

Hol mich ins Sternenreich

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Hol mich ins Sternenreich

by [RomanKerze](#)

Summary

The boys have an unconventional way of decompressing after the show, but they wouldn't have it any other way.

Notes

This chapter is set basically anywhen you like as long as that is during the past five to seven years

Sometimes when your brain overloads you can go semi- or non-verbal and a lot of people use signing to deal with that. If its in both bold and italics its being signed here.

Leg mir das Halsband um

After two decades they had no secrets from each other, no reasons to be embarrassed by anything at all.

When Till slumped soundlessly onto his knees by the side of the couch, the band barely even registered their rearranging throughout the room; Schneider was standing by the window one minute and then next he knew he was on the couch, one hand softly massaging Till's scalp. It was barely a conscious decision by now, a decade on.

‘Is everything okay, mein Hündchen?’

He knitted his eyebrows before deciding to sign out his reply. *Not good*

Till looked lost for a moment, unable to remember the sign and struggling to speak. He held his hands over his ears.

‘Loud,’ came his almost-inaudible reply.

It wasn't uncommon after a show, especially for Richard or Till, for a kind of depression to settle over a person; a dip, something akin to a snowdrift, sense-altering and chilling. An unbearable weight, for some. Over the years they had all attempted to mitigate it in their own ways, but in truth the only cure for this flavour of loneliness was the support of each other. This just happened to be what the majority preferred.

At first, when one by one they learned about it, they were all just relieved he wasn't abusing drugs like Richard once had; If anything, it explained a lot of old habits they just attributed to Till and Richard being Till and Richard. After a few teething problems, Schneider learned it was just as rewarding for him as it was for his pups. Paul has slipped into it seamlessly after that, surprising no one with his choice of role.

Puppy play was calming: It allowed them to have a job, a purpose, beyond what the stage gave to and took from them; they weren't themselves, but they weren't their work personas either.

‘Hey Paul, can you grab the old grey one this time?’ He knew what Schneider meant without question: they were old hands at this.

He could hear Paul rifling through their duffel bags, casting aside spare clothes and whatever else they were storing in there until he triumphantly thrust his hand, clutching a worn leather collar, into the air, ‘Got it!’

Schneider turned to Richard, still puffing away at the window where he left him. ‘Do you want to join us, Richard?’

Richard had to fan his hand for a few seconds to get a clear view through his smoke. He thought for a moment, ‘Shower first, I think, the make up melted right into my skin.’ Sure enough, there were still smudges of black streaking from his lips, and his eyeliner was starting to migrate. His gelled hair wasn’t faring much better.

Paul made his way over to Schneider and Till, crouched, and gently fastened the collar around Till’s neck. It was the very first they all chose together, ten years old and by far the most comfortable: Till looked like he needed that tonight.

‘Remember your manners, honey.’

An inward facing palm moving from his chin outwards. His index and middle fingers pointing outwards, the others curled into his fist, followed by a thumb-forefinger L **Thank you, Herr Landers**

Paul threaded his fingers through Tills damp hair and kissed his nose, ‘You’re welcome, Liebling.’

Paul and Schneider settled on the couch, Till still kneeling on the floor between them, and took a moment to breathe. It may have been much harder for some than for others, but everyone needs time to adjust. Schneider suspected Oli was off having a swim, having skipped the after-party altogether. Flake had retreated to his own room, so god only knows what he was up to.

Till made a strained keening noise in the back of his throat, surprisingly whiny for a man with such a deep singing voice. It really *was* a bad day. Schneider bent down so he was ear-level to Till and spoke in a low voice.

‘You did such a good job on stage today, pet. You were such a good boy for us, keeping everyone safe and performing so well! We were keeping watch the whole time, you know,’ he cupped his hand around Till’s jaw and stroked the stubble, ‘You must be so tired, huh? Do you want to come up on the couch or would you rather keep sitting pretty for us down here?’

Till considered for a moment before shuffling around to lean his head on Schneider’s knee. His eyes were bruised with fatigue, his lower lip sucked in for comfort.

Poor pup looks terrible.

His fingers circled over clammy skin, reaching down from jaw to collarbone, and when Schneider’s fingers made contact with smooth skin Till gave a shiver.

That might be an idea...

‘Be a good boy and take your shirt off for me.’

Till nodded once into Schneider's thigh before complying, revealing his powerful torso in a sequence of clumsy motions. How a man so big could seem so small never failed to amaze him; Paul would probably have something to add if he voiced his thought, but this wasn't the time for his ribbing. Instead, unaware, Paul simply reached over and took the shirt from Till's hands, lying it over the arm of the couch for safe keeping.

Manhandling him until he was again facing away from him and Paul, Schneider began lightly trailing the tips of his fingers over Till's back, pleased as they were met with more shivering and goosebumps. His hands traced over the subtle patches of scar tissue that littered the man's back as they did the rest of his body. Only some were identifiable by him: under the right shoulder blade, marking the time Flake misjudged the strength of a neon bulb; stretching from the left shoulder into his armpit, the only one truly the fault of the Engel wings; a sparse scattering, almost like stars, from a particularly bad bout of teenage acne. Beautiful. Schneider was firm in his belief that a body should tell a story, act as a map of a person's life, and Till's was certainly that. Maybe one day he would finally find out what the other marks had to say. Maybe it was better that he didn't know.

The muscles visibly started to loosen across Till's back and shoulders as Schneider stroked his fingertips over the fine hairs covering his skin. His breathing slowed and deepened, and Schneider suspected he would start drifting off to sleep if they kept going for a few more minutes: It was a good reset for his senses, but it was also just plain relaxing. A soft, contented whine escaped his throat, and Schneider couldn't help but turn to Paul with a pleading look of *how can a person be so fucking cute?* It was met with a similar look, but one touched with a hint of laughter directed at Schneider himself.

A click, the bathroom lock: Richard was back in the room, dripping puddles onto the carpet. His eyes drifted over the three other men a moment, and then he ducked into his room. Schneider heard rummaging and drawers opening and closing, and then Richard returned, this time wearing a loose white tank top and charcoal grey shorts, arms laden with pillows and blankets. One look from Paul and he dropped hard onto his knees. He threw his bundle over to rest at Paul's feet and crawled after it. Richard nuzzled Till's neck until he gave a little huff, and then knelt, back straight and hands in his lap, gazing up at Paul. He sat forward to ruffle Richard's hair, earning some mixture of indignant whine and purr.

'All clean, Zven?' Richard yipped with a soft smile. 'Good. Go choose a collar,' Paul nodded towards the duffel bag. He crawled off with no hesitation at all.

As Richard laid out the collars, as always adamant he would make the correct decision and reverent in his handling, Till began pushing around the blankets and pillows still balled up by Paul's socked feet. He got... clumsy when he was like this. *Probably one of the reasons he prefers to crawl*, Schneider mused. After another moment or two of admiring the adorable pup at their feet, Paul scooted forward in his seat to, at very, least unroll the parcel. Till

nuzzled his hand appreciatively, earning him a kiss to the crown of his head and a few murmured words Schneider didn't catch.

Together they spread the blankets and cushions out into something you could technically refer to as a nest, though the feather pillows were smothered by a quilt so they didn't have to risk a stabbing. Schneider had to admit, it looked cosier than their beds. Paul shook out the final blanket to cover over the whole thing and stepped back, clearly pleased with their work.

Till signed his thank you with a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Schneider would never get tired of seeing that.

Across the room, Richard was still deliberating over two collars, one blue and one black, when the front door opened, revealing Oliver's flip-flopped feet: presumably the rest of him was there too, but at 6'7 everything above-knee was basically invisible to a kneeling man. He spoke, confirming Richard's suspicions, 'Just pick the black one, would you ever actually wear anything else?' He chuckled, bending down to pat Richard on the shoulder before turning to Schneider, 'Tea? Coffee?'

'Green for me, hot chocolate for this one,' He nudges Till's side with his shin.

'Coffee would be great thanks, Oli. You know how I like it, you will be graded.' Added Paul with a grin and a raise of the eyebrow.

Oli levelled a weary look at him before peering down at Richard, who was tucking the blue collar away, 'Zven?'

Richard shook his head: as usual, he'd probably share with Till.

Oli made his way over to the kitchen area and Richard made his back over to Paul. He made an inquisitive sound at Till, who let out a sigh that told him everything he needed to know. He sat back on his heels as tidily as he could and handed Paul his collar. Paul held it for a moment, thumbnail rubbing and clicking the lining, until Richard got impatient and started pawing at his ankle, as if somehow Paul had forgotten him.

He gave in quickly, tapping Richard's side with his foot to indicate he should turn around so he wouldn't have to irritate his sensitive skin dragging the buckle to the back. Richard jumped, just a little, when the fastening clinked by his ear, but Schneider saw Till rest his hand on Richards knee to ground him again. He knew he was safe.

There was a rummaging coming from the kitchen, almost like a rat had gotten in and started building it's own nest in the pantry, and then Flake peeked around the corner. His eyebrows flattened in disapproval when his eyes landed on the kneeling men.

'Paul, what are you doing?'

‘Huh?’

‘It’s cold in here, his hair is still wet!’ Paul pulled a face

‘Oops?’

Flake huffed, turning into the bathroom for a moment. He stalked over to the couch, towel in hand, only pausing to groan as a small puddle of water soaked through his sock. He dropped the towel over Richard’s head, which gave an indignant and muffled huff in response.

Flake ruffled Tills hair before retreating back to the kitchen. Faint laughter, Oli’s for sure, made its way through the door as it closed.

‘You’ll be fine, you’re made of strong stuff, huh Zven?’ Paul tugged off the towel to reveal a massive grin, mouth open and eyes crinkling, and Richard lunged to half-rest in Paul’s lap for some love, licking a stripe up the side of his face. Paul attacked his drippy hair with the towel, making Richard giggle with glee, and then ended with a wet smooch on the forehead.

Schneider wondered how they had managed before this.

Komm mach den Käfig auf

Chapter Summary

How it all began for Till and Schneider, circa 2005.

Chapter Notes

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

Schneider had been peering over his drums with concern for the last half hour of the show. It had started with a few skipped lyrics and only gotten more troubling as the show went on: Till was gulping down water to avoid looking at the crowd, stumbling over his own feet, resorting to holding the mic out to the audience because he couldn't remember or sing the words. Whenever he turned to the drums to get his water his eyes were tightly closed, his breathing awkward. Something was going very wrong, but he had no idea how to fix it.

He crashed the moment they were backstage. Literally: Till sank to the ground like a tangled, dropped marionette. He crumpled, palms aggressively rubbing the short hair on the sides of his head, eyes squeezed shut, breathing ragged. At some point he must have bitten his lip, judging by the blood.

Nobody seemed sure what to do: they were used to a bit of anger, usually because the pyrotechnics had failed and could have caused an accident, and a quiet melancholy was pretty standard from him, but upset like this was new. Everyone froze except for Richard, who didn't hesitate for more than a second once he realised what was happening. One moment he was discussing the show with Flake, the next he was crouched over Till, holding his head against his chest and murmuring under his breath. Schneider, being the closest to the pair, could hear a handful of words looping: good, safe, proud, love.

Whatever Richard was doing, he was clearly experienced, and Schneider could see the stress beginning to ease from Till's bare shoulders. He stepped forward to ask if he could help, but before he opened his mouth Richard turned to shoot him a dark, distrustful look. It stung.

'Shut it, help me get him to his dressing room.' He turned to the rest of the band, 'Do **not** follow us.'

The dressing room was cramped, barely fitting everyone and their costumes. It was cluttered, far too small for more than maybe three people, and even then it wouldn't be very

comfortable. Schneider supposed the venue wasn't used to a band their size, particularly with members their size; Oli had had to stoop to even get through the door.

There was a single, grubby mirror on one wall—earlier that day they'd had to stand ordered by height to share it in the rush to finish their makeup, he recalled with a smile. Racks for their costumes, empty for the moment, took up the majority of the room, and touching any surface was a gamble with their health. They didn't have an alternative.

Richard and Schneider eventually managed to guide a wobbly, uncoordinated Till over to the side of the couch, where he proceeded to slump back down to his knees and rest his head on the leather armrest. Richard ran his fingers through Till's hair for a moment before bending to kiss his temple, 'Stay here, okay? I'll handle this. You can move if your knee starts hurting.' Till nodded.

Schneider looked from him to Richard, who sighed and dragged him over to the far corner, squeezing between the costume racks. He felt a strange pull, like he knew what he needed to do was be as near his distressed friend as possible and... he wasn't sure, but Richard's actions seemed about right. He just needed to take care of him, maybe.

'You can't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you, okay? It's his to share, but you probably deserve an explanation since you're drenched in his sweat. Anyway, you've seen him like this now.'

'Does this happen a lot? I've never seen him so... vulnerable, and I've watched him pass out from stage fright!'

Richard sighed, but set his jaw and carried on, 'Schneider, have. Err. Do you know what puppy play is?'

'Kink where you pretend to be dogs, ja? I've seen the masks in the shops.'

'I refuse to ask why you're visiting those shops. The kink thing, yes and no. For some people it's about sex, but for a lot of people, for us, it's not. It's just to relax, stop being ourselves for a bit. He gets to switch off and be looked after and I get to let out my controlling side, you notice I've been better since Mutter, right?'

'I thought Emigrate—'

'Well, Till isn't always reachable, is he?'

Schneider conceded, remembering back to days where they almost formed search parties to find the little bastard after a walk stretched out to eight hours.

'Fair point. But, so, this is just relaxing for you? Like a hobby? How did you even start if it's not about sex?'

'That's a long story, Doom, we have work to do. Another time.' Richard went to lean back, but managed to stop himself as he remembered how sticky all the surfaces were.

‘Oh, and the masks? Fucking hate them.’ He raised his voice so Till could hear, ‘Why would you want to cover up that pretty little face, huh?’.

Till dipped his head further as if trying to hide a blush. Schneider had to admit, it was kind of sweet.

Richard began, slowly, to introduce Schneider to the basics, eyes flicking over every now and then to check on Till. A few of his most common signs (‘He struggles to talk sometimes, this is much less taxing’), a little about how to talk to him, what can or won’t freak him out. Schneider and Richard both seemed surprised by how not-weird it was, inducting him into the fold.

‘Can I go see if he’s alright now?’

‘Let me check, come on over.’

Richard made his way back over to the couch, ‘Hey, Till?’

He heard a soft *hmm?* in answer.

‘Schneider would like to come say hi, is that okay?’

Till paused for almost thirty seconds before nodding. Richard waved Schneider over, and Schneider noted the way Till seemed to straighten in response. A promising sign or a show of discomfort?

‘Hey, Till. How are you feeling? Mind if I sit here?’ Till peered up at Richard, head tilted to one side in clear confusion.

‘One thing at a time,’ supplied Richard.

‘Ah, of course.’ He cleared his throat and tried again, ‘Till, can I sit on the couch next to you?’

Till nodded, so he eased himself down, trying not to squeak the leather.

‘Are you feeling any better?’

Till only furrowed his brow; Schneider didn’t have to ask what *that* meant.

‘I’m sorry you aren’t feeling good. Can I touch you, Liebes?’

At that finally looked up into Schneider’s face, nodding with eagerness. When Schneider placed his hand over Till’s head he felt a shiver run over his skin, and a spark ignite in himself. *This is cosy. I could get used to this*

‘Poor thing, you feel so tense,’ he turned to Richard, who only gave a reassuring smile before bending down in front of Till to cup his face.

‘Will you be okay here with Schneider for a few minutes while I grab something to drink?’

Till turned his face into Richard’s hand to press his lips softly into his palm. It seemed like permission.

The mirror was at a right angle to the couch, but he could still roughly see himself and Till reflected in the greasy surface. Makeup and body paint and pots of coffee-sludge crowded the dressing table as always: he made a mental note to make sure it’s at least somewhat cleaned up before they leave. He already knew he’d forget, but it was worth a shot.

It was only then that he realised they were still in their stage costumes, him in short-shorts and fishnets and Till in his thick, scratchy vest-contraption and net shirt. That probably wasn’t helping.

‘Hey, I think we should get cleaned and changed. Can you do that yourself?’ Till shuffled around like he wanted to say something but ultimately nodded, eyes fixed to a drop of hopefully-coffee on the floor. When Schneider pulled him up to his feet he went without resistance, but there was definitely some reluctance there. Schneider furrowed his brow, wondered if he’d done something wrong.

Together, they stripped off their shirts and began scrubbing the worst of the makeup off with baby wipes. Or rather, he thought they were doing it together; when he turned around he instead found Till tangled in the layers of his costume. It would have been funny, the image of Till caught up in the netting like a mermaid, but the man was clearly distressed. He swore he could hear sniffing, but he had turned his back at some point.

He placed a hand on Till’s shoulder. Till jumped away as if he had been burned.

Shit.

‘You’re okay, let me just—’ He tried to pull Till’s arm straight, intending to slide the first sleeve back where it should have been and instead unstrap the shoulders of the costuming over the fishnets first, as it was meant to be removed. Till jerked away again with a sharp whimper.

‘Till, please let me help you.’ No response. Schneider sighed, angry with himself

His mind was racing. *Why didn't I just help him? I could tell he was reluctant, I should have known that he would struggle, what if he never wants to try this again? What if he doesn't trust me? Why should he trust me?* It spiralled for a long time, or maybe just seconds, before he dragged himself out of it with his worry.

He blinked back into the present.

‘Till, do you want me to go find Richard?’ He knew he sounded disappointed, and it seemed like Till had picked up on it. He was actually crying now, trying to stifle his sobs but unable to do anything about his heaving shoulders. With renewed strength he yanked off his shirts, metal catching his skin and dragging stinging grazes, before curling up into an impossibly small ball. He didn’t seem to notice he was bleeding again, not that Till ever would.

Schneider took a deep breath and tried to centre himself. He was no use to anyone if he started panicking. In seconds he had brushed it aside and replaced it with something quieter and more rational; The guys joked sometimes that when he did that it was like seeing lights come on in a house thought long-vacant. The guys were dickheads, but he’d seen footage and they weren’t wrong. Hopefully it’d prove useful.

His voice was soft and authoritative when he spoke, crouching down a meter away so he wouldn’t spook Till any farther, ‘Till? Liebchen? Can you tell me why you’re crying?’

Till removed his hands from their places where they had been scrubbing again at the sides of his hair again, but he kept his face pressed up against his knees. He kept signing something, the same sign over and over again, and Schneider’s throat constricted when he ran through the signs Richard had taught him in his head.

Sorry

‘I don’t understand, sweetheart. What are you apologising for?’

It took him another few minutes to calm his breathing and force words to form, ‘You’re disappointed. I did a bad job. I’m— I...’ He buried his face in his hands, gently rocking from side to side like he was trying to comfort himself.

‘I’m not disappointed in you, I’m disappointed in myself,’ He wrapped his arms around Till, trying to copy what he saw Richard doing earlier, ‘Richard left for five minutes and look what happened! What was it, were you too embarrassed to ask for help changing?’ Till hesitated, nodded, and leaned into Schneider’s chest at little.

Schneider’s heart sank, just a little. It’s exactly what he should have expected from Till.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t think. Come on, lets get you scrubbed up and dressed so we can relax.’ Schneider took hold of Till’s arm and gently pulled him up before sitting him back down again on the stool by the dressing table.

‘Tell me honestly, do you think if I give you a cloth you can clean some of the make up off?’ He tried to look as open and calm as he could, hoping Till would feel comfortable enough to avoid embarrassment. Till thought for a second before nodding, and Schneider walked around him to grab a damp towel and hand it to him. Till wiped at his face with such

a complete lack of dexterity than Schneider had to fight back a laugh: How anyone saw this adorable man as anything but that was a mystery.

Whilst Till was occupied with that, Schneider started unlacing his boots. There was something oddly calming about this kind of focus, something very different for his usual habit of total vacancy and dissociation, or his burning need to get drunk and fuck to release some of the show's pent up energy.

When that was done, he had Till stand, helped him get the rest off and got him to scrub himself down as he peeled off the rest of his own clothes. He pulled outfits for both of them out of their duffel bags: briefs for him, boxers for Till, and some almost-matching black joggers and t shirts. Richard came back in just as Schneider was looking over the scratches Till's costume had made, which he had already decided wouldn't need more cleaning or bandaging. Mostly he just wanted a way to show Till how gentle and caring he would be while he was so vulnerable.

'Okay, I think you're good to go!' Till nuzzled Schneider's hand for a moment and then slipped from the stool back onto his knees.

Richard sat down on the couch, placing the drinks on the ground where they were sure to be kicked over, and patted his leg, 'Come.'

Till, eyes lowered, crawled as fast as was reasonable across the floor.

'Good boy, nicely done!' Schneider and Richard praised in tandem. They looked at each other and laughed, and then simultaneously reached to pet Till's hair. He blushed at the twinned praise, but he took it.

After maybe half an hour of gentle petting, Till looked back up at them. His eyes seemed bleary and hesitant. He looked away again.

'What is it Liebes? Anything you need.'

It didn't take much coaxing, after earlier: he immediately looked relieved and shuffled gracelessly around to rest his chin on Schneider's fishnet-clad knee. He was still looking away, a little bashful and uncertain, but shut down enough to be able to withstand it.

'Want to come up for a cuddle? You're going to have to show us you deserve it,' Tills eyes brightened, and immediately his entire posture changed. He sat back on his heels, hands folded in his lap and spine straight. His eyeline rested somewhere between Richard and Schneider's feet.

'Good boy! Richard, look at how pretty he's sitting! Think he deserves it?'

YOU'RE A NATURAL, Richard mouthed, lips still half-stained black, before agreeing out loud.

Schneider and Richard helped Till climb up onto the couch. His size made it a little awkward, a few knees (all Till's) dug into stomachs and he almost rolled off at one point, but with a bit of adjustment he settled comfortably with his cheek pressed against the cool leather armrest, body curled over Richard and Schneider's knees. When Richard let out a little sigh, Schneider turned to look him in the eye. It wasn't hard to work out what he was after. He curled his spare arm around Richards shoulders and pulled him to rest against his chest. They lay like that, dozing, for almost an hour before a tentative knock woke them.

'Can I come in?' A voice said, but the door was already being opened. Nobody could ever call them patient people.

Till tensed in their laps, unsure of what he was meant to do. Richard splayed a hand over his hip in a clear order: he wasn't to go anywhere. Schneider couldn't imagine the other guys working it out from that alone.

Flake and Paul walked in, stopping to loiter awkwardly in the middle of the room.

'Is everything okay? The three of us were thinking of leaving soon,' Paul began, 'You don't look very busy so get your stuff together and let's go, yeah?'

He seemed to pick up on Richard still flagging, half asleep. Before anyone got another word in, he stomped right over, slung an arm around his neck and planted a wet kiss on his cheek, ruffling his hair with vigour. Startled, Richard made a noise that Schneider could almost interpret as needy. It must have been a hard show for him too, Richard probably noticed Till's behaviour long before he had.

'Come on, sleepyhead,' Paul continued, 'you can rest at the hotel, you'll be whinging all day if you hurt your neck sleeping here.' He pulled Richard's head against his chest in an uncomfortable hug for a moment before leaping away, narrowly avoiding Richards fingers in his side. Schneider thought he saw a blush creeping over Richard's cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry but the masks etc will not be making an appearance

Dort wo die Sterne waren

Chapter Summary

Richard is sensitive, the boys take a shower together, and a costume accessory finds a better purpose

Chapter Notes

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

The next time it happened it was much less dramatic. They were, again, backstage after a show. In his peripheral vision Schneider vaguely noted Till tapping Richard on the shoulder, but his attention wandered as his brain started coming down off it's stage high. He always hated this, the adrenaline crash: he might not experience it as intensely as some of the others, but all the same he hated losing that moment of feeling, knowing, he was alive. He still had yet to find a way to combat it, though he had to admit he had come close recently. Once, at least.

After a while, Richard made his way over to Schneider's side, where he had been mostly chugging water and standing staring into the aether for the past few minutes. He turned to look at Richard as he approached. His mouth twisted in displeasure for a second, so more than likely he had caught him in the act of trying to spook him. Schneider smirked at him and nervous smile quickly took it's place.

'Hey, Schneider, sooo we're skipping tonight and, uhh... are you free for a while?' he looked back at Till before returning Schneider's eye contact, 'We thought maybe you'd be interested but you can say no, that's fine, maybe you changed your mind or just actually hated it or, I just thought maybe it'd be nice, you know? But you're pr—' Schneider held a hand up to stop the barrage of stumbling words, worried that he was talking himself out of the conversation before it even started.

'You mean, for what we did that time Till freaked out?' He glanced around to place the other guys, but kept it vague regardless.

'Well... yeah, kind of, he's not upset this time, we're just both exhausted, but we just... you seemed like you enjoyed it, maybe a bit of stress relief for everyone, I don't know how well I can cope tonight,' he was interrupted by a long yawn, 'Unless you're, err, going to the after party? Have *other plans*?' Richard nudged Schneider's arm, a bad attempt at masking his discomfort. Schneider just stared back impassively, mind already shifting tracks.

He hadn't been *obsessed* with the idea or anything, but he had certainly been entertaining it more and more, particularly when the flames got too hot and all he wanted to do was collapse or spear the pyro guys with a well-aimed drumstick. He'd call the idea energising if he didn't

think doing so was pretentious. He hadn't wanted to just barge in and ask, wasn't sure of the rules surrounding their... what were they, play sessions? He didn't even know what to *call* them, for fucks sake. He felt lucky that Richard had invited him again instead.

He made his way over to Till with outward confidence and inward trepidation: he hoped he would be able to relax him, but he was new to this and didn't want to overstep. He certainly didn't want a repeat of the mistakes he made last time. He settled on placing his hand on Till's lower back, guiding him away from earshot of the others.

'Would you like to try this with me again tonight?' Till smiled, nodded.

'Okay, nice. Your room?' Again, a small nod, but followed with a firm shake of his head. He made a sign Schneider already knew: a pointed hand, fingers touching, held by the mouth. ***Food.***

'You're hungry?' Till smiled and nodded.

Schneider lead Till towards the communal room where they had a few snacks waiting, hand still firmly on his back, and felt a warm swell of accomplishment as Till seemed to lean into his side. Schneider turned to Richard, who was flagging behind and chipping away at the varnish on his nails. He mouthed, YOU OKAY?, and got a curt nod in return. He wasn't convinced, but he supposed he could try and get it out of him later.

Their food selection wasn't great, they never bothered much about what they ate after a show, but Till seemed happy enough to stick to chunks of jerky and a couple of muffins—one double chocolate and one lemon poppyseed because, of course, he *was* still Till—from the basket someone had apparently left as a gift. He filled up a plate with this odd meal and then seemed to hesitate. Before Schneider could ask what was wrong, Richard was back at his side.

'Give him a second, he's still settling down.' His words were muffled by a mouthful of a sandwich he had procured from somewhere, despite there being none in the room.

'Didn't think to get me one, since i'm obviously busy?' Richard just shrugged and took another bite

Schneider, stomach suddenly kicked into gear and wanting to push a little, swiped the other half from his plate while he was focused on chewing. He couldn't tell what was in it, but he didn't particularly care. Richard opened his mouth to complain, but for once Schneider was too quick for him: He narrowed his eyes and licked a long stripe across the length of the sandwich, knowing that, unlike with Till, spit would be a highly effective Richard-deterrant.

Richard stared at him for a moment before turning pointedly away. He tapped Till's shoulder and raised his eyebrow in question. Till gazed down at his boots, huffed, and signed something Schneider didn't understand. He wracked his brain but determined he just hadn't

learned any of them yet. It seemed likely that Till did that on purpose, and Schneider's brow creased without his consent. Till glanced at him and turned back around. Confused, Schneider turned to Richard, who was stifling a laugh in the back of his sleeve.

'I've never seen you concentrate that hard in my *life*! I'll have to get you a DVD or something.' He swallowed before leaning in close to his ear, 'He's a puppy, remember? He wants to eat it on the floor.'

'Well he's not doing it in here.' He realised straight away that he'd said it too loudly. Oli, who he finally registered had been leaning up against the far wall the entire time, gave him a look and pushed himself up off the wall, shoving the remains of whatever snack he'd had been nibbling when they'd interrupted his peace and quiet into his mouth.

Schneider cleared his throat and said, 'So. Tills room?'

Till's room, thankfully, was empty. He unceremoniously set the plate down on the floor a couple of paces from the desk and perched himself on the wooden stool. He wondered why Till, usually voracious in his appetites, wasn't eating.

'How badly trained do you think he is, Schneider?' he looked over to Richard, currently occupied with the laces of his boots.

'Oh? ... *Oh*. Hey, Till?' He looked up to meet Schneider's eye for a second before lowering them again. 'You can start, pet, you must have worked up such a hunger tonight.'

Schneider watched intently as Till began wolfing down his meal, bent to rest on his knees and forearms. It shouldn't have been surprising, really, that he could still be so precise, even tidy, but still, he was fascinated watching his friend choke down chunks of meat and muffin like he wasn't even chewing.

Actually, that could be a problem

'Hey,' Till looked up at him, crumbs of his muffin speckling his face like freckles, 'Slow down for me, pet, I don't want you choking.'

Till nodded and did as he was told.

'You're a very good boy, you know that?' He didn't stop again to answer, but he wiggled happily as he finished his meal.

When his plate was completely empty Till nosed it closer to Schneider's feet and sat back as if waiting for something. Schneider looked to Richard, who raised his eyebrows and gestured towards Till, urging him to do *something*. He picked up the plate and examined it: It would have been sparkling if it wasn't paper, it was so clean. Nothing so much as a crumb could be found anywhere besides, still, all over his face. As cute as it was, Schneider decided

he should brush them off onto the plate so as to avoid getting their things any dirtier than they already were.

‘Very good, pup, was that nice?’

Yes, thank you

He patted Till’s shoulder as he rose from his chair to bin the plate. Richard took the opportunity to call Till over to the couch.

When he had sat down, removed his shoes, and settled Till on a cushion on the floor, aware that his bad knee had been acting up, Schneider assessed their surroundings properly. The room was even smaller than last time, and almost as grubby, but instead of crowding into a single room they had managed to score one per pair. This one was technically Till and Flake’s, but given his costume was already folded over the back of a chair he doubted they’d be disturbed. Luck saw Schneider and Richard sharing their room, so no awkward questions there. There were already bottles of water and cheap lager on the far-side table, courtesy of the venue and hopefully *please, just this once* unopened.

Richard slumped onto the other end of the couch looking suddenly bone-tired. Schneider made the executive decision to pull him over for a hug, something which usually perked the little sea urchin up. He guided his head against his shoulder and started to smooth the ungelled hair on the nape of his neck with his thumb. His fingers traced circles on the stubbled skin of his jawline absent-mindedly, and Richard melted into him in subtle increments.

Till gave a disgruntled whine, pawing at his leg to get his attention. He had naturally sad eyes as it was, and enhanced it every night with his makeup, but that was nothing compared to the dejection being wielded against him now. Schneider worked the fingers of his other hand into Till’s hair; it was damp and an odd kind of clean-greasy, but he didn’t mind.

He did, however, regret the size of the little couch, wishing instead for a few blankets and pillows on the floor. Till didn’t seem too bothered, though, judging by the gentle upturn of his mouth. He was almost falling asleep kneeling upright, chin dipping for a moment before he jerked back into some semblance of wakefulness.

A thought occurred to him: ‘Richard?’ he waited for some sign of conscious recognition before continuing, ‘Does Till have any collars?’

‘Oh, no, we uh... were worried it’d *arouse suspicion*, you know? You guys, or someone else, seeing him in a collar he wasn’t wearing earlier?’

‘And I suppose he couldn’t wear one around or on stage because then it would be too distracting...’

‘Yeah, exactly. It’s a shame, I think it’d help, he struggles getting into puppy space sometimes, and he does suit them.’

Without giving much time to think himself out of it, Schneider reached up to his own neck and unbuckled the spiked collar still clinging, damp as it was with sweat, to his throat. He dangled it in front of Richard's face, 'What do you think? It'd just be temporary, but this way it'd be hard to forget, easy to excuse and maybe help with the head space. For him and for me.'

Richard sat up to look at him, 'You want this to be a regular thing?'

'Yes, I think so. If you two would like that, of course.'

'I mean, if Till is happy and you won't try to push me out and take over *completely* then sure, it's a clever idea. For you, at least.' Richard tried for a wry smile and missed.

'What?'

His face fell, 'I'm sorry, the clever thing was a joke I didn't think—' Schneider pressed his fingers against his mouth to shut him up.

'The first part, pushing you out? What do you mean?'

'Oh, you know... as long as I still get to be here with you guys and join in and everything then I'm okay with him wearing your collar. I just,' he looked over to Till, who didn't seem to be paying attention, and finished his sentence under his breath, 'When he starts preferring you I don't want to be shut out, that's all.' He picked at his cuticles, hissing as a spot of blood bloomed at the base of a nail.

Schneider yanked Richard fully upright so he could look into his eyes, a hand cupping his face so he couldn't move away. He hoped the pale blue was piercing.

'Never. I wouldn't do that to you, Richard, that would *never* happen. Do you understand?' Richard hesitated a moment too long, as if stunned by the sudden outrage in Schneider's voice. He felt his voice harden and cool like molten metal and tried again.

'Richard. Do. You. Understand?' This time he nodded, eyes wide but not moving away. 'You belong here. If you need me to leave I can leave, and it's not like you can't still do this without me too, but I don't want *you* going anywhere. Besides, you're his closest friend and you've been doing this for a long time, he wouldn't let you even if you tried.'

Tears hovered at the waterline of Richard's eyes. He sniffed, nodded, and let Schneider drag him back down into the warmth of his lap, where he lay breathing unevenly, clearly trying to stifle his crying. Till finally noticed and looked to Schneider for permission, ***Help?***

He assented, so Till scooted in between Schneider's knees and simply rested his forehead against Richard's as if, in doing so, he was drawing out some of his pain. With the connection they had he wouldn't be all that surprised if he really could. Schneider stroked firmly down Richard's side until his breathing calmed. Till dropped a tiny kiss on the corner of his mouth and went back to the position Schneider had put him in.

‘I’m sorry,’ Richard started, voice thick but steady, ‘I guess I was more worried about that than I thought? It’s just... You’re so good with him and it took me weeks and weeks to get used to it and here you are, second time, nailing it!’

‘Richard, do you really think he would be this calm and obedient if you weren’t here? If it was just him and me?’

Richard blew a long, slow breath, ‘I guess not.’

‘Exactly. You did the ground work, you learned by trial and error what works and what doesn’t, and you passed that information over to me. If it’s going well it’s because of your guidance.’

Richard only cuddled in tighter.

They let the moment pass, Richard silently counting his fingertips like he did when he was lost in thought.

‘You know,’ Richard began, breaking the quiet a few minutes later, ‘you’re handling all of this really well.’

Schneider smiled, though he couldn’t see him, ‘We’ve done weirder things, if you think about it. Besides, Aljoscha and Flake were much harder to deal with when they were drunk and “coping”, back in the day. And with you, the drugs... Trying to help you *hurt*, it was *terrifying*. Till wanting to shut off and be looked after is nothing. Not even that, it’s probably healthy?’

Richard shifted, likely not eager to be reminded of the worst days of his addiction. He didn’t blame him: Richard, thankfully, didn’t remember the majority of it with any real clarity, but everyone else did. He had nearly *died*, and Schneider knew he wasn’t keen on reminding anyone of that fact. ‘That explains why you aren’t freaking out on us, but sometimes it feels like you like it. I thought you were just being a good friend last time but...’

He reached across Richard to grab two of the beers from the table, using the time to consider his answer. He opened both and offered one to Till, who just shook his head. He handed it to Richard instead, who sat up and took a long, grateful swig before wincing. Schneider sipped his: it was warm and cheap, and he had to struggle to swallow it. They looked at each other, shrugged, and chugged the rest in one go.

Richard reached for another two, and Schneider took the opportunity to answer while his back was turned, ‘I love my friends and want to be able to help them, all of you, when I can.’ His hand, still in place, squeezed Richard’s hip, ‘Besides, you know I’ve always liked dogs...’

‘And control, as much as we all blame me for what happened.’ Richard said it with a laugh, but Schneider saw Till’s brow furrowing and felt his own do the same.

‘Nobody was faultless, Richard.’ He pulled him firmly back against his side.

Another few minutes passed. A thought occurred to him.

‘Hey wait, so in the Mein Teil video—’

Richard snorted, ‘Don’t worry about it, he’s had enough practice, we made sure he wouldn’t shut down, and Zoran doesn’t know. Coincidence. Pretty funny though, huh? Maybe we should get you a wig, might help you get into the role better!’ Richard barked a laugh as Schneider gave him a playful slap on the thigh.

Till jumped, surprised by the noise, and surprised Schneider right back by reaching over and digging his fingers into Richard’s side, grinning as he squirmed and kicked. He sat back, eyes wide, when he realised Schneider saw and hadn’t given him permission, but Schneider just winked and tickled Richard until they were all giggling so hard he was worried they’d use up all the oxygen.

They didn’t have any watches on them, but at least an hour must have passed. The room was getting chilly, or at least *he* was, despite having a sizeable man half in his lap. Richard had occupied the both of them with racing chatter about his new equipment, nothing important but, surprisingly, Schneider didn’t mind. Till rocked side to side, knee to knee, seemingly without realising. He didn’t think he was even listening at that point, instead content to drift into a familiar, mindless calm. Only then, as he watched Till with fascination, did he remember the collar in his right hand.

‘Till, Liebling?’ He said, tapping his thigh with the side of his foot when he didn’t get a response.

Till jolted himself out of his stupor to look up at Schneider, Richard, and the collar in turn.

‘What do you think about wearing this for us?’

His eyebrows shot up as he nodded so vigorously his teeth clacked together. **Good!** he signed.

Schneider tried to wipe some of the gunk off on Richard’s shirt without him noticing, but Richard lurched up out of Schneider’s lap with a displeased grunt, ‘We should get his make-up off first, let’s not get it,’ he looked at it sceptically, ‘any grosser than it is.’ Schneider shot him a withering look, which Richard dutifully ignored, instead bending down to whisper in Till’s ear. Till signed something Schneider again didn’t recognise, and in sync they both turned to look at him.

Well that’s not at all disturbing

Richard plucked the bottle from Schneider's fingers and passed it down to Till, 'Go put all the empty bottles in the bin for us, Schatz.' Till's knee crunched as he straightened, but otherwise he was silent as he carried out his task.

'So, Till would like a shower but he, uh,' Richard's head tilted to the side, 'needs some help to do it. He would like for you to come, but we don't want to push you...'

Schneider froze, but only for a moment.

'Yea, okay. Uh. Let's just grab a change of clothes and we can go now, nobody else will be in there, I don't think. You're cleanest, you should get them. Toiletries too, please.' He said, reaching to unzip Till's own bag of street clothes.

Richard returned a couple of minutes later with their things, but Schneider was still hunting for Till's,

Apparently he'll just have to go commando for a night.

A few puddles of water trailing from the shower to Oli and Paul's room told them that, as expected, Oli and Flake had both already had their showers, but the absence of actual footprints suggested that Paul had not. Hopefully they had time.

Once they were in the relative privacy of the shower room, Schneider panicked. Or, more accurately, Schneider turned towards the shower controls and fought to push down the bubble of nervous laughter threatening to spoil the mood. It was ridiculous, it's not like any of them were shy, or had never seen each other naked, but this was bound to be intimate and he wasn't quite sure how to process that just yet. Despite how it felt, he was *very* new to all of this, and he wanted more than anything in that moment to get it right. The boys seemed preoccupied with removing Till from his costume, so he spent a couple of moments trying to ground himself, taking some deep breaths and trying to slow his heart.

How can I possibly pull this shit off when my hands are trembling ?

Still, he couldn't deny that it was helping, at least enough to let him get on with it. He turned the water on to heat up and then himself back to the other men as if he did this every day.

'Okay, how do you want to do this?'

Richard seemed to sense his nerves, 'It's nothing complicated, he needs help with his hair, mostly. It's a big shower so all of us will fit.' He made sure to catch his eye, lowering his voice, 'Everything will be fine, you're doing great.'

He decided to trust him.

Schneider stripped off and set his costume out on top of the others'. Richard had already started going through their clean clothes, sorting them into piles, so Schneider grabbed a few bottles and some washcloths from their toiletry bag and moved to guide Till into the shower and under the warm water. He lined the bottles up along the bottom of the mildewed tile wall. Richard climbed in just as he was finishing up getting himself and Till nice and wet, emerging through fog like a rockstar. Once he had thought it he was endlessly glad he hadn't said that out loud.

'Pass me that shampoo, Richard? I can reach his hair better than you can.'

Richard gasped, feigning offence at an implication Schneider didn't technically make. He did as he was asked, though, making sure to read all the labels carefully and reordering them so they could work from left to right. Schneider warmed at the thoughtful gesture, even if that wasn't what it was meant to be.

The shampoo smelled sharp, like it would almost burn on contact, but in reality it was mostly a pleasant tingle he thought their pup would appreciate. Tea tree and something or other. Schneider began massaging the grime and product out of Till's hair; he needed a few rounds of shampoo to get it all out, but hearing Till's careful breathing under the rush of the water was well worth it. He thought Richard might have been humming, but if so it was drowned out almost completely.

When he was done he considered his sudsy hands for a second before calling to the other man, 'Richard, swap places with him for a moment and I'll do yours too.' Richard opened his mouth, but Schneider didn't stop, 'Yeah, sure, because somehow that would be the weird part?' Richard's lip quirked, revealing a line of endearingly crooked teeth, a blush colouring his ears more than his cheeks. He positioned Till so the water stream was hitting his upper back, shielding them from the heat. Till seemed to realise this and instead sat himself cross-legged on the floor of the shower. Richard moaned when Schneider's fingers began circling his scalp, much to his amusement.

They stood there, Schneider massaging Richard's head, Richard melting under his fingertips, Till on the floor playing with the water, for longer than they really needed to. He figured Richard was still feeling a little fragile and could do with some care of his own, and it wasn't like anyone seemed to mind.

When he was done, he washed and rinsed his own curls and then proceeded to slather his fancy conditioner on everyone's hair, 'Trust me, it's totally better than the shit you guys probably use.' Richard grumbled but didn't argue. Till stood up, but occupied himself by humming softly and passing his hand back and forth under the water.

'Till, Liebling, Richard's shoulders look tense. Can you soap up and rub his back while I get you scrubbed down?' Till nodded enthusiastically, pleased to be given a simple task that would make Schneider and Richard happy. Richard practically purred as soon as Till's hands pressed into his taut muscles, fingers not exactly practised—puppies weren't known for their

dexterity—but doing their job well anyway. Schneider lathered his own hands with the (thankfully new) bar of Dove and began systematically rubbing away the makeup, sweat, and grime caking Till's body. He wasn't sure their washcloths would be salvageable, what with the amount of gunk they absorbed.

When the water started cooling, Schneider quickly and efficiently washed himself down as well. His was mostly coffee, nowhere as near as bad as the make up and whatever else Till coated himself in; A quick scrub down and some of Richard's face soap on clean washcloths for the make up, also forced on his friends before Till had time to try and use bar soap *again*, and he was ready to go. They took turns standing under the stream of water to rinse off a final time, and then Schneider and Richard helped Till over the lip in the floor, just in case.

It was a shame they didn't have the luxury of a fluffy hotel towel, but everyone seemed relaxed enough at that point that it wasn't that big of a deal. Till broke into a fit of giggles when Schneider threw a towel over his head and ruffled the water out of his hair, and soon enough Richard and Schneider followed suit, Schneider's characteristically wild and unrestrained, bouncing off the tiles. That is, right up until they heard a sharp knock on the door.

'Hey Till are you almost done? I want to get some of this make up off before we all drive back to the hotel.'

Richard and Schneider exchanged a wide-eyed look of panic.

'Did I hear Schneider giggling in there too? Stop fucking around, I'm sticky!' The pout was audible.

He shot Richard a strained expression, but he only shrugged helplessly in response.

'Yes—yeah, we uh. Yeah we're almost done.'

'Alright, thanks. Have you seen Richard anywhere? We had a few things to go over before we get off back to the hotel.'

'I'm in here, also, yes. Can we do it tomorrow? I uh... have a headache.'

Paul muttered something too quiet for them to hear through the door and then answered, 'Fine.'

Richard and Schneider threw on their clothes in record time, only pausing long enough to make sure they were the right way round. Till hovered, clutching his to his chest but not moving to get ready. This time, Schneider thought he knew what to do.

'Need help?'

Till sighed in clear relief and handed over his clothes. Schneider took the shirt from the top and passed the rest to Richard.

‘Okay, arms up, darling.’ Schneider gave him a warm glance as his hands immediately shot into the air, towel falling to the floor. He yanked a plain grey t shirt over his head, snorting as it caught and momentarily got stuck on his ears so only his sad little eyes peeked out. He looked at Schneider passively before getting his revenge, shaking out his hair like he was still hammering on stage. Or, more accurately, like he was a dog.

Appropriate, I guess, he thought to himself.

Richard shot Till a disapproving look as he helped him into his sweatpants.

Schneider assessed their appearances. Richard’s eyeliner, apparently not as waterproof as Till’s stage makeup, had melted down his face to his cheekbones. It looked, well, a little like Schneider’s own stage makeup, actually. He sighed, holding Richard’s head still with both hands and using his thumb to gently clean off the worst of it. It didn’t have to be perfect,

With eyes like his he can pull off anything.

He blinked, unsure of where the thought had come from. He couldn’t ever really remember thinking that way, but then again, had he ever really looked? He kept staring: he had to admit, he wasn’t wrong. They were a captivating shade of blue and even the laziness was cute rather than at all off-putting.

Till rocked happily from one foot to the other, hands twisted and clasped in front of him, but instead of his usual tipsy swaying Richard was statue-still. He wasn’t even blinking. Schneider realised he was still cupping his face and moved away.

‘There, all ready to go.’

Without another word, he turned to collect their stage clothes, wrapping them in the oldest-looking towel so he didn’t get re-dirtied. Richard shook himself and draped the other towels around Till’s neck, presumably to lower the risk of him dropping them, and gathered up their toiletries.

Paul was waiting outside the bathroom when, in a cloud of steam, the three men emerged. If he thought anything of it he didn’t voice it, though Schneider did notice him staring after them as they all turned into Till’s room together.

‘Richard, can you hang up the costumes while I pack everything up? Thank you.’ He didn’t turn to see if he was doing as asked, he knew Richard was too tired to argue. He popped back into his and Richard’s room to grab their things, and then they were all ready to go

In the car they decided on Schneider’s hotel room. The placement made the most sense, he argued, since his room was at the end of the corridor.

When they got in, Schneider slid off his trainers, not bothering to untie the laces, and went right into the bathroom to clean off Till's collar. It probably wasn't good for the leather, but he ran a hot, soapy sink of water to soak it in anyway, since they had nothing else. Richard and Till made straight for the bed, and Schneider shouted through to them, 'Take your shoes off, boys, or you'll be the ones sleeping in the dirty sheets!' He heard two distinct, heavy thuds as Till clearly yanked off his shoes and threw them towards the door, and then a sigh from Richard as he took his shoes off like a normal person, and placed them neatly by Schneider's. When Schneider peaked through they were both lying on the bed and looking completely exhausted. He'd let them rest for as long as he could, he decided.

Schneider scrubbed the coffee-sweat paste off the collar as best he could, glad it was leather and not cloth so their pup's first time in a collar wasn't too unpleasant. Of course, Till himself wasn't a stranger to wearing collars *or* being uncomfortable, but that was besides the point. When it was about as clean as he could get it without a toothbrush or something similar he took one look at the spikes and decided he'd rather not try to squeeze-dry it with a towel. He rummaged until he found what he needed: the cheap hotel-issue hair drier he had vowed to never, ever touch again since he had grown out his hair. It should work well enough, though he feared what effect it'd all have on the collar later on.

'Till, honey, you might want to cover your ears. This will be a little loud.'

It was. Despite being small and simple it sounded like a fucking leafblower, and Schneider felt genuinely sorry for subjecting Till and Richard to it. He sat there, hairdryer trained on the cool setting and caressing the lining of the leather, until Richard called him back into the main room.

'Hey Schneider?'

'Yeah?'

'Do you have any snacks in here? Only, I've only had half a sandwich and a couple of beers since the show.'

Schneider smirked, 'No, sorry. If you could get the rest of us some that'd be great.'

'Ugh. Fine. Till, I'm raiding your room.' He left before an objection could be made.

A few more minutes of drying later, Schneider tested the collar against his lip, checking for dampness and also hot metal. It wouldn't do for him to brand his new puppy. It seemed fine, but he took it through and had Till check it was clean and dry enough all the same.

A loud thud rattled the door, 'I suppose that'll be Richard, think I should leave him locked out?'

Till didn't seem to get the joke, his face taking on a worried expression as he shook his head.

'Sorry, Till, I was only joking. I'll let him in as long as he has snacks.'

Another thud came a moment before he opened the door, and when he did Richard almost stumbled and fell, forcing Schneider to catch him. Richard, seemingly trying to maintain a shred of his dignity, sniffed and walked in, arms laden with Till's private stash of food.

'Richard guess what!' Till clasped his hands as if trying to still himself, 'It's ready, he even cleaned it for me!'

'He did? What do you say, then?'

'Thank you for being so thoughtful Schn— Chr—Um. Oh. Name?'

Schneider turned thoughtful for a moment, 'What do you usually call Richard?'

Till shrugged, 'Never needed to before, just us.'

'What about Sir?' Richard chimed in.

'Till shook his head, 'Doesn't mean anything to me. Nothing English. Nothing not German.'

'It should be easy to sign too, you aren't usually this talkative.'

Till furrowed his brow as he tried out a few signs. He could almost hear his brains whirring away and only half-envied him. A lot of the transitions were clumsy or just didn't seem to fit, but there were a few that kept coming back around. They were simple and looked like they were together, and they seemed fairly quick to execute.

'Wait, stop, what was that last one? You keep doing it, what does it mean?'

'It's just an H and an S. What are you thinking, my love?'

Schneider caught the pet name and said nothing.

'Oh um. Maybe just Herr Schneider?'

The two other men considered it for a moment.

'We can give it a go, see how it feels?'

'It's better than anything else I can think of.'

‘Okay Till, over here. Back on your knees.’ Till almost started dropping, before Schneider corrected himself, ‘on a cushion, sweetheart.’

Schneider polished a few of the spikes with the edge of his shirt. It took Richard and Till a minute or two to search for a cushion, and they eventually had to settle on one of the pillows from the bed with an apology. Schneider didn’t mind; Till’s sore knees were more important than one of the several pillows he had been provided. They had made sure to leave the satin-clad one alone and that was good enough for him. Richard went back to sorting through his bounty and Till knelt at Schneider’s feet.

‘Okay, now, this one is just temporary, just to see how you like it. I’ll need it back. We can get you your own special collar later if you want to.’

Schneider bent down on one knee and nudged Till’s chin up for better access. Till was breathing a little strangely, but he put it down to uncertainty and, hopefully, excitement. He looped the collar around his throat and fastened it carefully, being sure not to overtighten it. Till’s stubble caught and rubbed when he twisted the buckle to the back, so he made a mental note to avoid that in future. He smoothed, or attempted to smooth, the decidedly softer hair sticking up at Till’s hairline.

‘There you go, mein Hündchen, how does that feel?’

Till took his time, making sure to swallow and check if anything was cutting in. Luckily, Schneider already knew it was worn in and comfortable enough, but he approved of Till’s thoroughness. He supposed he was making sure he wasn’t setting himself up for failure.

‘It’s good, thank you. Um...,’ Till fought for some eloquence, eyes suddenly welded to the floor, ‘How does it look, Herr Schneider?’

‘Beautiful. You’re *beautiful*, Till, I hope you know that.’ Schneider bent to press a kiss to his forehead, trying to calm the swell in his chest.

‘Richard?’

Richard crossed the room to crouch in front of Till, ‘I love it,’ he smiled, genuinely, at Schneider and then addressed Till directly, ‘Turn to face the mirror.’

Till did as he was told, and was rewarded by Richard’s strong hands gripping his shoulders from behind, making sure he couldn’t move away. He seemed to appreciate the pressure.

‘What do *you* see?’ Richard asked.

That wasn’t going to be an easy question to answer. Till shifted as if trying and failing to get comfortable.

‘It’s okay Liebes, take your time.’ Richard snaked his arms around Till’s neck, placed a kiss near the crown of his fluffy head. Schneider moved to give them some space in their private moment: He was integrating into their world, yes, but he was still new. He clearly still had a lot to learn about them, but this probably wasn’t the time to pry.

Chapter End Notes

my Tumblr blog is theelliottsmiths.tumblr.com, unfortunately

Der Schmerz ist schön wie du

Chapter Summary

The boys go for a swim, Schneider and Richard get physical, and Oli is... Oli.

Chapter Notes

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

The sun beat down on the city, heating the tarmac into something tacky which gripped the soles of their shoes as they walked. It wasn't far, but five minutes in Schneider and the others were already dripping with sweat. It wouldn't be long before one of them, probably Richard, started to burn, and then they'd never hear the end of it.

So much for the forecast rain, he thought to himself.

They'd stopped for ice cream, but whilst he and Richard had whittled theirs down as it softened, Till's had instead been allowed to melt, running in vanilla rivulets down his forearm and soaking into the side of his shirt. He was mumbling away to himself, so Schneider knew he was getting a head start on his lyrics. Probably stewing over criticisms long forgotten by everyone else but Till, but that was par for the course. Him being too preoccupied to eat was a rare sight, but not worrisome.

Still, Schneider shrugged off his bag, skin tingling with relief as the sweat was allowed to dry and cool him off, then back to being miserable as the sun refused to relent. He rummaged, trying to keep walking with it caught under one arm, for a pack of tissues or maybe some wet wipes. His ice cream disappeared from his other hand, something he only half registered as he added another hand to his search.

He stumbled on an uneven paving stone and stopped to catch his bearings. He looked up from the open bag expecting to see Till and Richard still walking up the street, but nobody was there. He remembered his vanished ice cream and turned to find Richard watching him, amusement glittering in his eyes.

'What are you looking for?'

Schneider gestured vaguely to Till, a flap of the hand to show it was surely self-explanatory.

'Ah. You might want to hurry up then, this is dripping.'

'So clean it off? I'll be a minute, he's getting all sticky.'

Bouncing on the balls of his feet in impatience, Till finally spoke up, 'I'm a grown man, I can do it!' He ran his tongue up his forearm, cleaning away the sticky trail. Schneider hid his blush by finding himself suddenly very interested in the zip of his bag: he hadn't even realised he was doing it, maybe he was getting a little too... comfortable with their new dynamic. Most hadn't seen each other in months, but it never felt that way once they were together again.

He held his hand out for his own ice cream, but before Richard passed it to him he made a show of curling his tongue around the side and twisting the cone, taking half of the soft-serve with it. Schneider made a face of outrage, but Richard just smirked.

'You did tell me to clean it off.'

Schneider narrowed his eyes at Richard's bratty grin and started to walk away.

'Wrong way!' Richard called after him. He sighed and turned back.

The sea would have been better, he thought, or maybe a lake, but here all they had was a swimming pool. It'd do. Judging by Till's reaction it'd more than do: it was all they could manage to stop him taking a running leap into the water. He shed his preoccupied thoughts the way he did his shirt. Schneider was pleased he had an outlet.

The others weren't there yet, but they didn't hesitate. They wouldn't mind. All three men stripped off their damp clothing and pulled on their swim shorts, laid out their towels, and slipped down into the water. The relief was immediate, and judging by their blissful expressions the others agreed. It was just the right temperature, a little cooler than lukewarm but not enough to take their breath away. Till shot off, but Richard and Schneider floated together in the shallow end.

Richard winced as he lay back to lean on the lip of the pool.

'You okay?' Schneider asked.

'No worse than normal, just let me stretch for a while and I'll be good.'

Schneider nodded and swam off to get a few laps in before the others showed up and got in the way. The scrunchie in his hair was a bad choice, becoming waterlogged as soon as his head dipped below the water. It pulled as he rose to fix it, sharp flashes of pain jabbing at his scalp. No matter how he tied it, it wouldn't hold. Frustrated, he yanked it out and threw it in the direction of his bag. His hair would just have to get in his eyes. He paddled back over to Richard for a quick sulk. As if he could sense it, Till made his way towards them.

The currents formed in Till's wake were deceptively strong, and Richard had to steady himself with a hand on Schneider's shoulder. It lingered. It was a shame Paul wasn't there: he'd find the contrast of dark nails on a pale hand on a freckled tan "visually intriguing", he'd probably capture the moment with the new camera permanently slung around his neck.

Schneider felt a jolt at the contact that he really shouldn't have, considering the decades they'd known each other.

He met Richards eyes and giggled. He didn't mean to, but he couldn't help it, and as always it set Richard off too. It struck him then, Richard's eyes were older than he remembered. When had they started crinkling at the corners? A heaviness gathered in his chest at the thought that Richard didn't smile around him enough for him to have noticed sooner.

The water erupted like some blue-tiled geyser, shooting off his clouding thoughts. Till shot out from under them, throwing himself into Richards arms. Buoyed by the water, Richard had no problem holding him up as he ringed his legs around his waist. Schneider heard a pop: he was hugging hard enough to crack someone's joints. He giggled again as Till pressed a thousand kisses to every inch of Richard's scrunched up face. Richard barked a laugh, holding him for a moment longer before pushing him off. He floated backwards towards Schneider, who caught him just before his head bumped the tiles. Thin fingers cradled the crown of his head, and Till seemed to take comfort in that, a softness washing across his more-than-sunkissed face.

'Forgot the sunscreen, huh?'

Till opened his mouth, closed it again, and then his face twisted in a shy smile. He turned his head to nuzzle his nose against Schneider's wrist, searching his face for approval: intimacy was still new, neither of them was quite sure where the lines would be drawn, and he appreciated the effort Till put into making sure it was okay.

He chose not to use his newfound power to scold him over the sunburn, concerned that it might just make him wary. Instead, he just smiled down at him, fingers swirling tiny circles over his scalp, and made a note to check before they left next time.

Looking up at Richard, he caught the warm fade of the open-mouthed grin that contorted his face when he was too happy to worry about it. His face smoothed over, breath returning to normal, eyes fixed on the hand in Till's hair. He wanted to reach out to him, and then shook the impulse off.

Somewhere behind them, a door slammed.

'Hey, guys!'

Till looked stunned for a moment, then pushed off the wall as if he'd been swimming laps the whole time.

Paul, Oli, and presumably Flake had arrived, finally, and though Schneider could have happily waited longer he was glad to see them all again. He was less sure he'd feel that way once they got started with work, but for now he was happy to bask in the specific kind of whole-ness he only ever got from his band.

Richard, however, didn't seem quite so prepared: he startled when Paul came up behind him, losing his footing despite mostly being buoyed by the water. When he resurfaced he splashed at Paul, soaking him head to toe, but Paul just laughed and jumped in next to him, dragging him under the water again. They continued like that for a while, Schneider watching in awe at how little his friends had changed over the decade they'd been a band, longer since they had met individually. Maybe boys really will be boys after all.

For a while, everyone just lazed in the water. The heat of the day, nice as it had been, was draining, and if they didn't take some time to recharge and cool down they'd be wishing they were back in a dreary Berlin studio before they even officially started working on what they hoped would be their new record.

A throat-clearing caught everyone's attention. All heads tuned to the centre of the pool where Paul was treading water..

'I'm bored, we're playing marco polo. Silent. Who wants to go first?'

'Why not sharks and minnows?' Till flashed a convincing intimidating grin, showing off his pointed teeth, but his tongue betrayed his glee as it pressed against the gap in his teeth.

'Come on Till, that's a kids game!'

Richard took sides: 'And marco polo isn't?'

'It's silent, way more grown up!'

'How do you even play marco polo without shouting marco or polo?'

'You listen carefully. C'mon, it'll be fun!'

He echoed him, mocking like a child, '*Cmon, it'll be **fun** !*'

'Calm it down, boys.' Schneider warned. It wouldn't do to have everyone in bad spirits before they'd even started working.

Richard looked suitably chastised, but Paul's head whipped around, 'Shut up or you'll be first.'

Schneider stooped to their level only for a moment, making an obscene gesture before turning to Till, 'Do you want to go first? You'll have no trouble catching those idiots.'

'Oh, sure, I can do that. Is everyone ready?' Despite the rolled eyes and protestations, a complete silence fell over them.

He closed his eyes, turned to face a random direction, and counted down, letting everyone choose a spot before he began roaming the pool. Richard stuck close by when Schneider made his way across to the other corner, but Paul glided into open water, probably betting on being able to evade him whichever way he swam. Oli seemed to have dematerialised and

Flake would rather drown, so it was just the four of them. He reached zero and began his hunt.

The silence was only interrupted by his and Richard's careful breathing and the ripple of the water as Till waded towards the sun, so he was navigating completely blind. His fingertips missed grazing Paul's hip by millimetres. Paul's face screwed up in a laugh, but he managed, for once, not to make a sound.

He slipped into a rhythm of stopping, listening, and then ducking deep into the water. When he went far down enough he was impossible to spot: Schneider managed, only barely, to keep his surprise to himself every time Till popped up somewhere unexpected.

Paul wasn't quite so lucky the second time Till passed by, though. He had drifted in Till's current, not wanting to do more than tread water in case he was heard, and when Till hit the pool wall and turned Paul couldn't move out of the way fast enough. They collided. Till recovered first and the pair sank out of sight for a second, surfacing in a frenzy of limbs and splashes and shrieks of laughter.

Forgetting themselves for a moment, Richard and Schneider giggled along.

Letting go of Paul, who waded off towards the ladder, Till's head quirked in their direction and he altered his course. Just as he was about to reach them Richard grabbed hold of Schneider's upper arm, pulling him in front of him like a human shield with no consideration for the splashing.

Till lunged blindly towards the commotion, grabbing at Schneider and curling himself around him like an octopus. He opened his eyes, grinning right into Schneider's face.

'Got you!'

Schneider smiled back, 'Yeah, yeah, you got me. I was sacrificed, it was easy.'

Till pouted, so Schneider added, 'but you still got me, good job!'

'So what do I get for winning?' Richard asked, only a little smug.

'My word that I won't drown you for throwing me under the bus like that, take it or leave it.'

Schneider gave Till a final squeeze and detached himself from his koala grip. After one last head pat he tried to swim back to lean on the poolside, but his knee connected with something under the water. Oli rose up from the floor of the pool, breathing evenly despite how long he must have been under for.

He turned to stare at Schneider for a moment, then rose an eyebrow and said, 'Can I help you?'

'Can you stop hiding in the way and then acting like it's not your fault when you get kicked?'

Oli blinked, left a beat, then replied. 'No.'

He breathed in and out rapidly for a few seconds and then sucked in a slow, deep breath before sinking back out of sight.

Till tried to dive down after him, but Schneider caught his arm.

'No, puppy, leave him be.'

'Wanna see what he's up to,' he pouted. Schneider couldn't help but ruffle his hair.

'You can see through the water, he's just sitting there trying to hold his breath.' He shoved him with his toe for emphasis.

Till's eyebrows drew close together, 'Bet I could do it for longer.'

'Then maybe next time you can ask to join him. For now just... leave him to it.'

The day flew by like that, like they used to when they were young. Beers were passed around, and at some point Flake left and reappeared with indian food and a story about a terrible miscommunication with a cashier. Till decided it'd be a good idea to build a fire as they ate, though they all kept their distance for the time being. Every now and again someone would make a joke or tell a story and the group would erupt; their laughs clashed in a way that should be grating, but with the whole gang together it just felt like home.

Despite the cloying heat of the day, once night approached Schneider was starting to shiver, so he migrated gradually closer to the fire. He looked around at his bandmates all doing the same, a smile dusting his lips.

Paul and Till were caught up in an animated conversation he couldn't quite make out, probably something artsy. Oli and Flake, to his surprise, were propped up against each other, Flake telling some long-winded story as if he wasn't stone-cold sober and babysitting a semi-conscious drunk. He could tell Oli was drunk because, well, he was still there. And drooling a little into Flake's sleeve, but the first point was more telling. Richard was alone right by the fire, chipping off his nail varnish with a beer bottle cap. Schneider moved to join him, but knew better than to speak first.

True night fell over them in a bubble of silence. One by one, excuses were made, until the only two left by the firepit were Richard and Schneider. Richard broke first.

'Schneider?'

'Yeah?'

He paused to light a new cigarette before asking, 'Do you ever feel like... Do you ever regret joining the band?'

Without hesitation he replied, 'Never.'

‘Not even when we almost broke up?’

‘We didn't almost break up, I wish you'd stop telling everyone that!’

Richard turned to him, eyebrows raised, ‘So your little show of “I’m done, I’ve had it, I’m leaving, clearly Paul is the better drummer anyway” was just for the drama, then?’

Schneider snorted and didn’t dignify that with a response.

‘Really though,’ he let his head hang back a little, exposing his throat to the night air, and flicked the ash from his cigarette, ‘not even when the rest of us let Paul join in the first place? You said you wouldn’t stay if he did.’

‘Is this your way of telling me you wish *i’d* never joined or *you’d* never joined? You remember you started it?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying.’ He met his eyes with his own: they were soft, a little distant, the colour bleached grey by the orange glow of the fire. ‘I don’t know what I’d have done without you guys but I don’t think it would have been anything worthwhile, you know? Music, sure, but...’

‘You’re a good musician in your own right, Richard. You’d have been fine. You don’t have the patience for anything else.’

He ignored the jibe, ‘Fine, sure, but nothing like what we have right now. It’s... special.’

Schneider felt the mood shifting. ‘Something’s wrong, isn’t it?’

‘What if this goes bad again? I feel like we’ve only just completely forgiven each other.’

It finally dawned on Schneider what he meant, ‘You’re scared.’

‘Yeah, i’m scared.’

‘We got through it last time, didn’t we?’

‘Yeah, barely.’

Schneider shuffled closer, intending to wrap an arm around his waist, but Richard looped his arms around his shoulders and pulled him into a proper hug instead. Schneider wrapped his arms around his ribcage and let it go on for longer than he usually would: Richard never could tell when it was time for a hug to end. He could take whatever he needed, just this once.

‘If you feel like something is going wrong you know you can come to me, right? It’s inevitable that Paul is going to say something eventually but you’ve learned, no?’

Richard didn’t seem convinced.

‘You’ll be fine, you’re a big boy. He’s... mostly harmless.’

Richard scoffed, but he ended the night smiling.

Schneider was *pissed*. No amount of calm breathing was enough to push back the anger burning in his chest. The thing was, he knew he couldn't do a Richard and scream back at Paul without a self-satisfied smirk painting itself all over the smug bastards infinitely punchable face. He'd win without trouble, of course, if they did fight, but it had never come to that and they all swore it never would, so instead of breaking his beautiful drums, or his knuckles on Paul's face, he stalked out and hid in the laundry room to cool off. He couldn't remember why he had agreed to do this shit again.

His phone weighed heavy in his pocket: after their little pep talk it would be hypocritical to ask Richard for help. It would be hypocritical to keep it to himself and allow it to fester too, though. Evenly split, it came down to what Richard would prefer.

The phone rang twice before he picked up.

Schneider tried to separate his gritted teeth, 'Paul is being a dick, do you mind if I share your room to work for a while?'

Through the door, half-muted, he could hear Richard playing something beautiful. He thought it must be new, maybe Till was in there and he was interrupting their little writing ritual, but Richard had said he could come up. Schneider tried to grasp the melody and focus, steadying himself before knocking on the door.

'Come in!'

He slipped into the room, ignoring the amusement on Richard's face: He was **not** in the mood right now.

Richard settled his guitar in its stand and faced him directly, 'What's the matter?'

Schneider took a deep breath and let himself rant. 'I'm just having a really hard time, I can't focus on what I'm meant to be doing and Paul just fucking laid into me and I can't even argue back because he was right and I'm just so. Fucking. Stressed.' With each word he bumped his head back against the door, 'And the worst thing is that what I usually do to work my frustration out is drum, but that's the entire fucking problem! And he's in there, I can't just take my kit somewhere else and he won't fuck off somewhere else with his guitar. God, I hate recording. Never doing this shit again.' One final thump jarred his skull.

Richard winced and watched him for a moment longer, tilting his head in thought, and then gave a staccato 'Hm'. Schneider opened his eyes to glare at him, thinking it was a dismissal, but that wasn't what his face suggested.

'Want me to go get Till?'

‘...Why, what’s Till going to do about it?’

‘Sorry, I’ll try again. Want me to fetch the puppy? Trust me, I think it’ll help.’

Schneider thought about declining, but he couldn’t think of anything else to try.

A few minutes later, Richard lead Till in, guiding him with a hand on his lower back, and then sat back to work on the piece he had been playing.

‘You wanted me, Herr Schneider?’

‘Knees, Hündchen.’

‘Of course.’ He went to kneel but stopped on one knee, fumbling in his pocket for a moment before pulling out Schneider’s stage collar, ‘I hope it’s okay, I took this before the costumes were all stored away.’

‘Very *resourceful*, aren’t you, pet?’ He took the collar, a little more forcefully than he had meant to. Till flinched, but said nothing.

‘Knees. Properly, don’t make me ask you again. I’m not in the mood.’

Till did as he was told, fixing his gaze to a spot on the floor.

‘Well? Turn around so I can put this on you.’

Till scrambled to follow his orders, turning to face Richard. Schneider looped the collar around his throat but, still shaking with anger, he fumbled. The ring pulled too tight, pinching the skin beneath, and a muffled whimper came from the man in front of him.

‘Schneider.’ Richard spoke with an edge of warning in his voice.

Schneider slid the collar off, preparing to try again, ‘What is it, Richard?’

‘I think you need to take a second to calm down.’

‘Probably. He really got on my fucking nerves today.’

‘Which is why I brought *him* in here.’

They bickered back and forth for a little while longer, ignoring Till completely. He tried to loop the collar around Tills throat again, but a hand came up to grab it before he managed. He couldn’t make out what Till was saying.

‘*Speak up* if you want to be heard.’

‘Schneider, amber, please, I need a minute.’

He backed off in an instant, collar forgotten.

Till continued in a careful voice, 'Are you upset with me? I don't know what I did.' His voice trembled, 'Are you going to punish me? I don't know what I did wrong. I'm sorry, I'm not even good enough to remember what I did wrong, Richard didn't say when he—'

Schneider circled, crouched down in front of him and reached out a hesitant hand. When he didn't pull away he cupped his jaw, pulling his head up so he could at very least see his facial expressions. His eyes were close to overflowing, his jaw clenched so hard it had to have ached. He tensed when their skin came into contact.

'I'm so sorry you thought this was about you. I'm not angry at you, sweetness, I'm just frustrated at Paul. Richard thought it would help.'

'Paul?'

'It's nothing, just a little fight. You're okay, I promise.' He rested his forehead against Till's for a moment, concentrating on synchronising their breaths. 'I'm sorry I scared you, that was wrong of me.'

'I don't need to be punished?'

Schneider's heart ached at the vulnerability in his voice, 'No, honey, you don't need to be punished, and I don't *want* to punish you. You did nothing wrong.'

Till drew back to search his face. 'Not anything?'

'Not a single thing. And on top of that, you were a good boy and used your safeword when you needed to. I'm proud of you for letting me know.'

They sat for a few moments longer, then Schneider pressed a final kiss to his forehead and rose back to his feet.

'I'd still like to help if I can, Herr Schneider.'

He set a hand on Till's head, 'Okay, clearly we need to negotiate this time. Intuition isn't going to cut it. Get up and sit on the couch, Till, this is a boy-mode activity.'

Till laughed as he stood and moved to the couch behind him.

Schneider paced the room, 'I need to get some of this aggression out before I shove a stick through Paul's eye.' He turned towards Till, 'How do you feel about fighting, wrestling?'

Till seemed shocked, 'Schneider I, I don't think I can. I don't want to hurt you I—I... No, I don't trust myself enough, I'm sorry. If you got hurt we'd be fucked.'

Richard cleared his throat, 'I could do it.'

Both men turned to stare at him.

'What?' Schneider asked, incredulous.

He looked away, 'I used to wrestle, I'm not as big as Till, I er... I wouldn't be against, you know, experimenting? Or plain wrestling, I don't uh. I don't mind.'

Schneider thought for a moment: He wasn't averse to the idea, and it wasn't *completely* out of the blue. Richard was trained, and strong, and a sore loser. He wouldn't make it easy for him. He turned to Till and asked, 'What do you think, Till? Are you okay with this?'

Till didn't have to think at all, 'Yes!' he enthused, and then calmed a touch, 'Yes, I think it's an excellent idea. He's a good fighter.'

'Okay. Are you staying or going?'

'I need to...' he gestured to his still-damp face, 'can I go and then come back?'

'Sure, just knock before you come back in so we know its you.' Till turned to leave, but Schneider called out to him again.

'Thank you for telling me you were uncomfortable, Till.'

Till smiled, nodded, and as he left added, 'Try not to break him, please.' Schneider couldn't tell which of them he was talking to.

The door clicked closed. Schneider rounded on Richard.

'So, guy or sub or what?'

Richard flushed pink, 'Can we aim for sub? I'm a little curious.'

'Of course. Okay, negotiation. Any rules?'

'Err... Don't use my name. Zven, if you have to use something.' Schneider looked at him, surprised, so Richard continued, 'I never use it, obviously, so I think I'll get more into it, you know? I'll overthink it otherwise. You?'

'Don't go for the face and don't break anything. Everything else is on the table, fight as dirty as you like.'

'Understood. Ready?'

'As I'll ever be.' He let the harshness leak back into his voice, 'On your knees, *Zven*.'

Richard's legs buckled. They exchanged looks, and Richard snorted at the shock Schneider felt on his own face.

Schneider paced a circle around him. At first, Richard tried to watch, but one stern look was enough to set his eyes straight forward. He paused directly behind him, taking a moment to make sure neither of them was wearing anything that could cause an injury. Luckily, they were both dressed comfortably for a long day of work.

Richard shifted on his knees impatiently: There was no doubt he'd make for a good brat.

Schneider rested a foot between his shoulder blades and shoved. He heard the breath forced out of Richard, who gasped as he tried to push himself into a better position. Schneider followed, preparing for another shove, but Richard was too fast: he grabbed Schneider by the ankle, dragging him down to the ground. The impact knocked the wind out of him, but he rolled out of Richards grasp and rose to face him all the same. They squared up, almost nose to nose, and tried to stare each other down.

Without anyone really intending it, some exchange of power fell into place under their sweating hands and mingling breath. It was no longer a fair fight, Schneider could see it in his eyes. It was a service being performed, and Schneider knew he would win. He just hoped Richard wouldn't make it easy.

As if on cue, Richard growled, a spring coiling in his posture, and then pounced. He had Schneider on his back in seconds. Sharp teeth made themselves known as they dug into his shoulder, Richard bearing down on him until he could barely breathe. Schneider felt a prick and grunted as he drew blood. Richard must have tasted it, because he leapt back with impressive speed, kneeling with his head down in anticipation of punishment.

A thick bloom of blood kissed a path over his skin. His brain homed in, finally, on one thing and one thing only: Payback.

'Hey, Zven?' He looked up, eyes confused and widening to surprise as he decoded the expression on Schneider's face. He didn't wait for the understanding, he just planted his hands on Richard's chest and shoved. He went sprawling on his side, surprise and excitement growing on his face. He laughed, not seeming to care who heard, and tried to scramble up.

He was too slow.

Schneider fell on him, hard. What he lacked in bulk he made up for in other ways, making full use of his army training. They rolled, then rolled again, both fighting to pin the other to the ground. His short nails found purchase in Richard's flesh, and Richard's bit right back. Chips of flaking nail varnish burned in the trail of one particularly bad scratch.

He pinned Richard to the ground by the wrists, pressing hard enough to feel the bones shifting. It wasn't enough to hurt him, but he couldn't move. Richard stilled beneath him, a grin brightening his face and Schneider's mood at the same time. They both panted with exertion, cheeks rosy and warm. He was trapped between Schneider's thighs and he didn't seem to mind at all.

Sweat beaded and cooled on his face. Richard's eyes flitted between Schneider's eyes and his lips, and he didn't think twice before saying what was on his mind.

‘Richard?’

‘Mm?’

‘Can I kiss you?’

Richard nodded readily, already tilting his head into a better position. Schneider dipped down, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. Nobody deepened the kiss, there was no urgency or lust and their tongues did not fight for dominance; Richard’s lips met his and they breathed, that was all. It settled the staticky frustration that had been building inside him and he felt calm for the first time in days. After a few more moments he leaned back, studying Richard’s face. He didn’t have to try very hard: Richard’s face was as open and honest as it could be, and what Schneider read was contentment more than anything else.

They lay in a sweaty, panting heap for a while. Richard cuddled up against him, skin sticking to skin, but it wasn’t unbearable. He kissed the top of his head, ‘Very good, you’re my good boy Zven. I feel so much better, sweetheart.’

Richard stilled for a moment, and it took that long for Schneider to realise why: ‘Oh, shit, sorry Richard. Guess I’m too used to... Sorry..’

‘You don’t need to apologise. I think I liked it.’

Richard wiggled, just a little, and he shuffled closer to nuzzle Schneider’s smooth chest, face buried in the dip of his sternum.

‘What about Till?’

‘What about him?’

‘Are you... I mean, I assume there’s something more there. Will this be a problem?’

‘Schatz, it’s not like it’s exclusive. He’ll be happy you made a move. He was devastated when I told him he ruined the moment in the pool.’

There was a knock at the door, and then Till slid in, blocking the gap as much as possible.

‘Hey Till, guess what Schneider said?’ Till made an inquisitive hum. ‘He asked if you’d be upset that he kissed me!’

Till laughed. And laughed. And fell slowly into a giggle, turning to look at Schneider with a goofy grin. Schneider fought back a blush.

Till dropped onto the floor beside them. He hesitated for a moment before shuffling closer and wriggling between Richard and Schneider up to chest height. It was a thoughtful gesture, inserting himself without separating the other men so soon. Schneider and Richard linked

fingers by mistake as both reached to run their fingers through Till's hair. They didn't move away.

'You should talk to Paul.'

Schneider groaned, 'Yeah, I know.'

'What were you even fighting about?'

'He thinks my parts aren't Rammstein enough. I told him if everyone else gets to experiment I should get to as well, but he thinks the drums should stay the same to "ground" it. He threatened to do it all himself, I threatened to throw his guitar into the pool. He got personal, I left.'

'Schneider, the exact same arguments happened over *Reise, Reise*. If you don't feel like it's right, change it up again. What's something you've always wanted to use in a song? I'll back you up as long as it's good. I keep telling you all we need to evolve the music as we go or there's no point.' He sighed, 'He likes to tell everyone he prefers novelty and expansion, but if anything I'd say he clings the hardest.'

Schneider felt a little choked with emotion, but managed a soft 'thank you' all the same. They settled into silence, half-doing as usual.

Richard spoke first, 'I need a drink but I'm too comfy.' Schneider sighed and made to get up, but sat back when a palm pressed flat against his chest, 'Wait no, stop, that's not what I meant, don't leave!'

'What do you want me to do, call someone? "Oh hey Paul, my boys are thirsty but this little brat is guilting me into not moving, could you fetch everyone a beer?"'

Richard sat in silence for a moment. 'Till, did you catch all that?'

Till nodded.

'Thoughts?'

A shrug this time.

Richard wriggled until he could feel the phone and pressed it clumsily to Schneider's face. Schneider sighed and dialled.

'Hallo, Paul? Yeah, everything's fine. Long story but any chance you could bring three beers and some water to Richard's room? And while you're here I think we need to talk. Thanks.'

He hung up and tossed his phone to the side, ‘Well, I’m sure this will be easy to explain.’

Chapter End Notes

They all use the common safeword system of traffic lights. Green for go, yellow/amber for slow down, and red for complete stop.

Comments are good for the soul. Yours and mine. Just saying...

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