibrating with want.

So Shane moves immediately. He is not letting go of this chance to get closer to Ilya, where Ilya might put a hand or a foot or his leg on his cock and give him the much-needed release.

Shane puts one hand on Ilya’s thigh and leans close to Ilya’s crotch, his other hand still dutifully thrusting into himself. He nudges Ilya with his nose, his tongue licking over the growing bulge hungrily, until he makes a wet patch on Ilya’s pants. Ilya curses, unzips himself, takes out his hard cock, and holds it in his hand as Shane surges forward to take it into his mouth.

Wet sounds, Ilya’s heavy breathing, and Shane’s obscene moans echo in the playroom. It’s too much, and even with just his own fingers reaching shallowly, Shane is getting dangerously close to coming. His body has had enough.

With a high-pitched yelp, Shane pulls his fingers out abruptly as he squeezes his eyes shut. He feels Ilya’s cock bounce in his mouth as his own twitches simultaneously. He stopped right at the edge like the most obedient sub he is. He hopes that means something to Ilya, and that Ilya can see the effort he is putting in to redeem himself.

Ilya’s hand cups his face, and Shane whimpers into it as he pulls back to speak. “Please, sir. Could I please come?” He is on the edge of crying, so he presses his face against Ilya’s thigh while he begs shakily. “Please.”

“Oh, I know, little sub. But you need a little more practice with control, yes? And I’m still enjoying your little show.”

Shane gets back at it. Because he can do this perfectly. He has to. He wants to be the best Sub for Ilya, who only deserves the best Sub.

The tide of orgasm threatens to submerge him much faster this time. Shane digs his fingers into Ilya's thigh as he tries to steady himself. He sucks a deep breath in, which takes Ilya's cock deeper into his throat, and promptly gags on it. Instead of letting go, he lets his tears fall as he looks up at Ilya pleadingly, his fingers curling at the edge of his rim, waiting for permission.

Ilya's eyes are hazy now. He puts a big hand at the back of Shane's head and starts fucking into his mouth at a frantic rhythm. "Keep going. I didn't say you can stop," he says thickly, his eyes fixed on Shane's fingers that are no longer fucking into himself.

Shane wants to say no. He shakes his head weakly with Ilya's cock still in there, not moving his hand. He knows one more thrust, maybe two, and he is for sure going to come, and he can't afford to mess up again. He can't go another twelve days without. He probably can't go another two.

So he works his throat hard to milk Ilya's cock in his mouth, letting his own hard cock hang heavily between his legs. He hears Ilya's breathing getting heavier and heavier, and eventually, the familiar musky stream spurts into his mouth. Shane swallows eagerly, keeping Ilya's cock in his mouth until it gradually softens, before he slowly lets it slide out of his mouth. He presses a reverent kiss there.

Shane keeps his head low. He knows he didn't obey Ilya's last order to keep going, and Ilya will not let it slide.

Ilya may be a very kind Dom, the kindest Dom Shane has ever known, but he is also strict. He builds and holds the structure for Shane to operate within. The rules are always clear, and the goalposts never shift like they did in his previous life. Shane feels safer than ever because he knows he will be rewarded when he tries hard and does well. And he also knows exactly when and how he fails.

"I'm sorry, sir," Shane says quietly with his head lowered. Admitting his own mistake is always better than waiting until his Dom points it out. "I couldn't, I... It's too much. I won't be able to stop myself."

Shane waits as he stares at the ground. The silence stretches between them, and with every passing second, he feels his tears threatening to spill over.

A finger traces Shane's jawline before tilting his chin up. Shane's eyes find those hazel-green ones, and he has this strong urge to rush to his feet and climb into Ilya's lap, to ask him to hold him and pet his hair and tell him it's okay to fail.

"Do you want to stop?"

The question catches Shane off guard. Ilya has called a stop to their scenes before, but Shane never has. With everything Ilya has built for him, all the structure and safety, he has never seen the need to use their little safeword.

So Shane shakes his head. "I'm okay, sir. I just... I just want to come." He takes a deep breath. "But it's okay if I don't get to. I know I messed up."

Ilya looks deeply into his eyes. There is so much emotion in there that, after a while, Shane has to look away. He waits in silence until Ilya pats his lap. "Come up here, baby."

Shane lets out a little whimper as he rushes to climb into Ilya's lap, his thighs bracketing Ilya on either side. Ilya cups his face to press a gentle kiss on his lips, then pulls back before Shane can

chase it. His large hands remain on Shane's face as he thumbs over his cheeks slowly. "I want you to listen to me, Shane. If you tell me to stop now, the punishment ends. You will get to come now, and again if you want. There won't be any more punishment. I know I denied you for a long time."

Shane snuffles at that. Ilya knows how hard he tried, and how hard it has been. He waits for the next option. He knows with Ilya, there is always another option.

"And if you don't want to stop, I will take over, and you will let me do whatever I want to do with you," Ilya says slowly, looking deep into Shane's eyes.

Shane bites his lip. He knows it's okay to call stop. He knows Ilya will allow that, encourage that even. But that feels like failure, for something he knows he can do very well. He may feel more hurt by that than by what is waiting for him.

"I want to continue, sir," Shane says quietly, even though part of him feels like dying at the thought of letting go of the opportunity to finally come.

Shane closes his eyes briefly, letting the taste of forgoing pleasure linger in his mouth.

Ilya presses a kiss on his cheek and holds onto Shane's cock. It's no longer leaking streams of precome like just now, but it's still hard. Without warning, he tightens his fist and starts stroking at a punishing pace.

Shane lets out a long, keening cry. His fingers dig into Ilya's shoulders as he presses his cheek against Ilya's, panting hot air into Ilya's face. "I can't, I can't, sir. I am going to come, please." He feels Ilya pressing wet kisses on his cheek, but he is too busy tightening his core to stop the wave of pleasure that's about to swallow him.

"Come."

The voice is deep and demanding, and Shane shudders. His whole body jolts at that simple permission, his mind too blank to figure out what to do except loosen his muscles and let the string in his mind that has been pulled too taut finally snap loose.

He feels the pleasure in his body building and building, towering over him, about to swallow him whole. And finally, finally, the much-needed release arrives, a single stream of cum rushing out of his slit, his toes curling instinctively and his arms tightening around Ilya's shoulders to brace himself for what will surely wreck him.

But then everything stops.

Shane freezes there, his body and mind lagging, still waiting to be submerged in that flood of release that never finds him. He feels the warmth in his body recede, replaced by a creeping coldness climbing up his back. He shivers uncontrollably.

He lets out a choked sob as he finally opens his eyes and looks down. Ilya's hand around his cock has loosened, and instead of holding his cock, which was expecting the continuous pumping through this hard-earned orgasm, it is now pressing flat against Shane's lower abs, where cold sweat is gathering.

Shane blinks a couple of times before he realizes he is crying. Ugly, frustrated, fat tears that he only ever shed as a child who didn't have his needs met right then and there. The type of cry he never

dared to let out when he was in hell, the type he never needed when he was with Ilya, until now.

“This is... You are...” Shane’s throat tightens as he finally finds his words after a while. “You ruined it,” he says, his voice still thin with disbelief.

He takes a deep breath before erupting in a much higher pitch. “You are so mean!” He cries into Ilya’s shoulder for another long moment before he finally raises his head and looks into his eyes. “SO MEAN.”

Ilya is fucking smiling. His eyes are locked on Shane’s face, and his lips are curling into the much-too-familiar, heartwarming smile that Shane loves.

Except Shane hates it now.

He wants to fight and snarl and tear that smile off.

Shane starts flailing in Ilya’s embrace. He is trying to work himself loose and run off, to shut the door of his bedroom, *his*, not theirs, and throw all his tantrums behind the closed door. But Ilya’s arms only tighten around him. The pressure is so annoying at first, making him fight harder to escape, but eventually, it offers a hint of comfort that Shane didn’t know he still wanted.

He has nowhere to go but stay in Ilya’s arms. His vision is blurry, his mind is muffled, his body is still too tight with the tension that didn’t find its outlet.

So he opens his mouth, finds Ilya’s shoulder, and bites him.

The strong muscle in Ilya’s shoulder is hard to bite into, but Shane is determined as he sinks his teeth in. He hears an exhale from Ilya, followed by a low chuckle. Ilya is not hissing or peeling him off. Instead, his warm hands come up to the back of Shane’s neck to gently massage there, like he is taming a feral kitten.

Somehow, that works.

Shane lets out an annoyed hum and releases his teeth, finally feeling the hazy cloud in his head lifting slightly. He looks dumbly at the row of teeth marks on Ilya’s shoulder, deep and red. He flinches, a shudder running through his body as he looks up at Ilya wearily. But Ilya doesn’t look mad. He is still watching him with that thoughtful gaze, calm as ever.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Shane mumbles. He frantically raises a hand to rub over those teeth marks, as if trying to erase them, his eyes swelling with tears again when he sees thin blood seeping from the edge. He doesn’t know what he is worried about more, hurting Ilya or the consequences that are staring at him now.

“Feisty little kitten,” Ilya says with a hint of amusement in his tone, but he doesn’t sound angry or cold. If anything, he sounds indulgent.

Shane lifts his eyes carefully to meet Ilya’s. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t... I was overwhelmed.” And then, because he can’t help it, he collapses into Ilya’s embrace and lets his tears flow. “You were so mean to me.”

“I’m sorry, little sub.”

The calm voice comes from the top of his head. The words are so foreign to Shane that he has to lift his head and look at Ilya again. Ilya just strokes his hair with one hand and his back with the other. "I wanted to see how far you would go before you told me to stop. I know that wasn't nice."

Shane shakes his head weakly. He has experienced many things that were much less nice. It was the fact that Ilya did this to him that made it unbearable, not the action itself.

"Why would you want to see me fail?" When no answer comes, he pouts as he lifts his head, demanding it again. "Why, sir?"

Ilya has this complex emotion on his face. He shifts Shane so he is no longer bracketing his lap, but instead seated next to him on the couch, and brings the glass of water he set aside earlier to Shane's lips.

Shane takes a sip, his eyes not moving away from Ilya the entire time.

Ilya exhales. "Is that how you think about it, little sub? That I want you to fail?" When Shane stares at him dumbfoundedly, he sighs. "I thought, perhaps, you were still too afraid to call stop."

Shane makes a face, his nose scrunching up as he shakes his head. "I'm not, sir. I know I can always tell you to stop, and you will do it right away." He leans in to take another sip of water from the glass still in Ilya's hand. "I just didn't want to... call quit. Because I'm not weak."

Ilya's eyes look like pale green crystals in the evening light. He wraps his arm around Shane's shoulder, draping a blanket across his thighs. "I called stop many times, little sub. Do you think I'm weak?"

Shane shakes his head right away. "You called stop for me. Because you care about me."

Ilya just looks at him with a patient smile as he tightens his arm around Shane's shoulder, guiding Shane to lean his weight against him. And Shane frowns before he mouths a quiet, "Oh."

He gulps, lowering his eyes and reaching a hand to hold onto Ilya's. "I should have called stop because I care about you too. Because I-I shouldn't let you push me over my limits. That will hurt... both you and me."

Ilya smacks a big, wet kiss on Shane's cheek at that. "Smart little sub. We are in this together, yes? If you let me fail you, we both fail."

Shane blinks slowly as he wraps his mind around that. "Big words, Sir," he mumbles.

The heated wave of anger and confusion and hurt has now receded, and Shane feels chilly sitting naked on the couch. He pulls his legs up to curl under the blanket as he leans over to cuddle up against Ilya.

"I'm sorry I didn't use my safeword," he says after a while. "Could you let me come tomorrow? Please? I will definitely call stop if you still don't let me."

"Sure, little sub." Ilya ruffles Shane's hair. "I don't think I want another bite mark anytime soon."

Shane jolts at that. He quickly straightens and reaches over to Ilya's shoulder, his brows pinching together as he sees the dark red marks turning purple. "I'm so sorry, sir." He tries to get up to get something to address the wound.

But Ilya holds him tightly against his side. “I will survive, little sub. I have had worse.” He presses a kiss on top of Shane’s head. “None from such a cute, feisty little thing, though.”

*

The rest of the evening passes just like many they have before. They cuddle until the hormones and emotions in their bodies subside, mumbling sweet things to each other and exchanging kisses and touches along the way. Then comes the warm shower, soft pajamas, and soft duvet that creates a warm cocoon just for themselves.

Shane drifts into a warm slumber with the safety of Ilya’s even breathing next to him. Like many of their scenes and conversations before, the little hiccup today only makes him feel closer to Ilya. He reaches out to find Ilya’s hand in the dark, his fingers linking with Ilya’s long, strong fingers. There isn’t anywhere else he would rather be.

Shane blinks his eyes open, expecting the morning light, but the room is still dark, and Ilya’s breathing is still deep and even next to him. The first thing he feels is the sticky layer of sweat clinging to his skin, making him shiver despite the warm cocoon that is their bed. Before he can process anything else, a wave of nausea hits him so hard that he instinctively rushes out of bed, his movement swift and quiet with practiced self-control, and he beelines for the bathroom. It isn’t until he is kneeling on the bathroom floor, retching up the entirety of his dinner into the toilet, that it hits him why all of this feels so familiar.

He is most definitely dropping. He has not dropped for so many years that the feeling is almost foreign, like a sickness his body had forgotten how to have, only to remember it all at once.

But the way his body handles it, the instinct to run away from the bed, hide in a corner where no one can see him as he quietly rides it out, and *scrub* every single trace of evidence, hits him so hard that he starts shaking uncontrollably.

Don’t let it show, don’t make a sound, curl into a ball until it passes, it will pass.

Because his body remembers. It remembers what happens when vulnerability is seen. It remembers that being helpless has never meant being safe. So it screams *hide and pretend* so loudly that it becomes the only voice in his head, and the next thing he knows, he is squeezing himself into the corner of the bathroom, his hands clasped behind his head in a gesture of self-protection, his knees drawn tight to his chest.

But unlike the many, many times he dropped many years ago, there is a small but stubborn voice in his mind that tells him to *get up, find your Dom, he will know how to fix it*.

Shane is torn and confused. He knows he should trust that voice, but at the same time, the mere idea of letting a Dom see him in this state feels so ridiculously dangerous that he cannot inflict it on himself.

But the voice is insistent. *It’s not just a Dom, it says. It’s your Dom.*

It’s Ilya. He is safe. He is home. He will know what to do.

So Shane lets out a pathetic whimper, curled up in the corner of the bathroom. He couldn’t find the strength to stand up, but he forces himself to call into the darkness of the bedroom, “Ilya.”

His voice is thin and shaky, probably not even carrying far enough to reach the other side of the bathroom.

He shakes miserably as he opens his mouth to try again. But this time, only a sob comes out. He buries his head into his knees, confusion and hurt and desperation circling him like a vulture circling its dying prey, ready to tear it apart the moment the struggle weakens.

When he forces his head up to try again, the bedside lamp is flicked on, quiet footsteps are padding through the bedroom toward the bathroom, and the tall, muscular body appears the next second at the door, his body a silhouette against the dim light in the bedroom.

Ilya doesn't move closer into the bathroom, to Shane's relief. He flips a few switches on the wall until the dark bathroom is filled with a warm but dim light.

"Baby. It's me." His voice is low and smooth, like a calm stream of water filling the cracks in Shane's jagged soul. "Did you have a nightmare?"

Shane shakes his head, his teeth clattering so loudly that his voice is hard to get out. "I dropped." He buries his head again, murmuring under his breath, "Sorry. It will pass soon."

"Can I come closer?" Ilya asks. His voice is not careful, just calm, like he knows what he is doing, and Shane hears the voice in his head again. *He will know what to do.*

Shane nods jerkily, and then quickly adds, "Just, please, don't touch."

His body remembers too well the slaps, the kicks to his gut, and the hands tightening in his hair, banging his head against something hard when he used to drop. He knows he will not react well even to Ilya's hands now.

Ilya is next to him in no time. Slowly, he slides down and sits next to him on the bathroom floor. They are close enough for Shane to feel the warmth from his body, but Ilya keeps that small distance and doesn't come any closer.

Shane's mind is torn apart by the desire to get closer, to crawl into that warmth. He is so cold. But fear has pinned him to the wall like a butterfly, his body caught between reaching for safety and remembering what happens when he does.

"I'm not going to touch you, sweetheart. But I will put this warm towel on you. You are freezing."

Ilya is not asking for permission. His hands are quick to work as he opens the large, plush towel that just came out of the warmer and carefully drapes it over Shane's bare shoulders.

"Thank, thank you." Shane's teeth are clattering less with the warmth on his body. "I will be okay soon. Sorry." He buries his head into his knees again, squeezing his eyes shut. An hour, maybe two. His body knows how to handle it. It will regulate the tidal waves of hormones and wrangle itself into something that appears normal.

"There is no rush," Ilya says simply.

Shane raises his head at that, looking at Ilya through his teary eyes.

"I know it feels terrible. But there is no timeline that you need to get better within, sweetheart." He smiles sadly, with a faint crease between his brows, and extends a hand to Shane almost

instinctively before dropping it onto the tiled floor between them. “I’m here. I will be here always. You can take an hour, a day, two days, a week. I won’t leave you alone.”

Shane sobs.

He hated being alone when he dropped. But he hated the pain he would experience when someone found him in that state even more. So he was always hiding, letting the excruciating nausea and dizziness eat him alive from the inside in exchange for a fragile safety against the outside.

He did that until his master found his disappearance deeply inconvenient, as if even breaking down had been something Shane was doing wrong. The master locked him up in chains after every session, put him under harsh fluorescent lights, and beat or electroshocked sense into him, until his body feared that torture even more than the drop and conditioned itself into never dropping again.

But he won’t be alone anymore when he drops now. Ilya will protect him. He will be there. That he knows with more certainty than he knows anything about himself.

Slowly, Shane drops one hand to the tiled floor between them and carefully inches it over until his fingertips brush against Ilya’s. Ilya doesn’t grab his hand. He gently moves his fingers to cover Shane’s, maintaining the contact but keeping Shane’s trembling fingers beneath, like he is protecting a small, terrified butterfly.

They stay like that for a while. Just as Shane starts to feel cold again, Ilya is already draping another warm towel across his body with one hand, all while keeping their little contact through their fingertips.

“We can stay here for as long as you like, baby. But do you want to move to the bed? It’s softer and warmer there.”

Shane nods silently. Slowly, he flips his palm up to interlace their fingers together. The contact is grounding. It doesn’t make him flinch. He exhales in relief.

Ilya is looking at their hands with beaming pride, like it’s something much more impressive than just holding hands. He pulls himself up first, then gives Shane’s hand a gentle tug, patiently waiting for him until he slowly stands up on his own.

Shane sits at the edge of the bed, watching Ilya move things around. The pillow is rearranged so he can sit up leaning against it, a glass of water appears on the bedside table, and with careful hands, Ilya tugs the duvet around Shane before he climbs into the bed next to him. They are not touching, still maintaining that little distance except for the hand-holding under the duvet.

Ilya is breathing louder than normal, like he is trying to show Shane his rhythm without spelling it out. And after a while, Shane matches that. They are rising and falling together on the little boat that is their warm bed, surrounded by the quiet waves of the night. Shane doesn’t know where they are sailing to, only that Ilya will hold his hand and be there with him, and the destination does not matter.

*

The sunray filters through the sheer linen curtain, bringing in the much-welcomed spring morning. Shane blinks awake, and the first thing he notices is the bone-deep tiredness. It feels like his body is finally catching up after years of holding itself up, and now it is finally allowed to rest.

Shane doesn't even want to move his head or neck, so he blinks a few more times to look around, and his vision quickly focuses on the body that he is way too familiar with. Ilya is lying on his side facing Shane, his head propped up by one arm, his other hand still dutifully linked with Shane's. He is looking at Shane with those pale green eyes that hold way too much emotion when he looks at Shane, and his lips are curling upward slightly, the smile that Shane will never get tired of looking at.

"Morning, sweetheart," Ilya says. His thumb rubs slow circles into the back of Shane's hand.

"Hi, Ilya." Shane tries to smile, but it seems hard to even move the muscles on his face. He yawns as he feels his eyelids drooping again. "So tired."

"It's normal. You went through a lot," Ilya says gently. "You should rest for as long as you need." He adjusts his hand that's holding up his head, and the full head of dark curls bounces in the sunlight like a halo. "I asked Marta to make red bean soup, very sweet, just the way you like."

Shane blinks a few times, his brain too slow to catch up. "How do you know...?"

"Oh, I texted Yuna this morning." Ilya shrugs. "Asked what your comfort food is when you are sick. I told her you had a little stomach bug."

Shane smiles. He is so tired, but his heart is so full. "With lots of rice cake?" he asks.

Ilya grins, his white teeth looking extra white under the morning sun. "You don't want to know the lecture Marta gave me on how it's impossible to find rice cake at six-thirty in the morning. But yes, many. She only does that for you."

Shane nods, his eyes closing again. "Thank you, Ilya," he mumbles. "Could you hold me while I sleep more?"

It's as if Ilya has been wound back up with that one simple request. His body was humming with tension, trying not to get too close to Shane, and now it moves right on cue when he finally has that permission. His long arms circle Shane, holding him right in front of his chest.

"Always, sweetheart. A day, a week, forever. We can stay like this."

Shane takes a deep breath in to let Ilya's smell fill his brain. "Thank you, Ilya. I don't... When I'm better, please don't baby me just because I dropped. I like it when you are a little... mean." He takes another big yawn, dropping his head against Ilya's chest.

Shane hears a low chuckle, and a soft kiss is pressed to the top of his head. "Oh, I will show you mean, baby."

Shane is folded tighter into the warm embrace. "Thank you for trusting me enough to drop. I will always be here."

Subdrop: Subdrop is the physical and emotional crash some submissives experience after an intense BDSM scene. During a scene, the body is running on adrenaline, endorphins, oxytocin, and other stress-response chemicals. When that heightened state wears off, the sudden shift can leave someone exhausted, shaky, cold, nauseated, emotional, anxious, or just generally *what the hell is happening to me*. It can happen immediately, but it can also be delayed for hours or even until the next day.

Importantly, **subdrop does not automatically mean the scene went wrong or that the Dom failed at aftercare**. Sometimes the body just has a lot to process. That is exactly what is happening with Shane. Ilya didn't skip aftercare. He did everything he normally does: they cuddled, showered, kissed, talked, ate, slept together, and gave their bodies and emotions time to come down. But Shane had an unusually intense session, didn't get a satisfying orgasm, and then had a huge, emotionally enlightening conversation with Ilya about safewords, failure, and trust. On top of all that, his body has been heavily conditioned for years to *not* drop. And apparently, his nervous system finally decided: *Oh. We are safe now. Guess we're doing this.*

So how do you prevent or manage subdrop? There isn't a magic formula, and everyone needs different things, but good aftercare can help. It also helps to know your own patterns and remember that delayed drop is possible.

If someone *does* drop, the goal isn't necessarily to "fix" them as quickly as possible. Give them safety, comfort, choices, and time. Ask what they need rather than assuming. Sometimes that means being held; sometimes it means being left alone but not abandoned. A blanket, water, food, a quiet room, or simply someone sitting nearby can all help. Which is why Ilya doesn't try to magically cure Shane's drop. He gives him choices and stays with him, letting Shane decide when he wants contact. When Shane finally reaches for his hand, Ilya meets him there.

Orgasm control is a very common BDSM practice where the Dom controls when, how, or whether the submissive gets to orgasm, within whatever boundaries they've agreed upon.

For the Dom, it can be a form of control and trust. For the sub, it can create a different kind of surrender: handing someone they trust the decision over their own orgasm. The anticipation can also make eventual release more intense, while denial itself can become part of the erotic experience.

Two terms that get thrown around a lot:

- Edging: bringing someone very close to orgasm and then stopping or reducing stimulation before they actually orgasm. This can be repeated multiple times before eventually allowing the orgasm.
- Ruined orgasm: allowing someone to reach orgasm, then deliberately reducing or stopping stimulation at the crucial moment. The orgasm is physically real, but without the satisfying stimulation normally accompanying it, leaving them frustrated or even more desperate. That's what Ilya does to Shane. Shane crosses the point of no return and starts to orgasm, and Ilya stops stimulating him, turning what could have been a satisfying orgasm into a ruined one. Which, as you may have noticed, Shane is *extremely* unhappy about.

And that is all the kink science for today. Please drink some water, communicate with your partners, and remember that sometimes your nervous system will apparently wait seven years before deciding to file its paperwork.

Chapter End Notes

Harris: You have never used your safeword?

Shane: No. I'm not weak.

Harris: *Gasps, tearing up.*

Troy: Don't you call my sub weak. *Thinking about how Harris only safeworded twice last night.*

Ilya: Shane, we talked about this. You use it when it becomes too much.

Shane: What if I prefer to suffer with dignity?

Ilya: Then I suffer with a bite.

Shane: Dignifiedly.

Harris: Is that a word?

Troy: Don't, he bites.

Chapter 23: One-shot: [Troy/Harris] The apple boy

Chapter Notes

Many of you have been asking for the scene between Troy and Harris after Harris accidentally told Shane about Troy/Ilya looking for his parents, which resulted in Harris's strong aversion to chairs 😂 so here we go! This is my first time writing characters outside of Hollanov, and I hope I gave them life. After all, I have a soft spot for Harris in my heart ❤️

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

Troy doesn't think too much of it when Ilya tells him that the groundskeeper is retiring and he is hiring someone new. Troy simply says he will run the background check on the new employee, just like he vets everyone who works for Ilya, and that is it.

The search comes back very normal.

Harris comes from a large family and has two older sisters. They own an orchard, and as far as Troy can tell, they run a perfectly legal orchard business: they grow apples, sell them, make some of them into cider, and sell that too.

The only thing slightly out of the ordinary is a heart condition Harris has when he is a little kid. It is the sort of thing that wouldn't usually come up in a regular background screen, but Troy has his ways. Troy is good at what he does. Most of the time, being good at what he does means finding out deep, personal things about people that aren't supposed to be available.

So Ilya hires Harris.

It is a crisp fall morning when Troy meets him for the first time.

He is just getting out of his car and walking toward the mansion when the heavy front door opens and Harris comes out. He is laughing as he talks to someone still inside, his body half turned back toward the house. His hair and well-trimmed beard look almost golden in the sunshine.

When Harris finally turns around, he locks eyes with Troy and pauses. He stares.

Troy frowns at that, but before he can react further, Harris's smile blooms so wide that it catches him off guard.

Troy doesn't smile much. He isn't used to dealing with people who smile too much, either. It is good that most of the people he works with wear a poker face on their good days and a murderous face on their bad ones.

But Troy can't seem to put on his poker face now.

Harris's smile is annoyingly infectious, so he tries to tilt his lips up in an attempt to smile back. Because that is the polite thing to do, right? When a cute, medium-built guy smiles at you like you have just made his day, the polite thing is to smile back.

“Hi, I’m Harris.” Harris rushes down the five steps leading up to the house and extends a hand as he walks toward Troy. “I’m the new groundskeeper, now that Mark is retiring. I officially start today. I grew up in a town that’s two hours away from here, and I just moved here for this job. My family still runs an orchard there. Apple orchard. It’s a really busy time now, but this job was too good to turn down.”

Troy shakes his hand, processing the knowledge he already has and wondering why Harris is telling him so many random facts about himself.

“I’m Troy,” he says.

Harris smiles brightly at him, still holding his hand. His eyes blink against the sunshine as if he is waiting for more.

Shit. He is probably waiting for more. Troy scans his brain for something he can say.

“I have been working with Ilya for a few years. Security.” That is the only thing he feels comfortable enough to disclose for now.

“You certainly are built like one!” Harris says brightly.

Troy feels a hint of very unfamiliar warmth creeping up his face. He frowns at that, hoping he isn’t getting sick.

“Um, thank you?” Troy says, uncertain how to respond to that.

“I hope we see each other a lot!” Harris reaches into the paper bag he is carrying. “Here is an apple from our farm. I left more in the kitchen. Marta has them.”

Troy doesn’t move. Not because he doesn’t want the apple. He just isn’t used to accepting food from another person. Not since he was a kid. His muscular build and stoic expression are usually deterrent enough to make people keep themselves out of his way, rather than offer him a piece of fruit.

Harris steps forward and pushes the apple into Troy’s hand, tilting his head when Troy is still too shocked to curl his fingers around it.

Then he takes the apple back. A hint of panic flashes across his face.

“Oh, sorry. Are you allergic?”

Troy blinks back to the present. “What? No!” He awkwardly rubs his hand against his jeans before extending it toward Harris. “Uh, thank you. I guess.”

Harris exhales a sigh of relief. “You are very welcome. As I said, there are more in the kitchen.”

He turns his head to check that the front door is fully closed, then leans closer and whispers in a much lower voice, “Are you familiar with Marta? I have a feeling that she doesn’t like me very much.”

The way he whispers makes it sound like a secret between the two of them, like Harris somehow trusts Troy enough to confide in him even though they have just met.

Troy feels a little special. He shakes his head once. “No. That’s just who she is.”

Harris doesn’t look too relieved, but Troy is already talking way more than he is used to with someone he has just met.

“I, um, I need to go see Ilya now. Thanks for this, again.” He raises his hand to show the apple before starting up the steps.

“Of course! I hope we see each other a lot!” Harris calls brightly after him.

Didn’t he just say that?

Troy opens the door to the study, where Ilya is already sitting behind his desk. He raises his head at Troy, his eyes immediately fixing on the apple. “Ah, I see you met Harris.”

Troy nods curtly. Then he sees an apple sitting on Ilya’s desk too. Suddenly, there is a hint of unfamiliar emotion curling in his chest.

He isn’t upset. Or sad. He just suddenly feels not that special anymore. And, for some reason he can’t begin to explain, he wants to feel special to Harris. The apple boy.

Troy shakes his head to clear the crazy train of thought. What a weird morning.

*

Troy wanders into the kitchen mid-afternoon looking for food because he accidentally skipped lunch again. It isn’t empty as it usually is at this hour of the day. Harris sits at the counter, chewing on a sandwich.

“Troy!” His voice is so infectiously bright that Troy can’t help but smile at that. “I haven’t seen you since my first day. I have been hoping to run into you!”

“I was away for two weeks. For a job,” Troy explains. He searches the counter, hoping to find some leftovers from the staff lunch because there is usually extra. But the counter is very clean now. He is apparently so late that Marta has probably already cleared it away. He picks up an orange from the fruit basket instead.

“Did you have lunch?” Harris asks.

Troy shakes his head. “No, busy day. I will just eat this.” For some unknown reason, he tosses the orange in the air and catches it the next second. He realizes quickly how childish that may seem and winces slightly.

“No way!” Harris exclaims. “Here, I haven’t touched this half.” He pushes half a sandwich that’s neatly wrapped across the counter. “Chicken, roasted peppers, and some apple slices,” he explains proudly. “I made it myself.”

It takes Troy a second to understand what Harris is offering. “It’s okay. I can’t just eat half of your lunch.”

Harris pushes back from his seat at the counter and walks around before wrapping his fingers around Troy’s forearm and starting to pull him towards where he was sitting. Troy lets him. He

doesn't know why. He isn't used to being touched like this, but he certainly doesn't hate it. Harris pulls out the stool next to the one he was using and raises an eyebrow towards Troy. "Sit."

Troy huffs. He certainly isn't used to being told what to do either, especially by a sub. But he still sits and stares at the sandwich that's now placed in front of him.

Harris settles next to him contentedly, going back to his lunch. "Please help me eat it. It's so late, I will have dinner soon anyway." He looks at Troy when he realizes Troy is still not taking the sandwich.

Troy finally moves. He can't say no to Harris, who is so bright and earnest, sharing his own lunch with him. It's a really good sandwich. He says so to Harris, who beams at the compliment.

"Do you always bring your own lunch?" Troy asks.

"Only on days when I know I'm going to miss the staff lunch," Harris says. "Harvest season is really busy, and I had to meet and onboard some of the seasonal helpers this morning, so I knew I was going to have a late lunch." His lips curl up into a bright smile. "I'm so glad that I did that. I have been hoping to see you again."

Troy is too busy inhaling the sandwich to say anything, and when he realizes Harris is looking at him, his smile crinkling his eyes, Troy says, "Oh, do you need anything from me?"

Harris laughs so loudly that Troy is fairly certain the whole first floor is going to hear him now. "No, Troy!" He has to take a break to laugh more before he says, "I wanted to see you. Because I want to be friends."

Right. Harris is probably friends with everyone already.

He has been here for less than a month, and Troy has already heard from several people how delightful the new groundskeeper is. Apparently, Harris has been invited to drinks, weekend outings, and various other gatherings after work. He seems to have a talent for walking into a room and somehow walking out with half the people in it liking him.

Troy never joins them. He isn't a house employee. He only happens to come by frequently to meet with Ilya, and there is no reason for him to be included in their social circle. It's perfectly normal.

Besides, Troy isn't close friends with the other people at Ilya's security firm, either. They trust one another with their lives, which is more than most people can say about their friends, but that doesn't mean they need to spend their evenings together. In their line of work, keeping some distance is probably healthier. It makes things easier when people aren't too attached.

It's okay not to have many friends. Troy tells himself this often enough that it almost sounds like a fact. He has Ilya. He has his work. His work keeps him busy enough that he rarely has time to notice what he might be missing.

So there is no reason for him to care that Harris seems to have collected half the mansion as friends already.

And certainly no reason for him to wonder why Harris hasn't tried harder to collect him.

He realizes he is spiraling a little, so he forces himself to stop. He gives Harris a small, awkward smile. “Um. That’s nice. Thanks.”

He has no idea what to say when someone tells him, so plainly, that they want to be friends. The appropriate response is probably something more enthusiastic than thanks, but that is what comes out. He does want to be friends with Harris. He probably should tell him that.

Unfortunately, he thinks he may have missed his chance. “Thank you for lunch again,” Troy says, pushing his chair back. “I need to get back now.”

Harris just waves a hand at him, like it is nothing to thank him for. He quickly swallows the bite in his mouth and says, “I’ll probably be having a late lunch all week, if you want to join me.”

Troy pauses. He hadn’t planned to come in tomorrow. He needs to sort out some business in the city and interview a few new people. The business has been growing so quickly lately that he and Ilya barely have time to keep up.

He should say he’ll see, or maybe. Instead, to his own surprise, he hears himself say, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harris looks up at him, smiling. “Two thirty? I meet you here and we can go eat in the orchard. Get some fresh air.”

“Two thirty,” Troy confirms. And then, because apparently he has completely lost control of his mouth, he adds, “I’ll bring lunch.”

Harris blinks and Troy immediately regrets everything.

“For us,” Troy clarifies, because apparently making it worse is the only thing he knows how to do.

Harris’s smile grows. “Okay Troy, I will see you tomorrow.”

*

Ilya figures it out before Troy truly realizes what is happening.

Of course that happens. Ilya is that one smart, observant, deeply annoying friend Troy has, one who has saved his life many times and changed it in many ways.

“You are in my house a lot lately.” Ilya drums one finger against his desk, one eyebrow slowly lifting.

“I work for you,” Troy answers flatly.

Ilya doesn’t need to know that, these days, most of those visits are really an excuse to spend an hour having lunch in the orchard with Harris, where they talk about everything from childhood memories to family and friends to the most useless superpower they would want to have.

Ilya shrugs. “I overheard the girls in housekeeping the other day. Apparently Larry from Supply is trying to ask Harris out.” He says Harris’s name slowly, watching Troy. “Our new groundskeeper. Harris.”

So Ilya definitely knows. That's fine. The important thing right now is to get rid of Larry. Cleanly. No evidence. Maybe the lake.

Ilya interrupts before Troy can work out a detailed plan. "Don't be stupid, Troy. Just ask him out on a date."

Troy snaps. "Why would I ask Larry?!" He goes back to his mental plan. Maybe he can fake a delivery request to the cottage after hours and wait for Larry there. It will be dark. No one will know...

Ilya sighs loudly. "No. Harris! You ask Harris out! Are you stupid? What does he see in you?"

Troy frowns stupidly. "See what in me?"

Ilya closes his eyes. For several seconds, he looks like he is reconsidering every life decision that has brought him to this moment. Finally, he waves Troy away with one hand. "Just go to your little orchard lunch break and ask Harris out for dinner. Go somewhere expensive. And please don't kill my supply guy."

So Troy does exactly that. The next day, over lunch, he asks Harris if he would go to Nocturne with him this weekend. Harris looks so happy that Troy almost forgets what he has just asked. He is too busy watching Harris' cheeks flush pink, and his whole face lights up.

He looks like a cute, chubby apple. Troy wants to bite him.

*

The date at Nocturne is definitely going well. Even Troy can tell, which is saying something. He is usually terrible at telling when people are interested in him, but Harris hasn't stopped smiling at him all evening.

Troy has even made an effort. He has traded his usual jeans and T-shirt for a suit he normally only wears when the job requires it. Harris noticed immediately. He has been looking at Troy like he is particularly pleased with what he sees.

They are finishing dessert when Troy finally works up the nerve to ask, "Would you like to go back to my place and hang out a little longer?" He can barely keep eye contact. He is much more confident than this. He is a Dom, for God's sake. He shouldn't feel this nervous asking a sub to spend more time with him.

But Harris is different. He is bright and warm and ridiculously cute, and Troy still hasn't figured out why someone like Harris would want someone like him.

Harris's eyes brighten. Then, just as quickly, they dim. Before Troy can take back the invitation, Harris blurts out, "I don't like pain." The words come out so abruptly that Troy blinks.

Harris lowers his head, worrying at the corner of his napkin. "I-I like you a lot, Troy. But I don't know if I'll be good enough for you."

Troy stares at him. His mouth opens and closes several times. "Um. Really?"

Harris swallows before finally looking up. "Yeah. I know most subs like it, or at least they're okay with it, but I really don't like pain."

Troy shakes his head immediately. “No. Not that.”

“The other part,” Troy says, suddenly much quieter. His eyes drop to his plate before he forces himself to look back at Harris. “The part where you said... you like me.”

Harris’s eyes widen. “Yes, of course, Troy!” he says, almost laughing. “I am so obvious. I think everyone working in this house knows.”

Troy’s throat bobs. “Uh. But... why?”

Harris looks genuinely shocked. “Have you ever seen yourself, Troy? Do you own a mirror?”

Troy frowns.

Harris laughs, then reaches across the table. His fingertip brushes slowly along Troy’s jaw. “Maybe you don’t,” he murmurs. “You seem to get shaving cuts a lot.” Harris’s cheeks turn pink, but he doesn’t pull his hand away. “But more importantly... I think you really see me. You always notice me and make me feel special,” Harris continues. “Even though I’m covered in mud most of the time.”

His fingers linger against Troy’s jaw for another moment. Neither of them says anything.

When Harris finally starts to pull his hand away, Troy catches it. He holds it carefully, almost as though he is afraid Harris might disappear if he lets go.

“I like you too, Harris.”

Harris’s smile blooms so suddenly and brightly that Troy thinks it might actually blind him.

Troy’s heart is pounding so hard it feels ridiculous. He has been in situations that should have terrified him, walked into places knowing he might not walk back out, and never felt anything like this.

“And I don’t mind not doing pain scenes,” Troy adds firmly. “I think I prefer that, actually.”

Harris stares at him. “Really?”

Troy nods.

“But you’re...” Harris trails off, his eyes dropping helplessly to Troy’s broad shoulders and muscular arms. He swallows. “You work for Ilya. You seem like you could really make it hurt.”

Troy gives him a small smile. “I could.” He pauses and squeezes Harris’ hand gently. “I do that a lot at work. To people who are on the wrong side... But that’s work.”

His thumb brushes once over Harris’s knuckles. “For a scene, I’d only do something because my partner wanted it.” He looks directly into Harris’s eyes. “If you don’t want pain, then you don’t get pain.”

Harris nods slowly as he puts another spoonful of chocolate cake into his mouth before he says, “You aren’t just saying this... to make me go home with you, right?” He swallows nervously. “You won’t pressure me into doing it later?”

Troy's face hardens. "Did that happen to you? Someone pressured you into doing things you don't like?"

Maybe he actually needs to make an addition to his kill list now.

Harris frowns and shakes his head weakly. "Not like a lot of pressure, but he certainly made me feel shitty for not being an adequate sub. That's why I ended things. The last contract I had."

Okay, so maybe not on the kill list, but Troy certainly doesn't mind roughing this anonymous asshole up and making him feel *inadequate* for all the pain Troy is going to give him.

"You are not inadequate, Harris," Troy says earnestly. "You are so funny and caring, so kind to everyone." Troy pauses, searching for words he isn't used to using. "Wherever you go, the air feels lighter and the room brighter."

That's probably the most poetic thing that Troy has ever said in his life, he doesn't even know where those words come from, but he is certainly glad to see the effect it's having on Harris. The hesitation and sadness leave his face. What takes its place is that warm, open smile Troy has already become embarrassingly attached to.

Their scene that night works out beautifully. And before long, they are playing every week. Harris eventually moves in, and they start a long-term TPE contract together.

The contract makes it very clear that pain play is only allowed to be used as a form of punishment, and Harris can still veto the punishment altogether before it's carried out if it's deemed unfair.

Troy still can't believe his luck when he puts his collar on Harris. He runs his finger along it several times before leaning in and kissing Harris passionately, promising Harris he will be the best Dom he can be. Troy keeps that promise and watches Harris bloom even more, something he didn't know was possible.

He watches Harris laugh without holding anything back, his voice carrying through the orchard. He listens to Harris tell him about his day, every story somehow filled with funny little encounters even though most of his job involves taking care of plants that can't talk back.

And at some point, he watches Harris become fiercely loyal to Shane when the quiet little sub enters their lives. He watches his sunshine of a boyfriend slowly work his way into Shane's guarded world, warming him bit by bit until even Shane, who once seemed determined to keep everyone at arm's length, starts to bloom too.

Troy didn't know a person could be so many things at once. Harris is warm and funny and endlessly kind, but he is also stubborn, fiercely loyal, surprisingly brave, and so full of life that sometimes Troy just finds himself watching him and wondering how one person can contain all of that.

He knows he will do everything to keep Harris blooming like that.

*

Punishment is new territory for both of them.

For the nearly three years since they started their relationship, Troy has almost never had to punish Harris. Harris is a ball of sunshine, warming everyone around him, especially his Dom. He doesn't usually find joy in bratting, and Troy isn't interested in making their scenes too difficult for Harris to meet his standards.

So when Troy tells Harris that Shane has been found and they will head home now, Harris's sigh of relief is very short-lived. He follows Troy to their car with his head ducked low, all his usual brightness gone.

Troy fixes his eyes on the road ahead as he grips the wheel with more force than necessary, his knuckles turning white. In his peripheral vision, he sees Harris glance at him several times, opening his mouth, closing it, and eventually resolving to squeeze his eyes shut while fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

"Do you want to explain?" Troy exhales after a while, trying to keep his anger at bay.

Harris shakes his head meekly, his hand coming up to rest on Troy's bicep. "No, sir. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken so carelessly."

"I told you about our investigation because I trusted you." Troy sighs. "You know Shane better than I do. You know he is... skittish."

Harris groans, linking his hands behind his head and dropping his head down, curling into himself. "I know, Troy-Sir! I don't know what I was thinking... He never says anything about his family. I just wanted to fucking encourage it a little, see if he would crack. Uh!" Harris brings his fist up to his forehead and knocks twice, as if he can physically knock the stupidity out of himself.

"Language, Harris. You don't want to get in more trouble."

Harris lets out a resigned sigh, leaning his head back against the headrest. "I know I'm in trouble. I'm sorry, Sir."

"You are lucky he is safe and sound. If anything happened to him..." Troy doesn't finish. He just looks at Harris from the corner of his eye.

"I know. Ilya will kill me. Or worse, he will ask you to kill me. And you will have to make a choice between me and him." Harris whines.

"You will be like the hunter torn between obeying the Evil Queen or sparing Cinderella's life."

"Snow White," Troy says with a straight face.

Harris goes quiet. He tries to hold his remorseful expression, but after a while he giggles. "And you said you didn't know your princesses!"

Troy just shakes his head, the corner of his mouth betrays him with the faintest smile. He is going to find it so hard to punish Harris, but he has to. Otherwise, he will be failing at being his Dom. He sighs at that thought.

After a long silence, Harris lowers his voice. "You can... You should punish me, Sir. I deserve it. I'm sorry."

“Any areas that are off-limits?” Troy straightens his face again as he asks evenly, his voice cool, like he is asking what Harris wants for dinner.

Harris shivers at that. He suddenly imagines Troy standing in a windowless room in front of some guy, asking which body parts they don’t want to keep. He shakes his head to physically shake the thought away. Those are bad guys, he tells himself. Troy may be dangerous, but only to those on the wrong side.

“Um. I am visiting home next week. So, nothing I can’t cover with clothing? Please?” He can’t imagine how his older sisters will react if he comes home with fingerprints on his face.

“Okay.”

Troy is being very curt now, and Harris dislikes that combination of curt and cool Troy. It has a dark vibe that Harris can’t seem to warm with his brightness alone.

“Could you say something? Anything?” Harris says defeatedly, looking at his lap.

“I’m not angry, Harris. I am not going to punish you out of anger,” Troy says after a while. “I was worried, and a little scared, when I saw Ilya approaching you earlier. I thought maybe I had to stop him. With force.”

Harris looks at Troy then, his eyes a little wet. “That’s why you were so stressed?”

Troy nods. “Yes. I love him as a brother. But I love you more than anything in the world.”

Harris wipes his face. “Oh, fuck you. You can’t just say this before you hurt me! Now I am going to suffer and won’t even be able to stay mad at you.”

“Language. Second offense.” Troy huffs out a little laugh as he pulls into their driveway.

Harris makes a zipping gesture across his lips with one hand and quickly wipes his eyes with the other.

Harris lingers in the kitchen after his shower, probably the last shower he will get to have in the next two days, depending on how much damage Troy wants to do to him. He organizes their fruit basket, which is filled to the brim with apples from the orchard, and wonders whether he will even feel well enough to make Troy the apple pie he promised him before he leaves for home.

A quiet and looming presence presses up behind him, flipping him around and cornering him against the kitchen island. Harris looks up at Troy, his heart thumping a little fast at that dominant gesture. Troy’s blue eyes are piercing into Harris’s soul. “Ready to get started?”

Harris drops to his knees slowly and tilts his head up, biting into his lips as he weakly shakes his head. “No, but let’s get it over with.”

Troy’s hand rests in his hair, gently brushing a few strands away. “I’m punishing you for not keeping things confidential as I asked you to, for violating my trust.” Troy pauses, waiting until Harris nods curtly.

“As mentioned in our contract, pain scenes are acceptable as a punishment tool, and that’s what we will do today.”

Harris whines through his nose. He already knew what was coming, but he still doesn't want to give up the chance to negotiate. "I also hate cleaning the tiles. Can I do that? Oh, corner time! I will go stand quietly and think about what I did wrong. I hate not talking."

His voice trails off as Troy raises his eyebrows. Eventually he gives Troy a resigned look and mumbles quietly, "Okay, fine. Please just make it quick."

Troy continues, "The whole house spent an hour looking for Shane, so for every minute we looked, I will give you one spank."

Harris really wishes they lived on some planet where the hours are shorter and maybe only consist of, like, ten minutes each. He tries to negotiate again. "How about one spank for every two minutes? The hour passed really fast because we were looking so hard."

Troy's lips are pressed into a thin line now. Warmth seems to be leaving his body. Before his blue eyes get colder, Harris grabs onto his hands. "Okay, okay! Sixty. Sorry. I will take it."

Troy nods. "Stand up. Bend over." He taps the kitchen island once.

Harris gets into position. He presses his upper body flat against the counter, folding his arms so his head can rest on them. He feels Troy's large hands come to his waist, dragging his sweatpants down until they are bunched around his knees.

The waiting is probably the worst part. Harris squeezes his eyes shut, waiting for the first spank to land. It will be okay once it starts, he tells himself. It's mostly a mind-game, the suspense is unbearable, but it will pass.

Suddenly, it starts without a warning.

Troy gives him ten in a row. For a while, all Harris hears is skin slapping against skin in rapid succession, his brain too slow to catch up with the fact that the punishment has already started, fast and furious without any lead-in. When the slapping sound finally stops, the pain flares.

So he was wrong about the wait being the worst part, because, apparently, the first ten already hurt like a bitch and it's so much worse than the suspense.

Harris loses it right then and there.

"Ow, ow!" Harris howls into his folded arms. "Fuck, fuck you! Troy. That hurts so much." His tears are threatening to fall, but he tries hard to hold them back, unwilling to let Troy see this moment of weakness.

He hates pain, and Troy knows - he has known since their first date! Yet Troy doesn't even try to ease into it, Harris thinks bitterly.

"Great attitude. I'm adding ten." The even voice sounds behind him.

Troy sounds *evil*. It must be what he sounds like when he is at work. Harris would totally spill all his secrets right away. He doesn't stand a chance.

"No, no, please. Troy-Sir! I am sorry. Give me another chance. I can't take ten more." Harris says breathlessly. He turns his head around to look Troy in the eyes, hoping the wetness circling in his eyes will buy him a pass.

Troy just shakes his head. "Third time tonight. There is no more free pass. You are lucky I'm not gagging you now."

Harris lets out a frustrated moan, burying his head back down. He mumbles a bunch more "fuck you"s, but carefully keeps them under his breath.

"What is that, Harris?"

Troy's voice sounds again, and Harris shakes. He doesn't know how anyone looks at that version of Troy and doesn't immediately fold down onto the ground. He is lucky that he gets the nice and soft Troy most of the time.

"Nothing, sir. Just saying I'm sorry." Harris forces the words out. He is not that sorry anymore after those mean slaps, but he knows better than to brat in the middle of a punishment he absolutely hates.

"Oh, is that so." Troy almost sounds *bored*.

The slaps rain down before he even finishes. Harris's brain goes blank, his mouth drops open into a silent scream, and he feels like his soul leaves his body in the midst of those rapid-fire strikes. Is this what an out-of-body experience feels like? Is he dying?

Weirdly, his last image before dying is that one time when he and Troy visited their club, where he saw Ilya do a whipping demonstration on stage. His mind unhelpfully substitutes that Sub that night - some tall guy he didn't have a name for - with Shane, and he wonders how Shane survives a sadist as his Dom, and still appears so smitten with him like he's the kindest Dom ever. He quietly says goodbye to Shane, his dear friend that keeps him accompanied in the garden and orchard in the past few months. He has a very soft spot for him.

He realizes the room is dead silent when his soul comes back, and that he has somehow moved from the island to the corner of their kitchen, pressing his back against the corner cabinet, tears rolling down his cheeks.

He doesn't care if he is showing weakness anymore. He feels weaker than ever. Emotions rush back into his body, and an anger burns through him. He hates that Troy is making him feel this way, his sweet, indulgent, and protective Troy.

"Apple," he says shakily, his hands moving back to hover over his burning butt cheeks, as if Troy might somehow find his way behind the cabinet and spank him more from there.

Troy reaches a hand over, and Harris flinches. Troy freezes right there, a wave of hurt showing in his eyes.

"No, stop. I need a break," Harris says shakily.

Troy nods slowly, lowering his hand at once. He opens his mouth after a while, "I know. You said 'apple,' Harris. I heard you. Can I hold you for a moment?" Slowly, Troy extends his arms in front of him again, careful not to get too close this time.

Harris wipes his tears with the back of his hand and looks away.

Troy just stands there, his arms extended, the cold and firm air leaving him all at once. He looks like a little boy who did something wrong, his big blue eyes fixed on Harris's face nervously.

Harris softens at that sight. He understands then and there what's going through Troy's head. And a sharp pang of ache rings in his heart.

He drops his head to take a few deep breaths in and out, riding out the searing fire in his rear end, calming the burning rage in his chest. After a while, he steps forward with trembling legs into Troy's arms, letting himself lean and press forward. Troy's arms wrap around him right away, so tight it almost hurts.

"I'm okay, Troy," Harris says after a while.

"Sorry. I'm sorry, baby." Troy says quietly, his voice trembles, he hugs Harris so tight like he is worried that he might slip away. "I- fuck, I fucked up."

Harris shakes his head, raising his head so he can look at Troy, "Hey, hey - stop. I know what you are thinking, but you are not your dad. This is consensual. It hurts, but I'm okay. You stopped when I asked you to." He tilts his head up to press a kiss on Troy's cheek. "You are a great Dom."

Troy lets out a long exhale before inhaling deeply again, like he has been holding his breath until that moment and is now finally allowed to breathe.

Harris stays in that embrace for a while. "Was that twenty more? Thirty total?" he asks after a while.

"Yeah," Troy says. "That's it. We won't do more."

Harris raises his palms to Troy's face, looking into his eyes. "I haven't said 'cider' yet. We will keep going."

"What? No..." Troy frowns.

"Remember when I told you I'm not fragile?" Harris points to his heart, where he showed Troy the ugly scars from his childhood heart surgery, and he sees the flash of memory across Troy's face.

"Well, I'm not, so let's keep going. I had my break."

Harris steps back to the kitchen island and kicks his sweatpants away. At some point when he was running away, he managed to shed them completely. He bends over the cold marble again, putting his head down on his arms.

Troy's hand comes to his waist, and Harris can't help but shiver. But the hand just stays there, pressing him down with only enough force to keep him steady. The contact feels warm.

Troy takes another deep breath in.

The hand stays there when Troy delivers the next five spanks with just one hand, slower than both rounds before. Harris feels each spank like it is striking a raw nerve. His asscheeks are already very sensitive, and the slow spanking only makes him hyper-aware of each impact. He squeals through this round and pants heavily into his arms afterward, his tears rolling down uncontrollably again.

"Thirty-five," Harris grits out. His back arches up in a useless attempt to escape, only to be held down by Troy's large hand on his waist.

“Five more, and then we are done.” There is a slight tremor in Troy’s voice. Harris looks back over his shoulder, surprised. He sees a striking ache in Troy’s eyes, almost as if he is feeling every single strike as acutely as Harris.

“Count for me, baby.”

He raises his palm and strikes once, twice, and again. Harris’s knees are giving out beneath him, his fingers shooting out to grab onto the edge of the countertop so he doesn’t slip off.

“One, two, and three, Sir.” He takes a deep breath and bites his lips. “Come on, Sir. Finish it.”

Smack. “Four.”

Smack. “Five.”

At that, Harris feels all the strength leaving his body. He slides down, his knees hitting the floor. He burrows right into Troy’s arms as Troy kneels down in front of him immediately.

Troy is making shushing sounds by his ears, and Harris lets himself fold into the hug, his mind a little frizzy. It feels like there is a static sound playing there, making him float slightly in the blank space.

He can’t believe he is getting to the edge of subspace with spanking, something he hates so much. It must be the vulnerability and deep care that Troy shows, and that unspoken reduction of punishments, because clearly, even if Harris can take them all, Troy does not have the heart to carry them out.

“I want bed,” Harris mumbles. “And numbing cream for my butt, and ice cream for my tummy, and many kisses for my heart.”

Troy nods. Slowly, he stands up, draping one of Harris’s arms across the back of his shoulder. He bends to place his other arm below Harris’s knees, and with a quiet “Ready?” he lifts Harris with ease, carrying him into their bedroom.

“Hmm. Now I feel like a true princess.” Harris buries his face into Troy’s chest, linking his arms around Troy’s neck. “Big bad bodyguard carrying me into bed. Evil Queen stands no chance.”

Troy huffs a smile and slowly, very carefully, drops Harris onto his side in the bed. Harris rolls over to lie face down, sighing into the mattress.

Harris dozes off shortly after Troy spoonfeeds him ice cream in the most awkward position in bed, his neck cranking up from time to time like a turtle reaching for sunshine.

He feels Troy pressing soft kisses on his back and shoulder blades as he drifts off, and when he wakes again, the room is dark except for the small phone screen lit in Troy’s hand.

“Hi,” Harris says sleepily.

Troy lowers the phone and looks at him right away. “How are you feeling? Do you need more numbing cream?”

Harris shakes his head. “I am feeling okay now. I probably need to take a sick day tomorrow, though.”

Troy nods. “Don’t worry about it. I will let them know.”

“You are up late.” Harris yawns, feeling his eyelids drooping again.

“Couldn’t sleep, so I was finishing up some work.” Troy says, and after a while he adds, “I made some donations too.”

Harris smiles. He raises a hand to link with Troy’s, squeezing it once. “I told you, it’s not domestic violence. I consented to it.”

“I know, baby. Still didn’t feel right. Hurting you.” Troy gently rubs Harris’s back in slow circles. “Had to do something to lessen the guilt.”

Harris smiles sleepily. “Maybe next time you can make me do corner time? It will hurt both of us less.”

Troy slides down to lie next to Harris, his arm draping over Harris’s bare back. “It wasn’t just punishment for you. It was for me, as well,” he says quietly. “I told you secrets and asked you to keep them confidential. It started with me.”

“Shh.” Harris lifts a finger to Troy’s lips. “Don’t start. Please don’t hide things from me. I want all the gossip. I promise I won’t spill again.”

When Troy doesn’t say more, Harris presses, “Yes? Promise?” He leans in to kiss Troy on the lips. “Big, bad bodyguard. Tell me, are you and Ilya killing those bastards that hurt Shane?”

Troy smiles. “We aren’t assassins, Harris. We are a legit security business. We destroy monsters by handing them over to law enforcement authorities.”

Harris rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, yada yada. Very legal.” He lowers his voice. “But only between us, how many on the list so far?”

Troy hugs him tighter, his lips tracing the shape of Harris’s ear, making him hum with contentment. After a while, he says, “Three done, five more on the list.”

Harris lets out a little squeal. “The kill list, right?”

Troy nods. “Well, more like the ‘make them wish they were killed right away’ list.”

Harris shrieks with excitement. “Oh, are you filming it? Can I see? Please, please?”

Troy laughs. He leans in to press their noses together, kissing Harris again. “Maybe when you are strong enough to take more than a few spankings, baby.”

Harris scrunches up his nose, “You can’t even deliver more than a few.”

Troy shakes his head, his eyes shining with fondness, “No, not to you, baby. I love you.”

Spanking is probably one of the first things people think of when they hear “BDSM,” but there’s a lot more to it than just hitting someone. In a scene, the same physical action can mean completely different things depending on the context: it can be playful, erotic, cathartic, or, as in Troy and Harris’s case, part of a consensual punishment dynamic and apparently hard for them both.

There is a common image of BDSM where the Dom is always the one in control, completely confident and emotionally untouchable, while the sub is the vulnerable one surrendering all the power. But that isn’t necessarily how a healthy D/s relationship works. A Dom can be nervous, uncertain, emotional, or even scared of getting something wrong. They can trust their sub enough to let that vulnerability show.

In fact, you could argue that the sub often has more practical power in a scene than the Dom does. The sub decides what they are willing to experience. They establish their boundaries, negotiate the scene, and can change their mind at any point. A safeword isn’t a failure of submission. It is one of the mechanisms that makes submission possible in the first place.

Which is why Harris saying “apple” matters here. Troy stops immediately - there is no guilt trip, no “but you agreed to sixty.” Harris gets his break, and then he decides whether they continue. When he says he is ready to keep going, that is still his choice. And Troy’s vulnerability matters just as much. He is the one holding the physical power in the scene, but emotionally, he has to trust Harris to tell him when something is too much, and Harris has to trust Troy to listen when he does.

That mutual trust is the part of BDSM I find the most interesting: submission isn’t really about giving someone unlimited power. It’s about choosing to give them a very specific kind of power, within boundaries that you both understand, and trusting each other enough to handle it responsibly.

Also, poor Troy. He finally gets the scary punishment scene he thought he was supposed to be good at, and then spends the entire night feeling guilty about it. 😂

Chapter End Notes

Harris: You can keep going.

Troy: No.

Harris: You said seventy.

Troy: Why do you want to hurt me?

Harris: ...I’m the one being punished.

Troy: Exactly. Do you have any idea how much this hurts me? I need you to wrap me in a blanket and rub my back.

Harris: Troy, You hurt people for a living.

Troy: I work in Security. Not emotional warfare.

Chapter 24: One-shot: Revenge and Reclamation

Chapter Notes

Welcome to another one-shot of our favorite boys! This chapter discusses revenge as the title suggests, and touches on Shane's past trauma. These scenes are carried out without Shane's presence in current time.

See below for TW with some spoilers:

► TW

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

Shane stares at the screen for a long time before he starts typing carefully into the blank text box of the blogging website he signed up for earlier that afternoon.

It is a warm day in May, the air already carrying the sweet, flowery scents of summer, but the wind is still cool and the sun is not yet scorching.

It has been almost a year since he came home with Ilya.

He sits on the backyard patio now, beneath the grapevines that have only recently begun to turn green. Small leaves peek out from the bare, woody vines, casting dancing shadows across his face whenever the wind moves through them.

A month ago, he started talking to a therapist online. Ilya never pressured him into it. He only encouraged it, mentioning that he sees one himself from time to time.

"It's like working out, but for your mind instead of your body," Ilya had said.

Shane knows he would probably benefit from it. But he had been putting it off because, to him, therapy feels almost luxurious. Not because of the cost, but because of what it seems to require from the person receiving it.

To have regular therapy sessions, Shane thinks, means being stable enough to sit down and process the difficult parts of yourself. It means having enough distance from them to talk about them without drowning in them.

His mind has started very far away from normal.

For almost a year, the only kind of therapy his body and mind could tolerate was the kind he had with Ilya: Ilya's familiar voice, his familiar hands, his familiar dominance, patiently coaxing Shane's body and mind into learning what a normal human life is supposed to feel like.

He has made a lot of progress. He will give himself that.

Sometimes, he thinks of his mind as a vast landscape. It is no longer made entirely of traps and landmines, waiting for him to step in the wrong place and be dragged backward or blown apart.

There are still plenty of them. But perhaps half of the landscape is simply soil now. It is still somewhat barren, but with enough care, something can grow there.

The tree that is his relationship with Ilya is growing very well. It is the biggest, most beautiful thing in his mental landscape. Shane waters it diligently, and every day he can feel its roots reaching deeper, its branches stretching wider, its canopy growing broad enough to offer coverage during a storm and shade in a scorching day.

There is a garden too, scattered with the flowers of friendships he has gathered along the way.

And his parents are the mountains. They stand a little farther away, holding the forest of his history, but there is a rich reservoir there, too. Shane knows that if he needs to, he can return to those woods, sit quietly beneath the trees, and absorb everything they have to offer.

The therapist had told him that the traps and landmines might never disappear completely. "But they don't have to," she had said. "You can keep expanding the rest of the landscape and grow your world."

Shane had understood what she meant, but he was uncertain, "But how? I don't know if I'm ready to leave the house and face a lot of people yet. That feels like a very big step."

"How about online connection?" she had said. "You can expand your network from the safety of your home, just like we're talking through screens now."

Shane had given it some thought. It would be like the journaling he was already doing, but with an audience.

He didn't think he would mind that, especially if he didn't have to show his face or his identity.

So here he is. He thinks about the therapist's words as he places his fingers on the keyboard. *Write something you want to let out. Don't worry about the audience or the reactions you may get. The right people will follow.*

Slowly, words begin to form on the screen.

About Ordinary Things

It's hard to describe what modern-day slavery is like without turning it into a pure trauma dump.

There are words for violence. There are words for captivity. There are words for cruelty, exploitation, coercion, and abuse. But none of them describe what it is like to believe that pain has a schedule, and safety is nothing more than a distant fever dream.

It is easy to understand a locked door. A chain. A wound. A gun. Those things are easy to recognize because they look like the things we have been taught to fear.

The more difficult part is everything that comes afterward.

I learn which footsteps belong to which person, and what they mean when they stop outside the thin wall. Those footsteps still come back in my dream, when I sleep in a warm and safe bed now next to my partner.

I learn which questions are safe to answer honestly and which answers will cost me more than lying. I still have to double guess what I can say, even to people I trust with my life.

I used to think freedom began when the door opened. At least, that is what I thought the first and only time I tried to run away. But I realized that a door can be open for a very long time before I understand that I am allowed to walk through it.

And I am still learning that.

Because waiting on the other side of the door is not some glorious version of freedom. What's waiting for me are just ordinary things. Like saying no. Leaving a room. Eating when I'm hungry. Choosing what I want.

Some of these things sound embarrassingly ordinary. A toddler can do this, let alone a grownup.

I think sometimes people imagine that surviving something terrible, like slavery, means that person has something so strong that they can do extraordinary things afterward. For me, surviving means learning how to have an ordinary life.

I was given another chance to live this wonderful, ordinary life. For that, I am forever grateful. To my savior. To my friends. To my parents. And to myself.

Shane reads the blog once and hits publish, not giving himself a chance to doubt himself.

He stares at the little blog post that is live now for a minute. It feels a little cathartic, a little thrilling, laying out such a deep, personal experience in the form of words and presenting it to anyone who may stumble upon it.

He almost forgets about the post after that. Early summer means the garden and orchard are suddenly demanding attention, and Shane spends the next few days with Harris, helping with the work that needs to be done. They weed around the fruit trees, spread fresh mulch, and spend hours thinning and tying branches so they can bear the weight of the fruit later in the season. By the end of each afternoon, Shane is tired enough that he barely thinks about anything beyond a shower and dinner.

He only remembers the blog post the day before his next therapy session, when he is curled against Ilya's side, reading a book in their library.

He apologizes to Ilya, saying he needs to finish some homework before therapy, and leaves for his own room, where he keeps the laptop. Ilya only pulls him in for a gentle kiss and praises him for being a good boy doing his homework.

Shane blushes deeply and hurries out of the room before he does something less like one.

To his surprise, there are a few people commenting on the post.

Some are asking what a slave contract is like and how he ended up having one. A few are giving him virtual hugs and cheering him on. One of the most recent comments says:

As someone who is recovering from an abusive relationship, I feel the longing for a sweet, ordinary life profoundly. Thank you for putting it into words.

Shane types a few sentences explaining that his slave contract was never voluntary. He chews on his lip as he reads those words before carefully deleting them. In the end, he types a quick response to the last comment.

I wish you the best on your journey of recovery. Please stay strong.

He closes his laptop.

He goes back to the blog shortly after his therapy session, during which his therapist warmly praises his courage and encourages him to write and interact with his readers more.

Shane takes to praise like a sunflower reaching for warm sunlight.

So he types on.

It helps distract him, especially since Ilya has been very busy lately, sometimes traveling back-to-back with only a few days at home between trips. Ilya promises him that things will slow down later in the summer and that they will spend some quality time together, maybe even take a trip somewhere and see more of the world.

But Shane just hugs him tightly as he sees him off at the front door.

“Please just come back safely. I don’t need anything else.”

*

About Fear

Fear is such a powerful tool for control.

It is an invisible leash around my neck. At first, someone has to hold it. They have to tell me where to stand, when to kneel, when to speak and when to be quiet. Eventually, they don’t have to hold it anymore. I learn to hold it myself.

That is what fear does when you live with it long enough. It stops feeling like fear and becomes instinct. I anticipate what people want because being useful makes me easier to keep, and being easy to keep makes me more likely to survive. Eventually, I don’t need anyone to threaten me. I threaten myself. That is the cruelest leash of all.

The auction has barely ended when Ilya's people storm into the building. Shouts and footsteps echo through the halls below, followed by the sharp commands of the police as they begin taking the organizers and buyers into custody.

Ilya barely hears any of it. He follows one of the auctioneers who has disappeared behind a closed door with his newest purchase. Troy follows closely behind. Ilya has a separate agenda in mind.

The room smells of blood and fear. The man with a sagging belly jerks back when Ilya kicks the door open, his hands still buried beneath the girl's sheer blouse. Troy closes the door behind them.

The man barely has time to turn before Ilya drives his knee into his groin. He folds with a strangled cry, crashing onto the floor. The girl screams and scrambles backward until she reaches the corner.

She curls into herself, both hands over her head.

"Easy," Ilya says. His eyes are locked to the man, but his tone is quiet as he talks to the girl. "Troy will take you somewhere safe." Troy is already beside her. He removes his jacket and wraps it around her shoulders, helping her to her feet as they move towards the door.

The man sees the open doorway and starts crawling. Ilya steps on the back of the man's kneecap, his foot pressing down enough for the man to hiss.

"I followed you for months for this meeting. It's not that polite to leave right away, is it?" Ilya says. He lifts his leg just enough for the person to start crawling again, before grabbing the baton rested on the tool rack and slamming it down. A sharp crack cuts through the room. The scream that follows is almost childlike.

"For someone who likes rules that much. You don't listen very well." Ilya shakes his head and kicks on that injured leg, making the guy on the floor scream again.

"What do you want?" The guy on the floor hisses out. "Take the girl. Take whatever you want. Whatever this is about. We can handle this professionally."

Ilya reaches inside his jacket and takes out a revolver. The man's face changes.

"Ah," Ilya says softly. "Now you understand." Ilya opens the cylinder and removes the rounds, pocketing them while leaving a single one in his palm. The man's breathing becomes audible.

"I want to play a game." Ilya says casually. "You must have heard of it - Russian roulette?"

"No." The guy says, crawling backwards against the wall now that the path to the doorway is blocked by Ilya.

"You haven't even heard the rules. I heard you like to play games."

"I don't want to play." The guy grits out.

"Neither did the person you played this with."

The words leave Ilya's mouth casually. Ilya loads the single bullet, spins the cylinder, and closes it. "Do you remember him?" He says it almost fondly, his eyes turning soft.

The man's face has gone pale. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ilya presses the barrel against his chest. "Ah, I forgot to tell you the rules. If you lie, I pull the trigger. If you tell the truth. I don't. Easy, right?"

"I'll ask again. Do you remember him?" Ilya asks patiently.

"I don't know who you mean."

Click. And nothing happens. The man jerks so violently that his head hits the wall. Ilya lowers the gun. "Try again."

"I remember - I do now! It was so long ago! And he lived! I didn't kill him. Is this what this is about? A revenge? He didn't die, not on my hand, at least." The guy speaks frantically as he tries to

crawl back further into the wall that he's tightly pressed against.

"Tell me about the rules. What were the rules that you gave him?"

Ilya backs up and sits down against the opposite wall, crossing one ankle over the other. The revolver rests on his left arm, pointing straight at the guy.

"I owned him! He tried to run, it was a lesson when we caught him." The guy says it like he truly thinks that's a crime that fits the punishment he carried out.

Click. The man flinches and yells at the same time, "You, fuck, you are fucking crazy!"

"You didn't answer me. That was my rule - you answer truthfully and I don't pull the trigger, yes?" Ilya tilts his head. He waves the gun casually, "Try again."

"The rule was..." The guy swallows, "If he cried, screamed, or passed out, I pulled the trigger."

Ilya just stares at him, waiting for more.

"When my guys took turns on him." The man on the floor looks coldly at Ilya, his lips curl into an unpleasant smirk when he sees the slight change on Ilya's face.

Ilya only looks at the ceiling. His throat bobs once. He takes a breath in, closes his eyes, and breathes out. When he opens his eyes, the guy freezes at whatever he sees in there, like a deer caught in headlights.

"You have some creative rules. Let's play a bonus round with your rules." Ilya gets up from the floor, slowly walking towards the man. "If you scream, I pull the trigger."

"No, no - no. Please. I..."

"Better get ready." Ilya says as he stops in front of the man, his arm raising slowly as he aims.

The next moment, he kicks sharply at the man's injured knees.

"Emmf... Gagh -" The man lets out a sharp scream before covering his mouth frantically, his eyes widen and then squeeze shut, "Wait -"

Ilya pulls the trigger. Silence follows.

A foul smell spreads through the room. The man has wet himself. He curls into himself, his leg twitches a few times figuratively.

"What was his name?" Ilya asks softly. He walks back a few steps as he looks at the trembling, crying, ugly mess on the floor.

"I don't know."

Ilya aims his revolver again.

"I don't remember! That's the truth!" The man screams. "Dark hair, dark eyes, pretty."

Ilya nods slowly. His eyes seem far away. He thinks about those pretty, dark eyes, and how scared they must be when they were looking at the man in front of him. Not a pile of shaky mess like he is now, but towering over Shane, casually giving him his death sentence.

“Look, whatever you have with him - I didn’t know, alright? I had his contract. He was mine and he tried to run.” The man sits up straighter, trying to reason. “You look like you understand the rules of our world. I was teaching him a lesson. And he didn’t die!”

“His name is Shane.” Ilya says softly. “Do you think you could remember that ? “

The guy nods frantically, eyes trained on Ilya’s gun. “Okay, Shane. I - I know now.” He says shakily.

“Are you scared?” Ilya asks as he steps forward. “I think you are.”

The man shakes so violently that his teeth chatter as Ilya moves closer again. He is sitting in his own mess now, staring up at him with wide, terrified eyes.

Ilya looks down at him almost with pity. “You are lucky today. I don't play this game past the third round. I don't toy with fate.”

The man immediately begins to crawl again, dragging his legs behind him. “Thank,” he whispers. “Thank you.”

Ilya steps onto his good knee. “But I like seeing it when you are scared.”

The man screams and jerks backward, reaching for Ilya's leg. Ilya moves before he can touch him. His shoe comes down on the man's hand, and a raw scream immediately follows.

Ilya simply looks down at him. “You know what I find interesting? You used to decide how much fear he could take.” The man is sobbing now. Ilya takes another step on his good knee, his left hand finding the baton that was left by the door.

“Now you get to find out about yourself.” Crack. Scream.

“We can keep playing this little game until you understand.” He looks down at the man, his expression perfectly calm. “Until you learn what fear feels like. Or, you know, when fate decides you have lived enough.”

*

About Dignity

Dignity is difficult to hold onto when everything else seems to matter more.

There is a particular kind of humiliation in realizing that I would endure almost anything for something as small as a piece of bread. It makes me feel less than human, because hunger, as basic as it is, was turned into a weapon against my dignity. I was not choosing him. I was choosing food because I wanted to live. But when I am deprived of everything for long enough, survival can begin to feel indistinguishable from surrender. I think that was what he wanted me to believe: that I'm nothing but a body that could be bought with food.

It took me a very long time to understand that even then, even at my hungriest and most frightened, there was still a part of me that believed I deserved better. Because I never let go the desire to live.

Ilya walks the long, dark corridor toward the last door in the basement of the seemingly abandoned warehouse. He hears the clatter of chains before he even reaches it.

The person waiting on the other side is clearly eager to see him.

When the door opens, the man's face is desperately hopeful. His eyes are sunken, his lips cracked, with a smear of dried blood at the corner of his mouth.

"Please." His gaze immediately drops to Ilya's empty hands, and whatever hope had appeared in his face begins to collapse. "I don't need much. Just five. Please."

Ilya watches him for a moment. "You know," he says quietly, "he used to say that too. That He didn't need much. Didn't need a bed. Didn't need a proper meal."

The man goes still, but his hands are still trembling, a sign that he no longer has full control of his body.

Ilya steps closer. "Tell me. Did you make him beg?"

The man looks away. "I, I can beg. What do you want to hear?"

Ilya waves his hand, "I know this place isn't much. But think of it as a non-drill rehab, yes? You should probably be thanking me."

The man nods eagerly, his words choppy as he fights the shiver that's running through his body. "Yes, yes thank you. I- I appreciate it. I only need a little - please."

Ilya smiles but his eyes are sad. "Did you make him wait for his food until he was desperate enough to thank you for the terrible things you did to him? Did you teach him to listen for your footsteps like how you listen for mine now?"

The man swallows. "I... I always gave him something in the end! He didn't- didn't die."

Ilya's voice remains perfectly calm. "Good. And maybe you will live too. Just not that comfortably. I don't think you made it comfortable for him."

Ilya pauses and reaches into his pocket. Pulling out a small clear bag that's no larger than his palm. The man immediately surges forward, only to be dragged back by the chain.

"Please, I will do anything." His teeth clatter as he chews on his fingernails, blood smearing his lips.

"Did you ever dangle a piece of bread like this in front of him?" Ilya holds the bag between two fingers and waves it lightly. "What did he have to do to get that?"

The man doesn't answer. The clear bag has all his attention now.

“How does it feel,” Ilya continues, “to wait for someone else to decide whether you get relief?”

When no answer comes, Ilya turns to leave.

“Don’t, please! Terrible - It feels terrible.” The man strains against the chains, reaching toward him.

“You can take whatever you want. Anything! Please just give me that... All I’m asking is five.” The chains pull taut around his ankles, stopping him before he can get anywhere near Ilya.

“Too bad. You have nothing I want to take.” Ilya says after a while, looking at the man in front of him slowly drops to the ground and starts sobbing.

“I think you can wait a little longer. I might come back and check you out. Work on your begging. Maybe I will have something for you.”

Ilya closes the door behind him, leaving the man's desperate pleas on the other side.

*

At first, Shane's blog is small.

He doesn't know exactly how small because he refuses to look at the numbers. He doesn't even want to picture there are people on the other side of the screen reading his stories. The therapist had told him not to worry about the audience, and Shane has decided that checking how many people are reading would count as worrying about the audience, so he averts his eyes on the little numbers tracking his viewerships.

He keeps writing.

The posts were mostly for himself in the beginning. He writes about fear and hunger and dignity. He writes about the strange things his body remembers even when he doesn't want it to. He writes about learning that a locked door can be open and still feel locked, that choosing what to eat can feel strangely overwhelming when someone else once decided whether you deserved to eat at all.

Then he starts writing about the brilliant, ordinary things in his life now. The garden and their seasons. The sunrise at the lake when Ilya brings him a blanket and a cup of warm tea. The two weeks he spent in his childhood bedroom, listening to the sound of loons that has been long lost in his memory.

To his surprise, those posts are the ones people seem to like most. He had thought people would want the terrible things because of how far removed they are from ordinary life. They feel almost dramatic. He had thought the parts that hurt would be the parts worth reading.

Instead, strangers write to tell him that they cried over a post about the day when he chose his own outfit and decided that it's safe enough to not finish his food.

One woman tells him she has started leaving half a cup of coffee in the mug because she has decided her coffee machine's serving is too large, and somehow that makes Shane laugh for the first time in the middle of reading his messages.

Another person writes that they finally walked out of a relationship where they didn't feel safe because of something Shane had written about doors.

Shane reads that message several times. Then he closes the laptop and sits very still. “Ilya?”

His boyfriend looks up from the other end of the couch. Their socked feet are touching.

“Someone said they left... a bad situation. Because of something I wrote.”

Ilya looks at him for a long moment before saying, “I told you.” He has this proud smile on his face. “Your brain is so useful, every single fold filled with beautiful wisdom.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “That’s not a very romantic compliment.”

“I have many better ones.” Ilya smiles. “Come over here and I will tell you.”

“No, you come here.” Shane laughs, kicking Ilya’s feet playfully. He gives in shortly and reaches across the couch.

A few months later, a journalist emails him. She says she has been reading his blog for some time. She says she would like to interview him about his writing and his experiences, but she understands if he isn't ready. She offers to conduct the interview entirely in writing and says he may remain anonymous.

Shane closes his laptop in a panic after first reading that email. And then he carefully opens it again a day later, as if checking something that might bite. He worries his lips so much that Ilya has to cup his face and kiss them tenderly, “I will kiss you ten times for every time you bully your beautiful lips again.” Ilya says.

Shane turns the screen to Ilya and says, “Could you, um, help me look at this?”

Ilya reads the email and turns his head back to Shane. “You don't want to?”

Shane presses his lips together, and then carefully shakes his head. “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

“Okay. Then tell her no.” Ilya shrugs.

Shane looks at him. “You're not going to tell me it would be good for me? Or that I should be brave?”

Ilya closes the laptop gently, kissing him again. “You don't owe anyone your story.”

After a few days, Shane agrees to the interview anyway. He spends an entire Saturday afternoon writing and rewriting his answers. Ilya eventually takes the laptop away from him. “Don’t overthink, my love. Your brain with beautiful folds writes beautiful essays. I already know that.”

The interview is published anonymously, and it spreads far beyond the audience of his blog. People quote him. They translate his words. A celebrity posts one of his paragraphs on social media to raise awareness about human trafficking, and Shane wakes up one morning to find that tens of thousands of people have read it.

Shane immediately closes the laptop. He covers it with books and then puts a large decorative pillow on top of it.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

Ilya looks up from his coffee. “Do you want me to make the internet disappear?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Ilya only nods seriously.

A month later, an editor from a major magazine asks whether Shane would consider writing a few essays for them. It is for National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, the editor explains, and they would like to commission a series of four essays from him.

The check comes in a very plain envelope, and Shane stares at it for a while before he understands what he is holding. His first physical paycheck. The first money he has ever earned that did not come from Ilya.

Shane knocks on the door of the study with such urgency that Ilya rushes to open it, his face a little wary.

“Ilya,” Shane says breathlessly, “let’s go on a date. I’m paying for it.”

He waves the paycheck in his hand, grinning widely.

“Please,” he adds sweetly.

Ilya wraps his arms around him and swings him around and around until Shane laughs so hard and gets so dizzy that he finally knocks on Ilya’s back and asks to be put down.

Shortly after the essays are published, another publication contacts him, and by the end of the year, Shane has a regular column.

A book deal follows, and Shane throws himself into it. He sets up his own workstation in the library, often writing well past lunchtime until Marta barges in and demands that he take a break. He never misses dinner with Ilya, though. He talks about the chapter he is working on, the sparks of soul-searching it inspires, and sometimes just complains about the writer’s block tormenting him.

He still can’t stay in the room while Ilya reads his drafts. He always makes some lame excuse and leaves, until Ilya finds him later and takes him into his arms to tell him what he thinks.

The book is published the next spring.

Shane refuses to read any reviews, but the enthusiasm of his agent tells him that the book has done something real.

Suddenly, there are requests for interviews, podcasts, and speaking invitations.

A documentary producer reaches out, and then someone asks Shane to give a keynote speech at an international conference on modern slavery and human trafficking.

This time, Ilya doesn’t wait for Shane to ask for his opinion.

“You don’t have to do it if you don’t feel comfortable being out there physically.” Ilya tells him seriously. “You are already giving so much of yourself. I don’t want you to feel like you have to put yourself out there if you don’t feel safe doing so.”

Shane asks carefully, “And if I want to be there? This seems to be a really big conference, and it’s for a very serious cause.”

“Then I will be there too. And bring the best security there is on the market.”

Shane blushes.

“You don’t have to, Ilya.” He shakes his head. “I’m not that important.”

“Uh-uh. My boyfriend is famous. Maybe people will try to get close. They will say, ‘*Oh, Mr. Hollander-Rozanov, could you take a picture with me? Could you sign my book? Could I send you flowers? You are so pretty. Please, please?*’”

Ilya puts on a high-pitched voice, until Shane smiles fondly and leans in to kiss him to make him stop.

“You are so annoying, Ilya,” he murmurs.

Ilya doesn’t stop. He pulls back and continues, “And I will say, ‘*No, Mr. Hollander-Rozanov has a boyfriend, Rozanov, and that’s me. He’s mine. Only mine.*’ I will kiss you so good that your knees go weak, so I will have to carry you away. And they will all cry and run away.”

Shane smiles and shakes his head.

“Possessive.”

“What, is this the first day you know this? That I’m possessive of you?”

Ilya leans back a little, feigning surprise.

*

A week before they fly out for the conference, Ilya’s phone rings late in the evening. He looks at his screen, and his face tightens.

“I will need to take this, sorry, baby.” He leans over to kiss Shane on the cheek. Shane pauses the movie and gives him a cute little wave.

Ilya’s heart flutters at the gesture. He takes a deep breath as he heads toward the back door and steps out into the crisp night air. He closes the door carefully behind him.

“What do you want, Manny?”

“Ilya, it’s been too long! What is it, two, three years?”

“You are not calling to reminisce,” Ilya says flatly.

“No, no, I’m not.” Manny lets out a dry laugh. “Look, Ilya. I know we aren’t that close anymore, and you weren’t at the wedding. Nat sends her greetings...”

Ilya kicks a pebble on the ground, his fingers tightening around his phone.

“It was brought to our attention that Shane may be... voicing his story lately. And there is that big speech he is going to give next week.”

“Manny, if you ever get close to him or dare to show up in front of him, we won’t just be not close anymore.” Ilya’s voice turns cold. “We will be enemies.”

Manny chuckles nervously. “No, no, of course, Ilya. Why would I want that? He is your sub now, yes? I get that.”

Ilya exhales. “He is my lover.”

There is a pause on the other side of the line.

“Right. Okay. Here is the thing, Ilya. Could I ask for a favor? There are things that don’t need to become public. And I’m sure you get it.” Manny slips into that friendly tone Ilya has known for years, and it sends a wave of nausea through his stomach. “You know people like us, with business and family reputation on the line. It wouldn’t be a very good image nowadays, with those movements everywhere...”

Ilya can’t help but laugh out loud. “Manny, that’s what you care about.” He shakes his head, “Why do you think I control what he says?”

“Look, I know you didn’t like what happened,” Manny says after a moment, his voice still calm. “Think about it this way. You never would have been with him if not for me, right? So consider this a return of a favor, for an old friend.”

Ilya scoffs. “That’s right, Manny. I do have to thank you for that.”

He kicks another pebble, looking up at the bright moon shining above him. He remembers that night when he stood in the courtyard in front of the guest wing, debating whether he should take Shane away. The moon had been bright that night too.

“Is that what you want?” Ilya asks sarcastically. “Have Shane thank you for introducing us in his speech?”

There is a long silence. “What can you do for me, Roz?”

“Nothing, Manny. But here is a piece of advice from me.” Ilya’s voice dips low. “Listen to his speech. He’s very good with words. I think you will find it memorable.”

Ilya ends the call.

*

When Shane walks onto the stage, the first thing he notices is how little he can see past those bright, white spotlights shining on him. He can’t really make out any faces down there, which is helpful.

When he starts his speech, he imagines speaking to an empty room, to his old self seeking reclamation of his life. He isn’t thinking about the cameras pointing at him or the hundreds of people sitting in front of him. He isn’t thinking about the fact that at this point, in many corners in the world, strangers know his name and his face and who he is.

He is thinking about the first blog post he wrote under a pseudonym, sitting beneath the grapevines with his hands hovering over the keyboard.

He had thought that he was writing because he needed somewhere to put the words. He hadn't understood that words could travel. That they could reach people he would never meet.

He has learned over time that someone could read about his fear and find enough courage to leave. Someone could read about dignity and remember that theirs had never truly belonged to the person who tried to take it. And more importantly, many who are privileged enough to not have to know darkness the same way he does could read his stories and understand the haunting exploitations that are still happening around them, under the bright daylight.

His eyes move to the final paragraph on the teleprompter.

“I know that in the world we live in, there are people who choose to enter slave contracts willingly. There are people who understand what they are agreeing to. That is their choice, and it should remain theirs. But a slave contract can also become a convenient mask for people who have no intention of respecting the difference between consent and ownership. A piece of paper can make exploitation look legitimate. It can make a person disappear in plain sight.”

He takes his eyes off the teleprompter now. There are so many people sitting down there, and he couldn't make out where his parents or Harris sit. He clears his throat and imagines seeing them anyway.

“Some of the people who once owned me may hear this speech. They may recognize themselves in my words, and perhaps they will remember the slave they once knew. But I am not telling this story for them. I am telling it for the people I met while I was enslaved, people who had been taken from their lives. Some of them gave me warmth when there was very little warmth left in that place. Some of them reminded me that I was still a person. I carry them with me. I hope some of them are still out there, alive, and building a new life like I am now.”

Shane's voice cracks slightly, but he regains his composure quickly.

“I am telling this story for my parents and my friends, who waited for me, loved me, and helped me find my way back to a life that felt like mine. And finally, I am telling this story for the person who walked beside me through every step of learning how to live again. He showed me that love does not equate ownership, that care does not come with a price, and that I was allowed to have boundaries, choices, wants, and a life of my own. Thank you for helping me find my way to being again.”

When the applause roars from beyond the blinding white lights, Shane stands still for a while. He then looks toward the side of the stage.

While he can't make out who sits in the audience, he has seen that long figure standing there from the corner of his eye throughout the entire speech. Ilya is dressed in an impeccable black suit, standing exactly where he promised he would be.

He stands tall, his shoulder broad, just like how he has been standing between Shane and the past, dutifully making sure that nothing could reach him again. He is looking at Shane with that unbearably proud expression that makes Shane blush more than he did in the last hour.

Shane smiles at him and gives him a little wave.

Chapter End Notes

Shane: Sometimes I wonder, if they come across my book or see my speech, how would they feel?

Ilya: Probably nothing.

Shane: Yeah. You're probably right.

Ilya: I mean, if you want them to feel something, I can see what the doctors can do.

Shane: Ilya, what does that mean?

Ilya: Actually, I will probably need a witch instead.

Works inspired by this one

[No limits, until him - epub cover](#) by Anonymous

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!