

i know you wanna see me in hell, my love

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by [hollanovgrl](#)

Summary

Before ascending the throne, omega Shane Hollander must choose his betrothed, the one with whom he is destined to spend all his springs, but who will also be the father of his children, the one who must leave a mark on his neck. Therefore, it is not a decision to be taken lightly.

Chapter 1: about you

Chapter Notes

hiiii!!!

i hope you're doing good, honestly i never thought the constant thinking about these two would get me here but yeah.

i noticed there aren't many alpha–omega fics about hollanov so i decided to make a contribution to it, i hope you enjoy it.

my plan is to post every friday, it won't be a long story so hop in and enjoy the ride!

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

Shane wakes up an hour before his alarm goes off and is unable to fall asleep again.

Today is the big day.

Several alphas will arrive at the castle, pre-selected by his mother, to be considered as candidates to become King by his side.

Nervous is an understatement when insecurities loom over him. The fear of not being able to choose a good leader to rule by his side and a mediocre lover are at the forefront of his mind.

He calls Jackson, the person he grew up with and his companion, to tell him to summon the maids to prepare the bath.

He takes his time with it, so the minutes pass more quickly and without the vertigo he feels inside about what is about to happen.

Throughout his life, in addition to learning about his people, he internalized the different opinions about what a good alpha by his side should look like.

There were too many, and sometimes they contradicted his own feelings. This made it difficult to differentiate his own needs from those of the people around him.

All the suitors present would have ties to the family in one way or another, his mother had made sure the range of possibilities was as narrow as possible to avoid giving him the wrong ideas. They're looking for someone able to rule a whole country, not just some charismatic soul.

He was born into royal blood, which meant his kingdom would always come first. This knowledge was reflected in every glance cast in his direction the moment he presented as an

omega, in every comment made by his friends and the princes he had known throughout his life.

When he finished showering, the maids helped him dress to go to breakfast with his parents, before his suitors arrived.

As was customary, he bowed before taking his seat, at the left side of the queen. She signaled to the kitchen staff, and they began to serve them. The place quickly filled with noise.

His mind races, worried of what lies ahead. His left leg thumps incessantly as everything around him moves, he feels an spectator of his own life.

His father, too easily mistaking terror for excitement, does little to calm him.

"I can't wait to meet the one who will rule alongside my little boy. You've learned so much, Shane."

"I agree," his mother adds. "You know your people as well as the old men rotting away in the Council. With a stroke of luck..." She grimaces, then laughs. "You might just get to govern the paradigm shift we're all feeling."

Shane's stomach clenches at her words, barely managing a smile and a stifled chuckle.

He's lost his appetite completely, but he still moves the food around to give the impression that he's eaten breakfast. Tea is all he can digest.

The night before, he met with his friends urgently. He never needed to explain anything, because his own features revealed all the pent-up anxiety.

Instead, they played cards, chess, and called a saxophonist to play some of his favorite songs. Alcohol was forbidden per his mother's request, which meant he wasn't able to fall asleep until the early hours of the morning.

He seriously tried not to think about how his younger self had imagined it would happen, but the memory was more present than ever during these last few days. It was deafening.

His friends don't know this, although they can sense how his voice becomes more strained when a meddling duchess wants to get a glimpse of what his choice will be.

If only they knew that was stolen from him several years ago, disappearing without a trace, their enthusiasm would turn to sorrow.

He leans back in his chair, hoping the minutes will pass more quickly or that the earth will swallow him whole, while his parents discuss some of the candidates who will be present this afternoon, all eager to meet the prince whose attention they must steal.

"I've already decided that the top three suitors will undergo a skill competition," his father announces, to which he frowns while his mother rolls her eyes.

“They won’t be here for your own entertainment, but to win over our omega.” she reminds him.

“I know,” he says, almost offended. “But they have to prove themselves worthy. This nation cannot have a king consort who doesn’t know how to kill an animal.”

Shane’s face transforms into one of disgust. He knows his parents are used to talking about violence as if it was a debate over the kind of flower that should go in vases, but that doesn’t make it any more interesting.

Being an omega, he never had to bother going into the forest to learn how to hunt, his training always consisted of learning how to escape and how to use the dagger he received on his thirteenth birthday.

He was always trained by the army commander, accompanied by some soldiers, who were sometimes a distraction due to their beauty. Shane always made sure to follow his heat cycle calendar to the letter to avoid awkward situations.

“I’m hoping they won’t have to do any of that, because we have a great kitchen staff.” he murmurs.

“As your father, your future alpha should know how to provide for you and your pups,” he reminds him, a detail easily forgotten by most people around him. “Besides, it won’t be *just* that. I’ll make it such a fun competition that everyone will be talking about it, believe me.” he laughs.

“They should also know about politics, you must remember to ask their opinions about...”

“Our agreements with Ocrad, I know.” he finishes for her, and she nods, pleased that he remembers.

The omega is the last to get up from the table, wanting to enjoy these last few minutes of solitude before plunging down a slide whose end he can't see.

He knows all too well that his days as a prince are nearing their end. It should be something that excites him, of course.

If only he didn't feel so damn empty inside.



By lunchtime, Shane feels like he can't have a bite without making a fool of himself in front of people he barely knows.

His mother kept the list a secret, a firm believer in love at first sight, but he didn't bother to insist so as to be able to do some research on them ahead of time.

This is supposed to be fun, not completely terrifying. He sincerely hopes that the social skills he learned during his youth will prevent him from being the one who ends up being rejected instead of the other way around.

His bedroom window points at the castle entrance, meaning he can watch the soldiers doing the finishing touches on everything before the suitors begin to arrive.

His mother is there too, barking directions as if it were her wedding party. He understands it's a way of dealing with his own nervousness, but it only makes him more anxious.

A knock on his door makes him jump, but then he invites the person on the other side in. "Come in."

Jackson opens the door and stands in the doorway. Shane shakes his head and gives him a tight smile. "I see you haven't dressed," he says, eyeing the dress lying on his bed.

"I'm not sure it's what I want," he murmurs, barely higher than a whisper.

"What?"

He snorts and rolls his eyes. He's getting irritated too easily, and he knows it.

"It looks fucking old. I feel like my grandma might have worn it."

"Well, you tried it on several times..."

"I know."

"And the seamstress came to make it your size."

"I know, it was there," he reminds him.

"So why didn't you say anything?"

Shane closes the curtain and approaches the bed. "I don't know."

"Hmm, I see."

The look he gives him could have melted the beta instantly, if only he had that power.

"Perhaps we'll try on one of your suits," he says, heading to the closet in the next room. "I'm sure you have something light blue to represent the Kingdom."

He lets out an audible sigh at his words and throws himself onto the mattress, his hands covering his face, as if that makes it less real.

Jackson, even though he's a beta, can recognize the change in his scent quickly, and turns to him in an instant. He says nothing, allowing his fear, mixed with his anger, to take center stage.

The silence stretches out, the only thing the prince can hear are his own heavy breaths, along with all the unspoken words.

All destined to the same person.

“I feel so stupid,” he says finally, removing his hands from his face to look at him. He knows he's sitting on the bed next to him, on the other side. “How long has it been? And I'm still stuck here, these recurring thoughts about what could have been.”

The difference between the beta and the rest of his friends is that he's been there for him—whether he wants it or not—during every one of his mental breakdowns and has supported him through every one of them. In addition to that, he never went overboard in his attempts to sympathize with the omega, even though there were several opportunities.

“I think it's normal, you know,” he murmurs. “Because you're hours away from starting a new chapter of your life, and you're looking for a way to cling to the previous one by getting angry.”

Shane's eyes well up with tears, and a lump forms in his throat. “It's exhausting.” the beta smiles at the sound of it, a small smile.

“He'll always have a part of your life, because that's what happens when we get involved with other people. You shouldn't try to escape these connections and, most importantly, you shouldn't let it dictate your whole life.”

The omega wonders how tired his friend must be of hearing the same thing over and over. If he ever had a better alternative, would he get rid of him too?

Are all of Shane's bonds meant to be convenient rather than enjoyable?

They stare at each other for a few minutes. “I could wear a blouse.” he offers, to which he chuckles tenderly.

“You can,” he replies. “The prince can do whatever he wants.”

That's a lie, his inner wolf whispers. But he's determined to ignore it, just like the unease feeling in his chest.

When he gets back to his feet, he tries to feel a little more confident and less negative about what his life will look like in a few months. He needs to stop dwelling on the self-deception he's created and focus on what's coming next.

He's a future king, for God's sake. He needs to get his emotions under control.



His parents, excellent hosts, told him to wait until all the princes had arrived before going out to greet them. This way, no one would be treated differently from the others, nor could they hold the omega's attention for too long.

So he waits in his room, already dressed and made up to accentuate his features, until one of the guards knocks on the door, requesting his presence at the palace entrance.

He and Jackson exchange one last glance, and then Shane is coming down the stairs, his friend a few steps behind.

During the walk, he reminds himself to breathe and avoid saying anything that might lead to hasty conclusions. Flattery must be kept to a minimum to keep hopes low.

He yearns, with all his heart, that one of the princes outside might be a decent alpha for his pups and, perhaps, *perhaps*, a husband who will make him feel less alone.

His mother, the queen, is the one presenting him, which means he has to cross the threshold alone and keep his back straight, his head held high, to make the best impression.

When he hears her call his name, he can barely breathe out because the doors are opening for him.

He makes sure to show the hint of a smile to show that he is excited but not desperate. His brain finally quiets down, so he can take in the sight.

There are numerous princes lined up, applauding him, ready to show their best selves in order to be chosen and rule by his side.

The self-inflicted hope dies the moment one of the soldiers approaches to assist him down the stairs, he blinks twice and then leans on his arm.

The first candidate is Francesco, a man of about thirty-seven who emphasizes the fact that he arrived before the rest instead of asking Shane how he feels.

The bow is brief, and the omega has to fight the urge to turn to his mother and ask. "*What the hell?*"

He's an Italian prince, third in line to the throne, with rumors circulating about him getting very cozy with one of his cousins at his grandfather's cabin—his grandfather is still king. They're also a family with extensive landholdings and a rather liberal court.

The third is a twenty-seven-year-old prince named Shawn, known for being a skilled polo player and exceptionally cultured. The first thing he does is thank him for the invitation, expressing his enthusiasm to get to know the land through his eyes.

The comment catches him off guard, and the omega bites his cheek to avoid blushing. He knows he's failing when he notices the alpha grinning.

By the eighth candidate he's received, Shane is worried his hand is sweating from the warm weather and that the princes might find it disgusting.

Normally, he'd ask one of the servants for a napkin, but he knows that could be misinterpreted, so he keeps repeating the action, reiterating his welcome to each one and making occasional comments.

The sound of an approaching horse, followed by trumpets announcing someone's arrival, interrupts the introduction to the Prince of Poland.

He can't help but frown, his nostrils flaring as he tries to recognize the approaching stranger, only a faint trace of vanilla that he fails to remember.

He glances at his mother, who turns to look at his father with the same surprised expression. His father, on the contrary, looks pleased, even enthusiastic.

The steel gates open, and Shane thinks he's hallucinating as he recognizes the Rozanov family symbol entering his castle.

"Prince?" the alpha in front of him calls, concerned as he notices his Adam's apple twitching. The omega feels like he can't breathe, but he forces a smile nonetheless.

"Yeah." he swallows and takes a step back. "Excuse me."

The first rule for a prince is that he should never cross his arms or legs, in order to appear approachable, empathetic even.

Now, all those kinds of etiquettes seem to have flown out the window. His mind is urging him to be on his guard while the wolf in his chest is already whimpering.

He wishes he had rings, so he could have an excuse for his fidgeting. Even though not everyone's eyes are on him.

The second the carriage doors open and the omega spots the curly hair, it feels as if the world has spun off its axis.

Ilya Rozanov.

His best friend since childhood, the alpha to whom he shared his greatest fears as a child, the one who treated him as an equal, is now in his palace, dressed entirely in black.

On the other side, Alexandra, his sister, steps out, spots him immediately, and shows a huge smile.

She's an alpha, barely two years younger than him. They used to paint together in the backyard next to the swimming pool her brother used to make some laps in.

Another guard approaches them, and he has to force himself to look away—*at the line, of course.*

He must continue with the protocol and get to know these men better until he chooses one to marry, and..*why is he here, looking like the son of Hades and Persephone? Is this a fever dream?*

Shane feels warmer than before, and it has nothing to do with his heat or his heart beating at an abnormal rate. He forces himself to resume the conversation and continue greeting people. *If he's come to say hello, then his timing is shit.*

He listens to the other candidates and, as he nears the end, he can sense the alpha's presence nearby, something that throws him off.

Is he fucking playing me? Does he even know what this means, or have all those years away made him forget about duty?

He trusts that, when he's two men away, really close, he'll take a step back, or that his sister will say something that will bring him to his senses.

He finds himself increasingly unable to keep the focus on the conversation without letting his anger and resentment take over his features. The nods become shorter and the "welcome to the palace" is delivered with less sympathy.

Why the hell is he still in line?

He's not unaware that Ilya is often a heavy-handed joker; he just never imagined that he'd be on the receiving end of his jokes. Nor that he'd have the audacity to return to the palace as if the seven years of absence had never happened.

When he's only a suitor away, he doesn't let his gaze wander to him for even a second. Somehow, in his mind, that would be like privy-ing him to a secret he no longer has the right to know.

The candidate, Esteban, is very polite, and when he introduces himself, he lets him know that "I came to find you from the ends of the earth." which can't help but elicit a genuine laugh.

"Well, I hope the trip was pleasant, Prince Espósito." to which he nods.

Shane is aware that all the candidates he greeted after the eighth one had to pretend not to feel the sweat on his palms the moment they shook them. Now that he has Ilya Rozanov two steps away, he can't say he regrets it.

His expression changes completely the moment his gaze meets the Russian prince.

Instead of flashing a rehearsed smile like with the others, the omega raises his chin even higher as he looks directly into his hazel eyes.

He doesn't offer his hand immediately, waiting for the punchline of an unwelcome joke. But the alpha remains the same, his back straight and his shoulders back, his lips not curving into an amused smile that reveals the end of a joke. He's there, unmoving. Just like Shane.

Until he offers his left hand, the one where the wedding ring goes, rumored to be directly connected to his heart. Ilya waits, the omega wants to slap him and cry.

He extends his hand instead. Letting his fingers melt into the embrace, a hand that is larger than his. Instead of applying pressure to show power, the alpha gently lifts it and bows,

pressing a kiss to the back of his hand, all while maintaining eye contact.

Shane is perplexed by such a display of affection, to the point that he opens and closes his mouth but nothing comes out. His gaze is too intense to look away, but he should back off now.

This man, who took the first opportunity to leave and didn't look back, is holding me like I'm something precious.

At any other point in his life, the omega would have melted at the slightest gesture that suggested anything other than chivalry, but now he can't tell if it's some elaborate joke or just a simple game.

He slowly withdraws his hand, trying to regain control of the situation.

“Good afternoon, Prince Hollander.” he murmurs, his voice deep and his skin prickling at the sound of it.

He doesn't want to let it show the whirlwind of emotions he feels, but it's too difficult when the alpha is standing before him, looking splendid and with the confidence of someone who knows he has the world at his feet.

This is my chance to show him otherwise, he thinks.

“Prince Rozanov, I wasn't expecting your presence here today.” he says, frowning slightly and tilting his head.

He knows the double meaning his words might carry, yet he chooses to say them aloud. He doesn't care that the princes nearby might begin to speculate.

“I apologize for the delay, my prince.” he replies. “I know how much you appreciate punctuality.”

He tries too hard not to let the indignation show on his face, but he fails miserably when he lets out a loud snort, causing a few heads to turn. Ilya continues. “There's a saying, better late than never, *right?*”

Rozanov has the nerve to smile at him the way he used to, a smile he liked to believe was just for him. One that foreshadowed the start of an interesting night.

Now he's using it again, and Shane is finding it too difficult to bear the mocking.

He really thinks he's so clever that I will fall for his tricks.

Instead of trying to come up with a polite reply, which he can't seem to be able to, right now, the omega keeps his lips in a thin line and gives him one last look before heading over to where his parents are, along with Alexandra.

He greets her without hesitation, given that she's always remained close to the family, even after the alpha left. He stands next to his mother, and she's the one who tells them about the

schedule for the rest of the day.

“We will have meetings for each of you with Prince Shane. The order will be the same as your arrival. You will spend some time with him, and five of you will return to your kingdoms today to continue your work.” everyone nods in agreement. “I’ve noticed that some of you aren’t using inhibitors. Do so before our maids call you in.”

The omega is pulled from his thoughts the moment he hears them clapping and his mother turns to tell him he can go inside to wait for them.

“Can I go to my room first?” he asks, too eagerly. She tilts her head.

“Are you alright?” she asks. He nods.

“I need to cool down, the temperature is terrible.”

“Would you like me to get you some water?” his father asks, to which he shakes his head vehemently.

“No, thank you. I’ll fetch it myself.” He answers, trying to give a reassuring smile, and proceeds to walk into the palace, without once looking back.

Jackson joins him on the way, aware of the situation and worried. Shane starts taking the stairs two at a time until he reaches his room, not bothering to close the door because he knows his friend is following behind.

“I-I can’t...Is he fucking playing with me?” he shakes his head, pacing the room. “What the hell is he doing down there with his sister and *my* family?” He runs his hands over his face.

“I don’t know, maybe...maybe he came for you.”

That comment makes him let out a sarcastic laugh. “As if.” he shakes his head. “He left me seven years ago. What the hell are you talking about, Jackson?”

“I-I... I don’t know, okay? The only way to find out is to have that meeting. I’m sure he’ll tell you, otherwise he wouldn’t dare show his face here.”

“There was a list...a list my mother made. There’s no way the guards would have let him in without permission. Did she plan all this? Does she think I’m an idiot who can’t communicate?”

He sees a book on his shelf, one about soulmates and marks. Without hesitation, he takes long strides to grab it and throws it against the wall with all his strength. Notes scatter across the floor, his breathing becoming labored.

“Shane, I think you should...this isn’t good for you.”

“Why did he come back?” he whispers to himself. “I don’t understand.”

He angrily pushes his chair away from his desk, sitting down and burying his hands in his hair. *This can't be real.*

“You know how to find out.”

“So what? I listen to him like we’ve been best friends forever, I hear him spout some ridiculous excuse, and what? I forgive him? Because that’s what omegas are supposed to do, *right?* That’s what my mother says, don’t hold a grudge, as if he didn’t...*Fuck. I hate him.*”

“That’s not what I mean. You don’t have to forgive him, *hell*, you don’t even have to look for answers if you don’t want them because you’re in control now.”

He lets out another snort and straightens up. “Sure,” he says, ironically. “He’s the prince of half a continent, but somehow, I’m in control.”

“Still, he was the one who got in *your* line, that means something.”

“Yeah, that I’m a coward to stand up for myself. I even took his hand, fucking hell.”

They both fall silent. Jackson doesn’t dare say aloud what’s obvious, and the prince is grateful. This isn’t the time for introspection, he only has a few minutes before his mother comes to get him.

Although the feeling of powerlessness lingers, being able to talk about his frustration out loud is a great help. He knows damn well that there’s nothing the beta can say to improve the situation and that his words make sense.

The idea of being in another room with the alpha is something he doesn’t think he can handle without ending up having an outburst that leaves him in a bad spot.

It’s terribly unfair to be overthinking everything to the point of delirium while the other man is probably showing off to the rest of the suitors.

What if he scares them off? Shane shakes his head and wipes his eyes with his thumbs, erasing any trace of tears that might create rumors.

He’s a grown man, for God’s sake, he shouldn’t wear his heart on his sleeve.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do to fix this, unless you want to claim you’re feeling unwell due to the heat. I could go downstairs and tell them...”

He shakes his head several times. “It won’t do any good. My mother will come all the way here with a doctor and won’t leave my side until I’m better. I must, at least, be able to interact with the other candidates. Otherwise, I won’t get a moment’s peace.”

Jackson nods. There’s not much more he can say, and waits for the omega to stand up again. “You’re going to be the one helping me dispatch them when they get too intense, so you have to be ready.”

“To tell a prince to fuck off? I was born for it.” he says, and that earns him a genuine laugh from the prince.

He proceeds to stand up, and they make a quick stop in the kitchen to hydrate.

The sweltering heat is making him feel less energetic, which is why his mother arranged the meetings indoors. Before entering the room, he can see his parents chatting amiably with Alexandra.

It's not a surprise, but he can't help but get goosebumps just thinking about what he'll have to deal with.

Were his friends aware? Will it be something unexpected for them as it was for him to hear that he's back? How will they treat him? Shane takes a seat on the sofa and calms his breathing before the first alpha enters the room, using a scent inhibitor.

Francesco goes on and on about the things that matter to him: his vineyard on the coast, his horse named Julio, and his desire to have enough pups to ensure his lineage endures.

Shane can't hide his surprise, choking on his own saliva as the alpha tries to approach to assist him. Jackson moves faster, pouring some tea and stroking his back.

The brief glance they share is enough for them to understand each other.

"I'm sorry, Prince Lombardi. Please continue."

After five minutes of nodding and making affirmative sounds, without a single question directed his way, the omega ends the encounter by standing up. The alpha tries to lean in for a kiss on the cheek, but his reflexes are quicker, extending his hand in his direction.

He's aware that alphas in general tend to overstep their bounds, but no one dares to point it out. Omegas, on the other hand, can only exaggerate, which is why he has to be creative when rejecting someone, because a simple "no" is never enough.

Many would believe that by being a prince he's free from all those prejudices, but his own nation's council has proven him wrong.

The only reason they let him postpone the selection until now is simply because his mother took her time compiling a list of the best candidates and took him to every event where his presence was required, in order to get to know his people better.

Jackson takes charge of bringing in the next candidate, and he turns out to be more pleasant than the first, although he mentions that he doesn't understand the decision to force them to use inhibitors, which makes Shane suppress a grimace of displeasure.

Those who do ask questions, like Shawn and Esteban, make him talk about his hobbies. The conversation becomes interesting, to the point that it goes a few minutes longer than planned.

Shane tries not to get defensive so he can give the rest of his candidates a chance and focus on the fact that one of them will become the father of his pups. With the return of someone

who meant so much in his past, that's where what matters to him lies.

He needs to find someone he can tolerate and his children can look up to. He can deal with the rest.

When he realizes that Theodore was the second-to-last suitor, he gives Jackson a quick glance, panic written all over his face. So he does what his brain deems logical at that moment, which is to continue the conversation until a guard knocks on the door, reminding him that time is up.

He should feel ashamed of using the Greek prince for his own benefit, but he doesn't seem to care, genuinely interested in naming each of his horses and suggesting the idea of going riding together.

"Well, I'm sure that's a lovely idea," he says, standing up, making no commitment.

"I must ask you, before I go," he murmurs, shaking his hand. "Is Prince Rozanov here for you, too?"

He feels like rolling his eyes, because that is the question of the century, but he restrains himself. "He was in line, just like you."

"I know, it's just... I had to make sure. I know how powerful he is and the influence he has on people, I must admit I was worried."

"Well, you shouldn't worry, Prince Makris. Because I have my own opinions and I don't let myself be influenced by what others think. I know how to draw my own conclusions."

Jackson is already opening the door, and they shake hands one last time before he walks out of the room.

When it's just the two of them again, the beta takes a seat on the couch next to him.

"He's waiting outside, isn't he?" he asks, hoping this is a dream, or a nightmare. His friend's sigh is enough of an answer.

"He only left the room to greet your parents. They're delighted." Shane snorts. "I think your father planned it." he blurts out, making him turn his head quickly to look at him.

"Are you serious?" he nods.

"He seemed less surprised by his presence; your mother, although she knows how to hide it, she seemed confused."

"Well, that makes two of us..." he murmurs. "Why would he? All he does is ride horses and attend those council meetings. He's never seen me cry, either."

"I remember one dinner where you stormed out of the room because you thought you were going to faint," he argues. "Anyway, that doesn't matter. I thought of some excuses. Want to hear them?"

He takes another deep breath and says, "I'd be the biggest jerk on the planet if I made up an excuse not to see him. The other candidates will probably laugh at him."

His friend, instead of arguing why he should hear him out, remains silent, which makes the omega hate him for not pressing on the issue.

He glances at the clock on the opposite wall and lets his shoulders slump. Since he's using inhibitors, there's no way the alpha can sense his fury, so it's a matter of his attitude to let him know.

"Tell him to come in, and if I get too sensitive, remind me about the time." The beta nods and stands up again.

As he crosses the threshold to go find him, Shane thinks about all those months waiting for an answer, the birthdays he wished for him to come back, the words that never left his lips for fear of ruining everything. Too naive to believe that things weren't going to completely fall apart, one way or another.

The moment he sees him again, he wants to laugh at his younger self for having been so stupid and falling so quickly for a crooked smile and an intense gaze. Even now, he doesn't come close to the rest.

"Prince Hollander, could I spare a minute alone?" is the first thing out of his mouth. The omega stands up, so as not to be caught off guard by his approach.

"These are the rules in the selection process; you should know them, since you're on the list. Unless what happened out there was just a game."

"Of course not, I..." He glances at Jackson, who's quite good at making a face, and then back at him. "I thought there was a chance, I'm sorry."

He moves closer, Shane backs away, in an instinct for self-preservation. Something flashes in his gaze, but he can't quite put his finger on it.

"Why are you here, Prince Rozanov?" he murmurs aloud, letting his anger permeate his voice.

The alpha frowns, as if the question is absurd, but the omega's unforgiving stare seems to make him realize he means business.

"I'm here...I came back, because I want to court you."

Words that were once all he wanted to hear now pierce his heart like daggers. *Don't let him fool you, he's lying.*

"Courtship is for omegas who don't have a line of suitors," he says, savoring the poison in every word. "It happens at twenty-one. Where were you when I was twenty-one?" he tilts his head to the side, feeling both curious and masochistic.

His expression hardens, as if the question had stung. “*Fighting*,” he answers through gritted teeth. “Now I’m back.”

“Oh, I see. So you think you can just come and go from my life as if nothing happened? Not only that, but show up here, demanding a minute of my time. Like you’re some kind of friend of the family?”

“That wasn’t my intention. I received the invitation and wanted to be here. I didn’t expect to arrive late, there were girls on the road who were lost, and we helped.” Shane interrupts his speech with a sarcastic laugh.

“Yeah, right,” he mutters. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Tell me what the hell you came here for, or you can go back in your fancy carriage, because I have more important matters to attend to, than arguing with you here.”

“I’ve told you!”

“Well, I don’t believe you!” he replies, even knowing it sounds petulant.

Ilya takes a step forward, and Jackson does too, alert. The omega gestures for him to stay still, his gaze still on the alpha's.

"It's been seven years since I last saw you. Are you going to make me believe that, what, you had some kind of revelation and remembered there's an omega in Canada available?"

The curly-haired man's gaze is fixed on his eyes, forcing him to hold it.

"Do you really think I've forgotten about you?"

He whispers the question, as if it were something impossible for him to imagine, yet sacred.

He looks vulnerable, and the omega inside him desperately wants to comfort him, to assure him that everything is alright, that this will be a bump in the road in their relationship that they'll soon overcome. But his human side won't allow it.

He blinks, as if the scene before him could vanish so easily. The alpha runs a hand through his hair and tugs at it. “It felt like I was dying.”

Shane realizes he’s let his guard down and starts shaking his head. “No, no, no. I don’t want to hear it. Whatever it is, keep it to yourself...all this time I went without a damn word. *You* threw it all away like it weighed nothing.” he points at him. “So don’t come here now trying to make me feel sorry for you.”

“I don’t want your pity. I know very well I did this to myself, to you, to everyone.”

Always an after-thought, even on the day he should be happiest.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” he says, nodding. The pain is written all over his face.

“Prince Hollander, time’s up.” his friend reminds him, glancing at his watch. “I must get Prince Rozanov outside,” he announces.

“Let me make amends. I know it’s difficult, but let me try.”

“Do you understand what it means to be one of them?” he asks him, and he nods.

“I want you.” he replies. “*Unconditionally.*”

The omega feels like he’s on the verge of tears, so he decides to step aside and walk back to the couch to distract himself with his cup of tea.

“Goodbye, Prince Rozanov.” he murmurs, feeling his throat go dry.

The alpha says nothing more, and Jackson opens the door to show him outside. The moment it closes, his lower lip begins to tremble.

The tears that threaten to spill don’t take long to appear. Having him back and so close, saying all the things he once fantasized about hearing from his lips, only makes it worse.

His friend appears a few minutes later and locks the door behind him, approaching to give him a hug.

Shane rests his forehead on his shoulder as he repeats, “I’m such an idiot. I should have kicked him out of the palace when I had the chance.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be very prince-like.” he remarks, trying to lift his spirits. The omega sobs over everything he’s lost, and how quickly the alpha can dismantle his bookshelf.

"Fucking hell." he mutters, just as he hears two knocks on the door. He straightens up automatically, wiping away his tears with his fingers; he hates crying so much.

His parents cautiously enter the room, completely unaware of the emotional turmoil within him, questioning him about the suitors. Jackson excuses himself; he has the task of sending five of them home without making him look bad.

The question of whether Ilya should be among those chosen to leave isn't even raised, a silent understanding that there are things to work out first and that, if the omega wants to send him away, it has to be made face to face.

“How's my boy, huh? I know he was very excited to see you,” his father asks, which leads to a barrage of questions.

“I wouldn't have any way of knowing, given that I haven't heard from him in seven years,” he reminds him. “But I'm curious now, father. How did you decide to interfere with the list just to add his name? Have you kept contact with him all this time?” he narrows his eyes.

“Yes, David, please tell Shane how you interfered with my list so that the Rozanov guy would get the invitation.”

“Well, Jesus. I can’t stand you two looking at me like I’ve committed a crime. Have you seen your son, Yuna? He looked like the eleven-year-old kid who used to wait for nightfall to see the stars when Ilya showed up. And I’m not blind, either.” He says the last part looking at him, who, in response, lets out a snort.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Are you implying that I don’t notice what’s going on with him?” his mother says, her voice rising, and Shane stops feeling comfortable in a conversation about himself.

He doesn’t feel like expressing his feelings to his parents because these are things he should be able to work out on his own.

“So, what? You called him because you saw me looking at him once?” he presses. “He was my best friend, for fuck’s sake. How do you expect me to look at him?”

“Like the world doesn’t revolve around him, for starters.” he tells him, which makes his mother gasp in shock. “*Please*, darling, he can fool you, but not me. And I’m sure you two can work things out, you have a lot to catch up on.”

“The differences aren’t about ice cream flavors, dad. It’s ‘cause one day he decided to pack his bags and fuck off.” he mutters, furious, and stands up. “You’re delusional if you think a ten-minute conversation is going to fix this. He has to do a lot better than that.”

“Are you in love with him?” his mother asks, catching him off guard. He flinches, as if the question burns him.

In that instant, the omega considers storming out of the room to find the alpha and demands he leaves the palace right now, just to prove a point. Instead, he just snorts and leaves the room, his friend following behind.

“Fucking unbelievable,” he curses, shaking his head. “He comes back like he owns the place and I’m supposed to just stay put? Bullshit.”

When he gets to his room, he asks his friend to run him a bath so he can cool off from the heat of the moment and to leave him alone in the shower.

He cries one last time there, where his tears mingle with the shower water, and promises himself he’ll do better. Whatever that means.

I haven’t forgotten either.

kudos and comments are what keeps me going. come scream at me [here](#)

Chapter 2: plotting hard

Chapter Notes

hello again.

i'm very happy with how this story is turning out, even if you haven't seen it full yet. i really appreciate all those who dare read it while being a wip, i promise that does not go unnoticed by me and that i am a step ahead with these two.

having said all that, i hope you enjoy this new chapter.

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

Waking up the next day to a routine laid out by someone else makes him want to stay in his room, lingering in bed. However, he has a duty to his people and cannot afford to be lazy.

The maids knock on the door, and he indicates they may enter. They quickly set about making the bed and running a bath. He asks about the temperature outside to choose what to wear, and they warn him that it is very hot, which means that activities outside the castle are unlikely to happen today.

As he showers, his mind replays images from the previous day: Ilya stepping out of the carriage, his suitors looking at each other in confusion, the moment he gasped for breath when he pressed a kiss to the palm of his hand, his pleading gaze.

Shane knows it's too much information to process in just a few hours, but he has never been in such an uncomfortable fog as this. It's not fair that the reappearance of someone who, he thought, no longer cared about his existence, can so easily dismantle his world.

He must remain calm and regain control; any sign of weakness will be scrutinized by the other alphas, and they may try to take advantage of it.

Jackson appears as he's finishing dressing in front of the mirror. "Good morning, Prince."

"Please tell me you have good news," he murmurs, almost pleading, as he puts on a pair of moss-green satin trousers.

"The five candidates are already out of the palace. Only one of them complained, the rest were cooperative." he tells him, and he lets out a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad. I can't have anyone spreading rumors within the group. Is he still...?"

The beta nods, his expression becomes serious. "The maids told me he was one of the first to wake up. He took a few turns in the garden. They're all gathered in the parlor your mother

prepared."

"So she intends for us to have breakfast all together. *Perfect.*" he lets out a snort.

"Don't be like that." he murmurs, to which the prince glares at him. "I know, but just because he's here doesn't mean you have to stray from your main objective."

"How can I not, when his gaze will follow me every step of the way? He should have gone back where he came from."

His friend remains silent at his words, though Shane knows what he's thinking. The only way to make Ilya leave is by having the omega say it out loud; otherwise, he won't care.

Once he finishes dressing, the prince leaves his room without another word. Jackson hands him a fan, proof it's warm enough to rely on the occasional breeze.

He finds the guards standing at the door of the hall and gives them a brief smile. His friend waits until they open the doors and steps aside. "Good luck." he says, the prince nods before entering.

The place is too ornate to pass as a casual gathering, and his parents' clothing makes him feel somewhat embarrassed by what he's chosen for the occasion.

The alphas who had their backs to the door turn to look at him and bow their heads. His omega searches in the crowd of suitors for the one who makes his heart leap, but his human side refuses to shift his gaze any more than necessary.

"Good morning," he murmurs. "I hope everyone is enjoying our typical Canadian breakfast."

Some of them bow, and others flash smiles in his direction. Shane approaches his parents, and the conversation resumes. "If I'd known we had a dress code for breakfast, it would have been a big help." he mutters under his breath. His parents look amused, their expressions relaxed, as if they find this hilarious.

"You look radiant, darling." his mother murmurs, running a hand along his left arm.

"That's true, you don't have to worry." his father adds. "We're the ones who went too far. Now go make conversation." he says, winking.

The omega sighs and scans the room, approaching the table where the drinks are. He's barely finished pouring his tea when two alphas approach him.

"Good morning, Prince." one of them says. The omega smiles, returning the courtesy.

"How did you wake up this hot morning?" the other asks. Shane laughs at the tone.

"Fine, the weather's always like this this time of year, though you never really get used to it. I hope your quarters are comfortable."

They exchange glances and nod. "We were wondering, Prince, what does an omega like yourself usually do this time of year?"

"I tend to meet up with my friends," he replies. "I also like to spend time painting, and sometimes I join my father in his ride to the nearby lake." he tells them.

"Oh, you paint." he says, surprise evident in his tone. "We have a painter back at home who's really good. He did most of the paintings in the castle. We asked him if he wanted to work exclusively for our family, but he declined." He turns to the other alpha, sharing a private glance. "He said his inspiration comes from being in contact with the people, as if we were about to give him an honorable mention."

They both laugh, and Shane shakes his head.

"Andreas Bernet, right?" the suitor raises his eyebrows and nods. "I remember him. I have a small picture of him somewhere, although the initials on the back always seemed odd to me. They never matched his, but his wife's." he tells them.

"Well, that's a really nice gesture of his, isn't it? Carrying her initials with him everywhere he goes." the other alpha remarks. "I have a very nice sword that's still missing a symbol."

He pretends not to notice his obvious advance and smiles. "Oh, I'm sure it is. I had the opportunity to meet the omega and I noticed her calloused hands. I'm sure it's because of how grateful she is for his work." he says, and proceeds to drink the orange juice he poured himself.

Shane mingles among the suitors, only lingering longer with those who offer interesting conversation while forcing himself to eat something solid. The high temperatures have left him with little appetite.

It's impossible to not spot him, sitting in one of the couches, gazing out the window, seemingly lost in thought, a porcelain cup in hand.

His posture and energy are magnetic, sparking conversation around him that the omega can't help but overhear. Everyone is wondering what his next move will be, including himself.

He much prefers to be the one who approaches his suitors rather than the other way around, because it gives him a sense of control. Now, with the curly-haired alpha, a voice pops up in his head advising him against it, as if he's about to be burned.

So he moves around him, without addressing him directly, chatting about national sports and music as if he were having the time of his life. The moment his gaze meets his mother's and she glances at Ilya, his posture shifts slightly. He knows that avoiding him will only lead to more conversation.

"Prince Rozanov." he says, by way of greeting, nodding briefly. The alpha stands.

"Prince, would you like to take a seat?" he asks, to which the man nods and sits beside him.

"Thank you." he murmurs, and Ilya gives him a tight smile.

"I didn't expect you to be here this morning," he murmurs, causing the man to flinch for a fleeting second. "It's good to know you follow through with your commitments."

"I wasn't going to leave," he murmurs. "I came all the way here for someone, I made up my mind."

Shane ignores the dry feeling in his mouth and nods foolishly. "Let's hope you don't change your mind with a change of wind," he mutters, giving him a half-smile. "I wonder, though, how a man with so little commitment thinks he's ready to make a lifelong one."

Ilya, instead of looking away in embarrassment, raises his head even higher. "I'm aware of my mistakes and I've learned from them, if only you'd let me explain," he says the last part in a lower tone.

"Yes, you could start with why you're coming back here, after seven years, looking to woo me when you know perfectly well that..." he stops in his tracks, realizing he's getting agitated.

"I know it was supposed to happen when you were twenty-one, I know I wasn't there to make it happen. I know *everything*." He quickly turns his head away.

"Then why the hell did you say that? Do you even know what it means...?" he murmurs, incredulous at what he's hearing.

"I know, Shane. I just wanted it to be special."

"Special." he repeats, and he nods.

"Yes. You have several suitors who want your hand. They'll talk to you about land, connections, and treaties."

"Yes, because that's what an alpha must do, prove he knows enough about my people to be able to take care of them like me," he murmurs.

"They won't tell you what they think about soulmates, nor about how sacred it is to be able to create a family with you. They'll try to sweet-talk you, of course, but you should know they're not serious."

"And you are?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. He seems surprised; it's his cue to continue. "Seven years without a word from you, and you still think you're more capable than the rest?"

That makes his lips curl into a thin line, the murmurs grew quieter around them, so now they're practically whispering.

When Shane looks around, he notices several undisguised glances on the two of them.

"I'm not saying that, I'm just trying to show you that I have the same desires as you, and I know there are things we need to work through. I won't hide from that. I'm just asking for a chance, let me prove it to you."

Ilya's gaze shows desperation tinged with sadness. His omega would love to understand his reasons so he could forgive him quickly, but his human side knows he can't ignore the pain he inflicted with his departure and, later, with his absence.

He knows he's spent more time with him than he did with the other suitors and that he needs to stand up for himself. He also knows that a lack of response from him could hurt. He chooses to be the best person he can be.

"You're here in the end, aren't you?" Ilya nods foolishly. "That must mean something."

"What?" he ventures to ask. Shane shakes his head.

"I'm still trying to figure it out."



Shane is in the palace's back courtyard, watching the gardeners tend to the plants and reflecting.

After breakfast, his mother informed the suitors that they could use the rest of the time to attend to their own affairs. Two alphas approached him to let him know they wouldn't be staying overnight, implying they weren't entirely comfortable sharing the palace with the other princes.

He overheard something about honor and a reference to their titles before tuning out. In his mind, they were no longer part of the competition, but he let his mother take care of it.

As a Canadian, it's quite important to him that they be willing to engage with his culture, considering it will be the alpha who has to move out, not the other way around.

The Hollander family has built a legacy that won't be stopped just so Shane can blend in with another family interested in making him one of their own. He's aware of this.

Although this doesn't mean the omega doesn't intend to learn about the land where his future alpha was raised, from a young age he's had the opportunity to visit hundreds of countries, and later, as an adult, he learned to operate a camera that would allow him to treasure memories of his time in each place.

He doesn't believe the proper way to rule is through impositions and hierarchies, but rather that there are ways to reach common ground without relinquishing power.

It was somewhat predictable that some underestimated the situation and his mother's influence, leading them to believe the omega would consider becoming more flexible. It's still a good thing for him, because it means he shouldn't take things for granted.

One of the gardeners starts walking in his direction, carrying pink chrysanthemums, and Shane smiles at her. She bows before approaching.

"These are for you, Prince." he picks them up. "May this new beginning become everything you desire."

The omega's gaze softens, and he sighs. "Thank you so much, Dalilah. Let's hope so."

She nods and returns to her tasks, while he remains contemplating the flower's beauty, bringing it to his nose to inhale its scent. He always wanted his own pheromones to have that floral touch, but instead, he got the combination of cherry and wet earth.

His mind can't help but wander back to those times when he had just presented and everything felt new, *different*, yet special. Knowing that Ilya was an alpha, his young self had believed there was nothing to fear.

Instead of sadness, there's only a bittersweet feeling of not having been able to handle the situation better, and resorting to writing letters that never moved the alpha enough to make him come back.

If any of his friends had gone through a similar situation, it would be easier to talk and vent. Instead, he still can't imagine how they'll react when they see him again. Will they pretend the distance never existed and continue their friendship, or will they draw the line that Shane struggles to define?

Jackson finds him because, *of course*, and leans against the doorframe.

"They heard the rumors," he tells him. "They want to come as soon as possible, see for themselves."

"Any indication of their reactions?" he asks. The beta doesn't say anything, just shakes his head. "We have the dance planned for tomorrow, they can come after that."

"I'll tell Juliette to get the room ready, then."

"Tell her to be discreet," he orders, because he doesn't want the other candidates to find out and end up hurting feelings. And then, "I need to talk to him before the dance."

"I can go get him right now." It's the omega's turn to shake his head.

"I didn't mean right now. Let all of them do what they have to do; it's just a reminder."

"Are you afraid you'll forget?" he asks, jokingly, and Shane tilts his head.

"You know that was never possible."

"Yeah, I know." he murmurs, nothing more is said.

Shane enters the palace a few minutes later, with his new flower in hand, and heads to the kitchen to put them under water.



Two knocks on his door interrupt his reading, causing him to sit up in bed and take off his reading glasses. “Who is it?” he asks, raising his voice.

“Your mother.” Yuna says, peeking through the door. He sets his book aside and places his hands on his stomach.

“What’s the matter, mother?” he lets out an unconscious sigh.

She enters the room and doesn’t seem entirely in control of the situation, which makes him frown.

“As you know, Alexandra is still here.” he nods, not understanding where she’s going with this. “And you know that we have to share a meal with every guest that arrives.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind. But wouldn’t it lead to unnecessary speculation, having dinner with the sister of one of my suitors?” he asks, genuinely confused.

“The Rozanovs have been close to us for a long time, it’s normal and expected that there are talks about it,” she argues. “What we can’t have is these guys’ parents thinking we haven’t been hospitable enough.”

“Now you’re only thinking about how this makes you look instead of what it means for me,” he points out. “I can’t have these princes demanding a minute of my time every time I step out of this room. What you want me to do is only going to worsen their mood and could lead to undesirable consequences.”

“No one would dare question the treatment of the Russian princes.” she murmurs.

“No, but they would be questioning *me*.” he emphasizes. “They’ll think I’m biased. I might even have suitors threatening to drop out of the competition.”

“We can control the noise inside, Shane. What matters is what people on the outside are saying.”

“Okay,” he says, unable to hide the disbelief in his voice. “We’ll have dinner with the princess, then. No problem.”

He doesn’t want to waste his energy on this.

“I know it’s not ideal,” she begins, but he doesn’t want to hear any of it.

“Of course not,” he spits out. “I have my best friend, the one I’ve known for as long as I can remember, on my list of suitors. I haven’t spoken to him in all these years because, out of the

blue, he decided I didn't exist, and now he's trying to come back, saying he wants to be with me."

He sighs in disbelief, his mother moving closer to the bed. "Honestly, I don't have the faintest idea what to think of it, but here you are with suggestions that sound more like demands, talking about Russian optics. Do you really think I care about that now?"

"Shane, I'm sorry, but this wasn't my doing. It's unfair of you to try and pin it on me. I would have liked things to be different, too. But maybe it's for the best."

"Mom, please," he says, rolling his eyes.

He's not about to hear the reasons why choosing to marry the alpha would be beneficial for international connections. He might be being more stubborn than usual, but he's not going to let her try to dictate the course of whatever happens between them.

She raises her hands in surrender, her expression shifting to that of a child who seems to have done nothing wrong. "I'm just saying, but since you don't want to listen and I've already said what I had to say, I'll leave."

"Yeah, you do that." he mutters, and just because he knows how to be spiteful, he adds, "I'm not having breakfast with them again tomorrow. They'll wait until I have it *alone*, and then I'll see them one by one."

"Fine, you usually have empty afternoons anyway." she remarks.

The moment she closes the door and Shane is alone again, he tries to focus back on the book beside him, but fails miserably. Because of this, the omega decides to get out of bed and go for a walk around the palace.

He should be focused on balancing the qualities each of the suitors has shown so far, but all he wants to do is avoid his duty. Tomorrow he'll be able to have a longer conversation with each of the alphas and learn more about their families and culture, which means any tension should stay outside the room.

He's having a hard time keeping his emotions from influencing his every action. He was always someone who wore his heart on his sleeve until the world taught him that it wasn't so kind.

The alpha's reappearance reopens old wounds and transports him back to that empty place at the table during his birthdays.



When dinnertime arrives, Shane deliberately arrives a few minutes late, taking his time applying cherry-colored lipstick while admiring himself in the mirror. Jackson waits for him,

leaning against the opposite wall, biting his nails.

"That's not very gentlemanly." he utters. Jackson looks taken aback, and the second he forces a smile, the omega turns in his chair to look at him. "What happened?"

"Nothing." he says quickly. Shane narrows his eyes, then tries to figure out what could have occurred to have the beta so worried.

"You were with Robert again." he murmurs, to which Shane frowns and shakes his head.

"It's nothing, really."

"Something happened to your family. Is Geneive okay?" he asks.

"Yes, she is. I promise it's nothing."

"I don't believe you..." He stands up. "Does it have to do with me?" he ventures.

The silence stretches for a second too long, and Shane blinks as if he's just been punched.

"He's gone." he murmurs.

The beta takes a step forward. "No, *no*, no." he shakes his head vehemently, letting out the breath he didn't know he was holding, but what comes out of his mouth next sounds six times worse. "I'm sure he just went for a walk."

"*What?*" he asks, dumbfounded. "A walk where? I only saw the doors open once before I showered, they stayed closed the whole time I was sitting by the window."

Jackson looks stressed and lost, a combination that's never good for someone so close to the prince.

He realizes, at that moment, that he can't give him the answers he needs.

The prince decides to leave the room and, with hurried steps, head for the castle entrance, his friend following behind.

He spots a young guard, who bows as soon as their eyes meet. "Have you opened these doors in the last few hours?"

"Yes, prince." he replies. "One of the visitors asked me to."

He feels rage creeping into his body.

"And you didn't think to tell me?" he demands, to which the beta quickly intervenes, noticing how the guard's face transforms into one of fear.

"Prince Hollander, I think we should go back inside, your parents are waiting for you," he reminds him, and the fact that Alexandra could have left with him is what makes him listen.

At least he can rub it in his father's face how *his boy* can't help falling back into old habits.

“I apologize, Prince. The King and Queen are aware of this.” the boy murmurs, as a way of explanation, adding another nail into the coffin.

“Of course,” he nods. “Right.” and then he retraces his steps back to the palace. He walks quickly, making it difficult for the beta to catch up.

“You must stop and think before you burst into dinner with this rage. I’m sure the prince will be back and...”

“How can you know that?” he asks, turning to look at him. “How can you be sure he hasn’t done the same thing again? Do you think I’m stupid too?”

“N-No. I’m just saying, the maids should have helped with his luggage. They said they weren’t needed all day.”

“Screw that.” he retorts and takes the last few steps so the guards can open the dining room doors. Shane makes sure to hide his anger with a devilish smile.

He needs to confront his parents about this before he thinks about himself.

He’s already throwing his hands in the air as he walks into the room.

When he sees the Rozanovs’ younger sister chatting with her own mother, he stops dead in his tracks and frowns.

Did he leave without telling her? Or is this an attempt at damage control?

They both turn to look at him, and the moment they do, he glimpses his father behind the queen, pressing a hand on the shoulder of the man he thought he had lost for a second time.

Ilya Rozanov is standing beside him, wearing black trousers and a matching shirt with red flowers embroidered on it. The necklace hanging from his neck gleams in the dim light of the room.

A Russian cross, the same one he fantasized about pulling to kiss his lips.

Shane quickly lowers his arms and places them at his sides, his expression unconsciously changing as Yuna approaches him.

“Oh, darling. We were all waiting for you.” she murmurs, forcing a laugh. The omega glances at his friend before the doors close, leaving only the five of them. “Alexandra here, she was telling me about the designer of this dress. Can you believe she’s the same one who’s going to make the one for your reception?”

“Good evening, Shane.” the alpha murmurs, raising her glass. He nods and forces a smile, his gaze shifting to the eldest brother as one of the waiters approaches with a glass of champagne.

“Good evening,” he mutters. “Thank you.” and proceeds to take a sip from his glass.

The prince can think of ten reasons why he shouldn't be in the same place as the alpha, now that he's one of the suitors, but the smile his father wears proudly tells him he doesn't care.

He has to move his body to be face to face with Ilya and greet him as well, the worst part is, he has no idea how to do it.

The king seems very determined to ignore the years that they went without contact and looks enthusiastic about another new interaction. Shane doesn't hesitate to glare at him before turning his eyes to the prince.

Ilya is already watching him, his hand outstretched, waiting for him. An uncommon gesture for alphas, who always play it safe.

The omega slips his hand into his grasp, and the blonde man brings his knuckles back to his lips, pressing a kiss. For a moment, the prince ceases to be a twenty-four-year-old with a future to plan, feeling like the sixteen-year-old boy who longed for a kiss.

"Prince Hollander, you look pretty." his deep voice murmurs.

His intense gaze, accompanied by the compliment, makes his omega want to purr. Shane has to cough to hide it, slowly withdrawing his hand.

"Thank you, Prince Rozanov. I didn't expect to find you here." he murmurs, because there's no way he can let the information he obtained go unnoticed.

His mother leans in to look at him, but he keeps his eyes fixed on him. "A guard told me he saw one of my suitors leaving the palace." he shrugs. "It made me think it would be you, you know, habit."

"Ilya wanted to go horseback riding, and he chose Eunice for it." his father remarks with a pride the omega doesn't understand. He supposes it's the camaraderie between alphas that makes him behave this way.

"Oh, prince, you could have warned us. I know Shane still likes riding Libya." she murmurs, smiling.

Shane thinks they've lost his mind.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," the russian prince says. "I'm aware of the rules, and I don't intend to overstep."

"Yet, you're still here." he says, his tongue working faster than his brain. His father laughs, as if he was joking, shifting his attention from Ilya to him.

"If this is making you uncomfortable, prince, I'd rather leave."

"Oh, *please*, don't talk nonsense. Shane is just joking, you know how he is," the older alpha tells him. "Your return has been a huge surprise to everyone, but you're still part of our family, both of you are." he corrects, looking at Alexandra, who smiles at him.

“Yes, I told him he’d taken long enough.” she remarks, emphasizing her point by glancing between them. He fights the urge to let out a huff.

Somehow, everyone believes their distance was due to a miscommunication on both sides and that Shane is just as responsible as he is. *Amazing*.

One of the waitresses approaches, announcing that dinner is ready. The four of them begin to move toward the table; he stays a few steps behind to catch his breath before diving into the chaos.



Ilya sits down opposite him, taking the napkin from the side and placing it on his lap as usual. Shane runs a hand down his shirt and smooths it slightly when he notices it's wrinkled at the edges.

The servants quickly bring the appetizer, and the first thing he chooses to do is start the conversation by addressing the alpha sitting diagonally across from him.

"I heard you were on a little trip to Italy. How was it?"

Alexandra isn't known for beating around the bush with her answers or shy when it comes to talking about herself. She speaks with a captivating ease and elegance.

"I met a nice bartender there, she was a bit of a show-off, so you can imagine her reaction when she found out I was a princess—her whole face changed." she says, laughing.

One of the things he appreciated most when they were closer was that she never hesitated to speak openly after he came out as an omega. She never believed there were things omegas shouldn't know because they were different, nor did she think jokes were too risqué. She always saw him as an equal.

Just like her brother.

During the anecdote, Shane can't help but feel a certain nostalgia for the times when things weren't so difficult, and when he dares to glance at Ilya, he notices something similar.

Even though he did it to himself, the omega can't help but wonder if he's truly aware of the extent of the damage.

When he snaps out of his thoughts, the alpha is already telling the punchline of a joke, and he has to fake a laugh to avoid seeming rude.

He doesn't harass her with questions, letting his parents chime in with their own doubts, but he makes it his mission for the evening to avoid speaking to Ilya directly.

He wants him to pay for the fury he unleashed in him moments before dinner. Besides, if one of the handmaids is weak enough to reveal anything to any of his other suitors, he doesn't want to give them any useful information.

Of course, the king can't help but ask him questions, to the point where even his mother is captivated by his storytelling. So Shane is forced to look at him, and sometimes it feels as if he's only talking to him.

"The temperature was too low, yet our enemies came prepared. They tried to block the exit from the trenches, but we had already left the sector and were waiting behind the small mounds of snow that had formed." he turns his head to look at the king. "We fired at them from the flanks and cornered them in a circle. I still remember the feeling of the snow falling on my face and all the adrenaline that came with it."

"I bet that must have been exciting, your first badge." he nods.

"I'll never forget it," he murmurs. "We barely had two weeks to plan our strategy, and they were closing in on us too quickly. It's the kind of victory that stays with you no matter what."

"It sounds like something out of a fairy tale," his mother remarks, and he gives her a smile. "I'm glad you're back in one piece," she says, sweetness dripping from her tone.

She seems to have already fallen for his charms, and Shane can't help but snort, drawing all the attention to him.

He fakes a cough, reaching for his champagne glass and emptying it. The waiters, always attentive to ensure nothing is lacking at the table, refill his glass, and he thanks them quietly.

"You need to tell us more about the treaties with Ardaitz. We've done something similar here with Ocrad to ease tensions."

"Yes, Shane was a major catalyst for that to happen." his mother points out, looking at him proudly. "He showed his strength in negotiations and proved to be very astute."

Suddenly, the dinner stops feeling like an attempt to catch up and resembles more those galas held in their grandparents' time to sell an omega to the highest bidder.

It's as if the roles have been reversed, and it's Shane who must prove himself trustworthy to reign alongside Ilya, not the other way around.

He picks up his fork and begins moving the salad around his plate like it personally offended him, bringing food to his mouth to avoid speaking.

"Well, I'd love to hear it." the alpha murmurs, looking directly at him. "I'm sure it was intense."

"Why? Because I'm an omega?" he asks, causing the table to fall silent.

"Not at all," he replies. "I'm only saying that because I know how stressful it can be—everyone's so tense and defensive when it comes to this kind of thing. Peace is never easily

achieved.”

“You can bet on that.” his father says, raising his glass of wine.

The prince knows he’s being petty and childish, but he can’t help it. He also feels that Ilya’s words are meant to hurt, which makes everything more confusing and complicated.

“I know because I was there. What you’re saying just doesn’t make any sense, but please continue telling us about your great victories while we have this amazing dinner. Perhaps you can light the way for beginners like me.”

His mother gasps in surprise and calls his name out loud. “*Shane.*”

“I literally told you to tell me about your stuff. I never meant to belittle them or disrespect you.”

“I think this is getting out of hand.” Alexandra murmurs, but he ignores her.

“No, but seriously, go on.” he says, gesturing with the hand holding the knife. “Everyone here was wondering where Ilya Rozanov had gone to, we couldn’t *resist* talking about you.”

The irony is evident in his voice. “Perhaps you could be so kind as to explain, although my parents are much easier to forgive.” He grimaces. “That won’t be so easy with me, *mate.*”

Using that term feels like landing a solid blow on the opponent’s jaw. The alpha locks it, and his gaze hardens. At any other time in his life, he would have preferred to swim in the river rather than being on the receiving end of that look, right now, his human side is enjoying it very much.

He wants it to hurt, to leave a mark that will be difficult to heal.

“If you would only let me explain the reason I left...”

“Oh, no. You don’t need to explain, I think I’ve got it covered.”

“Shane...” his mother begins, and he turns his head to look at her.

“What? Are you taking his side?” he snorts. “Unbelievable.”

“I think we should understand Shane’s reasoning,” the alpha woman murmurs. “No one can force him to change his mind.”

“Thank you.”

“But, what’s also true is that Ilya should be able to have his say. At least, for the good times they spent together.”

“We should all calm down,” his father murmurs, raising his voice. “I don’t think your mother taught you to hold grudges.”

The omega opens his mouth, incredulous at the words coming from the king's mouth. "What the he—?"

"No swearing at the table." his mother reminds him through gritted teeth.

"I apologize, I didn't mean for this to happen. I think we should change the subject completely," the alpha suggests, and both women nod because, *of course*.

The only reason Shane doesn't put his silverware down on his plate and leave the room is because he's certain that tomorrow he'll be the talk of the palace.

So he swallows the lump in his throat and fights his knotted stomach to finish his dinner. Everyone makes a point of not asking him any questions, the only kindness these people seem willing to offer.

Despite that, it becomes difficult to see what he's slicing because his vision blurs and he struggles to breathe properly. He feels incredibly childish, but he can't help it.

All the time he spent mourning his disappearance, the alpha had the best moments of his life a continent away. Now that he's back, those years are supposed to become irrelevant?

Chewing meat feels like torture as he tries to focus his eyes on anything but the alpha's gaze; he can feel it burning his head, but he does his best to ignore it.

"I think it would be better if I leave." he hears the alpha murmur.

"With all due respect, boy. No one is leaving this table until we finish dessert." David says, causing the omega to let out another sigh.

Alexandra and his mother try to keep the conversation friendly, but it's quite difficult to keep up when Shane's thoughts continue to spiral into a senseless mess.

He wants to curse as much as cry, but showing weakness isn't something he can afford right now. The lump in his throat stays put, and when he risks looking at him, Ilya barely intervenes in the conversation. He seems just as lost in his own thoughts as he is, only with a worried expression on his face.

When dinner officially ends, it's clear that the king's mission hasn't been successful, but he makes an effort to thank the Rozanov guys for being here tonight, unlike Shane, who remains silent, a step behind his mother.

As soon as they leave the room, Shane knows a lecture is coming; his father is already standing there with his arms wide open, acting genuinely surprised and with a disappointed tone.

The wolf in his chest can't help but feel offended by his attitude, as if it too had forgotten the nights he'd cried himself to sleep after falling for the wrong man.

"Well then, maybe I should kill myself so you don't have to deal with my emotions if they're so inconvenient for you!" he yells, gesturing mockingly. His mother gasps, surprised by his

outburst.

"Shane, never say that again." she murmurs, her tone firm, pointing a finger at him. It only makes him feel more stupid and useless. "It's certainly been a night that didn't turn out as we'd hoped, but at least you tried. We need to move on now."

He snorts and rolls his eyes. "Can I be excused from this?" She nods, closing her eyes.

"You're too quick to run from your problems, too, son." is the last thing he hears him say before he opens the door.

Fuck you, he thinks.



The moment he crosses the threshold, he realizes he's having trouble getting enough oxygen to his lungs, so he decides to walk to the backyard, fanning himself with his left hand.

When he notices the gray smoke, he doesn't stop to think that someone else might be outside.

He just bumps into the figure of his ex best friend, leaning against the wall and staring at the sky.

Noticing him, the alpha lowers his cigarette and straightens up. Shane rolls his eyes and tries to go back the way he came, but his free hand grabs his arm, stopping him.

"*Please*," he says, his eyes pleading. "I know you're sad. Can we talk?"

"There's nothing more to say, prince Rozanov." he murmurs, taking a step back. He can't allow himself to be this close to him. "You made that clear years ago."

"I was a jerk and selfish. You made that very clear, and I'm not going to argue about it because you're right." he points out. "But please, just let me..."

"What's the point?" he asks, throwing his hands up in the air. "You just want to sweet-talk me and then stab me in the back. I know how people like you work."

"I never meant to hurt you," he begins, glancing down at his cigarette and noticing it's burning down, so he quickly puts it out. "I know I did, and intentions don't matter. But the life I had here had an expiration date, it was my duty to return."

"So that's what I am now, something you can pick up when you're looking for a little entertainment, sure." he says, letting out a snort. The alpha runs his free hand through his curly hair, tugging at it.

"Will you let me speak?" he asks, raising his voice.

"No, answer me this." he replies. "Did you get the letters?"

There's a tiny shift in his expression that feels like a dagger to his chest, yet the omega can only find the will to take another step back.

"Right."

"Shane..." he starts, but is cut off by him.

"No, don't *'Shane'* me, answer the goddamn question."

"I received them months later when I came back to Moscow."

His answer brings tears to his eyes.

"Yeah, right. Fuck off."

"No, *wait*." He steps in front of him before he can flee. "You're not listening to me." he looks him straight in the eyes.

"There's nothing to listen to, you just gave me all the answers I need."

"No, you don't."

He takes a step forward, forcing him to back away. The omega feels a traitorous tear trickle down his face but swiftly wipes it away with his hand. "What I can't understand is the audacity to show your face here, after all this time. You just had to see me doing well at something to try and ruin it, because you have such a big ego that..."

"That's not the fucking truth, and you know it," he mutters through gritted teeth. "I didn't write back because I knew what I'd do to you. I didn't want to give you false hope without being sure how life was going to turn out for me in the coming years."

"So what? You decide to isolate yourself from the world? Or was it just me you had a problem with?"

"No, I didn't have a problem with you. I never did," he clarifies, taking another step forward into his personal space.

"Shane, I came back for you. I know my timing is shit, and I should have been here on your twenty-first birthday begging you to let me court you. I know I screwed up, and I'm sorry, you have no idea how much." he says, shaking his head.

"I wished for you in every candle I blew out, and now you're telling me this shit. *Fuck*." He curses as sadness makes his throat close. "How can I believe you? You tried to leave a few hours ago, who knows where and with whom."

"No one, I promise. I just wanted to ride, clear my head. I wasn't trying to blindside you, either. Your father came looking for me."

The omega's shoulders shake as he lets out his first sob and immediately covers his face with his left hand. "Shane, I don't plan on leaving again. I'll be a part of this, I'll work to show you how much I feel for you." he says, in a soft tone. "I won't leave unless you ask me to."

The canadian prince tries to get his breathing under control but seems to be failing. Then, he feels one of Ilya's hands cradle his chin and slowly lift his head. He's too sensitive to resist, his wolf whimpers at the touch.

"I don't want to cause you any more pain. My heart aches just thinking that I'm the cause of all these tears. My alpha begs me to make it better."

At the mention of something as precious as his wolf, he lets out a whimper. He wants to be able to smell him again, even knowing it means breaking all the rules that have been created to keep him safe. Little did his mother know that under Ilya's touch, he had never felt safer.

The sound makes the taller man's gaze drop from his eyes to his lips for a brief second. His thumb gently caresses the skin, a touch so delicate that it won't help but leave a mark on his mind when it inevitably fades.

"*Omega*." he breathes out, whether a plea or a warning, he has never heard that word come out of his mouth, directed at him.

Being called by his status instead of his title is too intimate. Only people who are mates use those words. To anyone else, it's considered an insult.

He hates to admit that it sounds damn good when it comes out of his mouth, better than in his teenage dreams.

"This is such a bad idea." he says, his voice barely a whisper, trying to escape his gaze. The alpha leans in, his face inches from his, his hand still on his chin, urging him to keep looking. "We shouldn't."

"Let me do better, now that I'm able."

The corners of Shane's lips lift, having him this close after so long makes it hard to think straight.

The closeness he'd longed for all those years is finally there, Ilya offering it to him on a silver platter, and he can't help but feel confused.

The alpha presses. "Will you let me?" and he knows he has to take a step back.

"I need to sleep on it, I feel *so* tired." he says, his shoulders slumping and letting out a sigh. Instead of getting angry, the curly-haired man nods.

"Okay." he removes his hand from his chin, missing the contact as soon as it disappears. "You need to rest, I won't interfere with that."

He gives him another smile and gently wipes away his own tears with his fingers. "You can always cry in front of me, you know that, right? It's not weak."

Shane nods. “Yes.” and then. “I should go to my room now, I don’t want anyone snooping around and it’s late.”

“I know,” he says. “You go ahead, I’ll stay a little longer, making sure the coast is clear.”

He laughs, a genuine laugh, and proceeds to say goodnight. “Goodnight, prince Rozanov.”

The alpha flashes him a grin, and Shane tries not to think about anything else that might ruin his underwear.

“Sleep well, pretty prince.”

If the omega goes to bed with a huge grin on his face at the compliment, that's between him and the moon.

Chapter End Notes

don't forget to leave kudos and comment what you think!

Chapter 3: steal this moment

Chapter Notes

hello everyone! back at it again with another chapter, i am very happy to see all the support in this story since it's been on my mind for a while.

i think today's chapter is really special, so buy a treat and get comfy, i will read you on the other side!

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

To Ilya,

How are you? It's been three months since we last saw each other, and my worry hasn't lessened since then. I know what you're thinking: dramatic. Still, I've never been good with long distances, you should know that by now—I think you do.

My days here are filled with etiquette classes and shaking hands with older men. You'll be perplexed to learn that Sir Paul has married Mrs. Petra. I find it hard to believe how quickly they've been allowed to get away with it after all the damage they caused. I suppose perhaps some ends do justify the means.

Do you still think love will always prevail? There are some days when I believe it more than ever, especially when such complex people (because I'm not allowed to put other words, imagine the scandal) end up having their happy ending.

I'd love to hear from you.

Best Regards,

Shane.



Ilya's POV.

The moment he opens his eyes, he feels as if he's slept for twelve hours straight, instead of less than six.

He stretches out in bed and throws the covers off his body to get up. He runs his hands over his face and walks toward the bathroom to take a shower, but first he peeks out into the hallway to let one of the guards know he needs water.

Sound sleep for him is uncommon, mostly due to a pleasant dream or after a victory on the battlefield. Being at home has always meant constantly making plans for what might happen. And he's grown exhausted by it.

Now that he's finally a man, with indelible memories and victories that will be written in his country's history, he sees himself as someone worthy of Shane.

If only things were that simple.

When the betas enter the room, he's standing in front of his wardrobe, debating what to wear.

Today is not an ordinary day at Hollander Palace.

This afternoon, the prince will receive his suitors and spend some time with each of them to get to know them.

The alpha can't help but feel nervous, even though they've known each other since childhood. There are still many things the freckled omega doesn't know about him, a result of the distance he's put between them.

"Prince Rozanov, your bath is ready." one of the maids informs him.

"Thank you," he says, smiling. They close the door as they leave, and he begins to undress before getting into the bathtub.

The feeling that runs through his body the moment he submerges in the water makes him let out a groan of pleasure, and he unconsciously closes his eyes as he rests his head on the edge.

"Fuck," he murmurs, before submerging himself to wet his hair. Then, the usual routine begins.

While he bathes, he goes over the important points he'd like to discuss with Shane. He doesn't want to bore him with war stories, but also doesn't want him to think he is hiding something. His sister had advised him to try to be a little more communicative to make things work, and as cliché as it sounded, her words had resonated with him.

He asked her to come with him, in case the omega decided to kick him out as soon as they met. She had agreed, not only to be his moral support, but because she missed the family.

They all used to be a united front, that's the thing. When the alpha left, he never thought the other relationships would become affected by it, although in the first few months during training, he had hoped they would. Jealousy was consuming him.

He became more mature, not only in combat, but outside of it. The moment he noticed his upward trajectory was when he truly began to believe he would be a capable man, a capable alpha his omega could look up to with pride.

He was so caught up in the idea that he forgot that it was also important to show that the interest still existed, and he had no one to blame but himself.

Ignoring Shane was a burden he had to carry until he was ready to forgive him. Just thinking about it made the alpha want to submit to a fight without resistance, but now he knew that wasn't a brave stance to have.

He also didn't want the conversation to revolve around his grief over what had happened. He used to know the omega well enough to know that he appreciated it when the other person showed interest in the things he liked. He had a feeling that hadn't changed.

Thinking about the previous night, his doe-like eyes staring at the plate as his breathing became erratic, made Ilya want to take him in his arms and carry him to a nest made by himself.

Knowing that he was responsible for Shane being in that state was a lump in his throat.

The closeness they shared later, in the palace's backyard, the way Shane allowed him to cradle his face, and the sound he made when he heard him call him by his status—these are small moments that ease the agony his alpha feels for having his omega so close, but not enough.

Even though Shane himself uses inhibitors, there's something about the sound of his footsteps that makes the alpha recognize him.. He didn't know if it was best to move closer to the flowers to avoid disturbing him, or if it had been a gift from the moon. He chose to stay still and wait to see him.

It had turned out better than he had imagined, considering the failed dinner. Despite not giving him an answer, the omega had promised to sleep on it. He truly hopes he has a positive response.

Just thinking about Shane's lips, his soft voice—even when angry—his hazel eyes, makes him shake his head to avoid sinful thoughts that will end up making him late for their meeting.

Once he steps out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his hips and his hair still wet, the alpha proceeds to spray the scent inhibitor on his neck before getting dressed.

The moment he leaves his room for breakfast, another alpha is walking down the hall. He murmurs a curt "good morning" and quickens his pace to reach the living room.

Several of the alphas have already struck up friendships, something he finds strange and twisted, knowing they are all after the same omega.

From the moment he received the invitation, he was well aware that the other suitors would be obstacles to overcome, he didn't want to get involved in stupid games.

He is aware that everyone perceives him as the opponent to be defeated, and he won't do anything to change their minds. He knows that being feared, on this occasion, implies being respected.

Most of those who passed the first stage are, relatively speaking, the same age as the prince. This means Ilya has a better record to boast about. Something his parents will surely take into account.

Being competitive is ingrained in him; more so for being an alpha, these tendencies increase when it comes to the one he's convinced is his omega.

He felt relief the moment he received the letter written by the king, along with the invitation. It meant that the bridges hadn't been burned and gave him the necessary confidence to decide to travel here.

As always when he enters a place, the noisy chatter transforms into soft murmurs until they get used to his presence.

The alpha keeps his head held high, assessing the faces of each of his rivals and realizes that few can hold his gaze. Which means there will be few opponents who are on his level.

He supposes that the increase in his ego is closely linked to having experienced what it's like to be on a battlefield. He had visited several countries and knew that not all cultures considered it obligatory for princes to lead the battalion. Before leaving, he couldn't help but feel a pang of envy.

He sat down in the usual sof  with his cup of tea and some homemade pastries on his plate. He ate in silence, watching the guards change shifts through the window. He preferred this to hearing something that might make him angry.

He wondered if Shane had woken up yet or decided to linger in bed a few more minutes. He thought about his parents, and the idea of asking them not to be so hard on him crossed his mind.

He didn't want to cause divisions within the family; he simply wanted the omega to feel the love he had for him.

"Hey." the prince of Argentina approached to greet him. Ilya looked him up and down without flinching. "Would you mind if I sat here?"

He doesn't give a verbal response, simply gesturing with his hand. The man holds two plates in one hand and a glass of orange juice in the other. "Thanks, man. I was afraid something would slip."

He makes an evasive sound, trying to convey that he has no desire to speak and that he was better off in silence. The other alpha seems to understand, merely grabbing pieces of his food

and drinking, until he asks another question.

“Hey, I was wondering, are you really planning on resigning your position as King of Russia?” his words make him turn his head quickly. “Because I know it's a very large country, you must have many people who adore you.”

“I'm here, right?” he nods. “Same as you.”

“Yes, but it's different.” Ilya tilts his head. “You did a lot for your country, man. The kind of impact that ends with your face painted on murals, things like that. We don't—my place is different, we have a more ceremonial role.”

He knows perfectly well that the implications of being a prince in his country differ from those in the rest of the world, and he's not going to be ashamed of it because, in the end, they gave him the knowledge he needed to grow and be able to be here for Shane.

“Are you saying I should quit?” he asks, because he's forced him into a conversation and enjoys seeing people shudder.

“Not at all,” he quickly replies. “I'm just saying it's impressive. I have no idea how we're going to compete with you, if I'm honest.” he adds this last part and lets out a laugh, the curly-haired man doesn't mimic it.

“You can always leave.” he retorts, in a bored tone.

“Yeah, man. That's not going to happen,” he murmurs, his voice shifting to its true tone. He doesn't need to add anything else, so he resumes the precious silence.

The alpha stands up when he finishes eating. “Good talk, uh. I'll see you around.”

He doesn't bother to reply, knowing perfectly well that this snooper will never be Shane's cup of tea.



Ilya is wrong.

Not about the prince, but about his overall perspective of them all.

After lunch with his sister, who had noticed his obvious nervousness about what would happen later and had given him some advice, the alpha went for a walk outside the palace to focus more on what he was going to do.

When he returned to his room, there were still ten minutes until they had to go down the hall for the reunions to begin, so he looked in the mirror to touch up his hair and grabbed what he needed to head there.

What he hadn't counted on was finding a long line before reaching the door, which made his expression change from calm and serene to one of concern.

The beta to whom Shane was always attached at the hip was standing in front of the door, talking to one of the princes. He took a step forward to get his attention.

"Is this okay? Aren't they going to call us in alphabetical order?"

"Prince Rozanov, we never mentioned how we would do it." His tone reveals irritation. "So, if you could please line up with the rest of the princes to avoid any inconvenience."

He realizes, at that moment, that most of them are carrying large boxes and can't help but feel a pang of insecurity rise in his chest.

What if I make him sad? I didn't bring anything grandiose or striking.

He feels the small red box in his right pocket and wonders if he should flush it down the toilet while he still has the chance and come up with some excuse that Shane might not believe and...

"I need to see him," he announces, his voice strong and decisive. Jackson looks at him as if he's grown a third eye. "Prince Hollander," he clarifies. "I need to tell him something, is he inside yet?" he asks, taking another step forward. The beta steps in front of him to avoid having him grab the doorknob.

"You will see the prince when it's due. If you want that to happen, then you must join the line that the rest of the princes did."

"Tell me if he's there," he insists. The blonde man looks at him defiantly, and Ilya, for a second, feels he will return to the line empty-handed.

"Prince Hollander hasn't arrived yet," he murmurs, then turns his head to announce loudly, "Which means you all arrived unnecessarily early. The meetings will begin at the scheduled time; no one is allowed to save your places."

He can hear murmurs coming from behind him, some complaining and others talking about him, but he doesn't care. "Fine. Thank you."

Jackson nods once but still doesn't move from the door, not trusting the alpha.

He's certain that the beta knows everything that happened between them and can't be offended by his stance. In fact, there's a certain relief within him knowing that the omega had someone to lean on during his time away and that things haven't changed so much.

As he walks to the end of the line, he counts the number of suitors who will enter before him; he'll have to wait for twelve meetings before it's his turn.

The queue moves slowly; it seems Shane is determined to spend a considerable amount of time getting to know them better. Ilya knew what he was exposing himself to when he packed his things to travel here.

The minutes tick by, and some employees pass by with refreshments to fight the heat while they wait; some have their jackets in their arms, and others use the gifts to fan themselves.

The alpha is certain that Yuna, the queen, planned this knowing that some would become impatient and irritable. He can't criticize the methods she uses to help her son realize who is capable of taking his place, when he, probably, would be worse.

He doesn't speak to anyone, still debating whether to show him the gift he brought or wait.

There are few moments when he's felt insecure, and when that happens, he takes it to extremes.

Ilya used to have a short temper, but with the wars he's fought in and all the strategies he's had to create from scratch, he's had no choice but to learn to control his temper over the smallest things.

The sound of laughter coming from the hall makes him straighten his back again so he can glance at the man who's just come out. That was definitely Shane, and the reason he was laughing might be unknown, but the other princes pat the man from Thornvale on the back.

"Yeah, man. He loved the plant, I even made a joke about it," he hears him boast.

He unconsciously clenches his jaw, looking him up and down without flinching. The guy wears a proud, relaxed smile; his alpha wants to press a dagger to his neck and force him to talk.

The clock kept on moving, and the jealousy that had surfaced in his chest began to subside.

If they weren't in this situation, he wouldn't even flinch if another alpha made him laugh, but he knew perfectly well that they were competing, and his position wasn't as secure as the others believed.

He ran a hand over his face and sighed. Right now, a cigarette would be perfect.



When he's next in line, he checks that everything in his outfit is in order and cranes his neck.

He knows now that the rest of the alphas are eager to sink their fangs into the omega's neck and that they're underestimating the omega prince, something that should give him a slight advantage.

As soon as the previous suitor leaves, Jackson asks him to wait and enters the room for about four minutes. He resists the urge to open the door and walk inside because he knows they must be talking about the man who just left.

What he does do is lean his head against the wall and try to make sense of what they're saying.

"So damn nervous."

"Yeah...he mentioned his ex." and then something unintelligible, ending with a few laughs.

Ilya can't help but smile and straightens up just in time for the beta to open the door once more, letting him in.

Shane is sitting on the couch, grabbing a bite from one of the pastries in front of him as he enters. He stares briefly at his outfit: a lilac t-shirt and beige shorts. He thinks he's the most beautiful omega to ever walk the earth, with his rosy cheeks and painted lips.

"Good afternoon, prince." he says, bowing.

"Good afternoon," he murmurs, and Shane gestures to the spot next to him.

Before sitting down, he offers his left hand, and the omega places his own hand on it. He presses a kiss to the palm of his hand while keeping his gaze locked on his hazel eyes. He notices a smile at the corner of Shane's lips, and it renews his confidence.

"I hope it's not boring for you," he begins, glancing at the gifts in the corner of the room. Some are open, others still in their boxes.

He laughs and shakes his head. "It's fine. Fortunately for me, I don't have to prove I'm worthy of a mate."

"Because you already are," he remarks, his eyes locked on his. The omega looks away. "Did you sleep well?" he ventures to ask.

"I slept wonderfully," he replies.

He smiles at him. "I'm glad," he says, being honest.

"What about you?"

"Me too, yes." he nods.

"That's good." he says.

The silence stretches for a few seconds, looking at each other. He wants to say so many things but has no idea how to begin.

"I..."

“I was *think*—” they say in unison, causing each other to laugh.

“Go on.” Shane urges him.

“I was thinking about what your mother mentioned yesterday about Libya. Are you riding more often now?”

“You could say that. I like to hide away and go riding outside the palace. Sometimes I go to the local fair and pretend to be someone else. It’s a very exciting feeling. Other times I do it with Jackson; we go to the river and spend the afternoon,” he tells him. “I assume you must like it too.”

“It’s a good way to clear my head,” he remarks. “I like the way it makes me feel. Eunice behaved very well.”

“Of course he did, horses don’t forget,” he murmurs.

“I suppose so.” He inclines his head slightly. “How does it feel to be close to ascending the throne?”

“A lot of responsibility,” he replies, sighing. “The people have placed all their hopes on me for a change in the political climate, and that requires more than just persuasion.”

“You’re still inheriting the same Court as your mother. The Council is still the same, isn’t it?”

He nods. “She said that the expectations of them retiring once I ascend the throne are high, but I’m not sure how that will make me look in front of the country’s lords. They still don’t want to share their wealth.”

“Well, they’re destined to leave, either by choice or due to age,” he points out. “It will be important to have the support of the people; they won’t let people with similar ideals judge them.”

“I know,” he says, sighing. “The scheming is so vast that it can be overwhelming at times,” he tells him.

He feels fortunate to be hearing his honest opinion, rather than a much more politically correct version. He gives him the sense that trust hasn’t disappeared; it’s simply been buried, and it’s his job to bring it back to the surface.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to handle it perfectly well,” he murmurs, smiling at him. “You were always the one who made things happen; your perseverance is a quality you should cherish.”

“Do you really want to give up Russia to rule here with me?” he asks, taking him by surprise.

“I only want to rule if it means being by your side. I’ve done all my work in Russia, and I’ll be eternally grateful for everything they taught me to become the man I am today, but those days are over,” he states, looking him in the face. “I know where I belong. I always have.”

“Even so, you never said so.” he murmurs. “You never let me know you felt anything for me.” he emphasizes.

“I didn’t think it was the right time,” he explains. “I was...” he sighs. “There was so much going on. I realized you were growing up too, and all I’d done was run from my legacy while I stayed here.”

“So you decided to leave without an explanation,” he points out.

“It didn’t feel that way when I was leaving. It felt necessary,” he argues, to which the omega snorts.

“Wow, Prince Rozanov. You definitely have a way with words.” he says, ironically. “The only thing you’ve shown me time and time again is that you never choose me when it comes down to it.”

“Shane, it was never that simple.” he murmurs.

“Don’t say my name,” he tells him, and he knows he’s only saying it because he’s hurt.

“Prince Hollander,” he corrects himself, despite not wanting to. “I was choosing you by deciding to step aside until I could become someone worthy. I was a stupid kid back then, and you always had potential; it would have ended in an inevitable collision.”

“It doesn’t matter now.” he says, waving his hand. “It’s stupid to keep talking about this after all this time.”

“Not to me,” he mutters. The omega ignores him. “It matters to me because I can’t let you keep thinking I won’t choose you. That idea is absurd, even to my wolf. I never thought that punishing myself would end up hurting you more.”

He seeks his gaze. “I want to make amends as much as I want you to trust me again,” he says, and proceeds to take out the small box he carries in his pocket. “This is for you.” he says, opening it to see what’s inside.

The omega’s gaze shifts from the gift to his chest. “This is...”

“People say beliefs can’t be gifted, that they must come from within,” he begins. “When I was in the war, I went through nights with crises of faith. I even thought that defeats were my penance for not being fast enough. My father used to say that I became very lazy from being in one place for so long; I couldn’t understand it.”

Shane’s gaze is fixed on him instead of the gift, listening attentively to what he’s saying.

Instead of feeling vulnerable, he feels like a beginner just learning to walk; it’s strange but not humiliating. He supposes it has to do with being in front of the person he loves and noticing that he’s open to what he has to say.

“I realized he lost that happiness I used to carry the moment my mother passed away. His light was fading, and somehow, seeing me happy was like twisting a knife.”

"I didn't know..." he whispers, he shakes his head.

"I know. I never told you, and that's on me." he clarifies. "What allowed me to keep going wasn't the common good or trying to change my father's perspective about me. I knew that couldn't be fixed," he murmurs.

"You are my faith, and it will always be this way. *This*." He shows him the cross hanging on his chest. "It has taken on a new meaning for me."

"Which is it?"

"Faith can only be sustained if we are willing to love." he replies. "And I have already found him."

The omega's gaze turns tearful at this, his expression softens, and he finds the courage to take the necklace with his delicate fingers. He inspects the Russian cross and runs his index finger gently over it.

"I know it's nothing grand, and that the other gifts are probably better. But I wanted you to have it."

"This is...incredibly sweet, thank you so much." he says, looking into his eyes.

Ilya smiles at him and is about to assure him that he doesn't need to put it on now, ignoring the wolf inside him that yearns to mark him in any way possible, when the omega asks, "Would you mind putting it on me?" his soft voice when he asks makes him want to kiss him.

The alpha nods twice and places the small box on the table. Shane hands him the necklace and turns around so he can put it on.

The curly-haired man runs his hands behind his neck and asks him if that's the right length. Once he has it, he hooks the ends and rests it against his skin. He has to fight the urge to lean in and press a kiss to the area and nuzzle his nose against his neck.

Even though there are no pheromones wafting in the air, it feels charged with unresolved tension and late-night confessions.

"There." he murmurs.

The prince turns to look at him again and adjusts the collar so it falls in front of him.

"Thank you, this was very nice. A wonderful gift."

His wolf wants to howl, while his human side feels hopeful.

"You deserve something nice." he murmurs, making him blush. His gaze drops to the cross, and a smile automatically forms on his lips.

"I should let the next one in," he says, his voice sounding guilty.

Despite the jealousy he feels at the mere thought of other alphas spending time with the omega, he won't show him that irrational side of him because he knows it's not his fault.

"Of course," he nods and stands up.

"The Thursday group heard the rumors that you're back," he tells him, surprising him with the news. "I told them to come tonight after the gala; it'll be in the room next to the library, as usual."

"I'll be there," he replies, unable to suppress his smile.

He'll see his childhood friends again, and even though he knows apologies are inevitable, the excitement of being with them and the fact that they cared enough about the rumor to show up and see it for themselves is enough to make him happy. "Thank you for your time, Prince."

"You are welcome," he says, wrapping his fingers around the cross.



The only redeeming quality of the gala is the chance to admire Shane moving through the room with his characteristic grace, and he even manages to elicit a few genuine laughs from him.

David finds him off to the side, scanning the room. Three of the suitors are surrounding the omega, engaged in a conversation that doesn't seem awkward.

"Are you going to approach him, kid? Or do you need me to do it for you?"

"Mr. Hollander," he murmurs, by way of greeting. One of the waitresses passes by, and the king grabs two appetizers.

"You need to try this, it's damn delicious. Yuna always keeps an eye on me because she says I have too many, but the flavor is totally worth it."

Ilya takes his advice, making sure to savor the food before giving feedback.

"It's a little spicy, but it's okay," he murmurs.

"Yeah, she worries because she can't handle spicy food. If I told you how many times my friends and I have visited the taco place in town undercover, you'd be shocked," he laughs.

The alpha barely turns his head to see that the omega has moved to another table, his back to him. He's dressed in a blue suit that accentuates his delicate figure. It makes him feel guilty for having these thoughts with his father beside him.

"So, how was today? Any progress?" he asks.

"Well, I think that him agreeing to take me in is a big deal," he comments, not wanting to elaborate on their conversation. Besides, if the omega himself hasn't shared it, he's not about to break that rule.

He knows Shane sees his parents as overly intrusive, but he doesn't believe they have bad intentions. In the end, it's Shane who will be deciding his future and the path of his people.

"Of course, you know you can always count on me. Right, kid?" He nods. "I know it's not easy, but I can see you're a great man. My Shane deserves someone like you."

He smiles at him and thanks him sincerely. Having his parents' support makes him feel less adrift. "I appreciate it, I really do."

The prince sees them and, instead of frowning, bites his lower lip and shakes his head as if the scene were familiar. Perhaps, once upon a time, it used to be, which is why the curly-haired man's heart can't help but leap.

A prince steps into his line of sight, blocking his view of the precious omega. The king pats him on the back and says, "Let's go find your sister before she runs off with the waitress." he nods toward the alpha.

She's standing in front of another girl around her age with a tray full of food to serve. Ilya approaches and rests his hand on her left elbow while David dismisses the employee.

"Always the same thing with you." he whispers in her ear.

"What can I say? Old habits die hard." He rolls his eyes at her words. "Looks like yours did, though." he adds. "Watching him like you're a predator. You remember it's okay to approach and talk, right?"

"Ha, ha." he says, full of irony.

"I told him the same thing," David murmurs. "I guess my little Shane can be a bit intimidating when he wants to be."

"Perhaps," his sister murmurs, then leans close to his ear. "or perhaps you're afraid of being rejected in front of everyone, like a teenager."

"I just don't want to force him to talk to me. He needs his time to think, and I'm not going to interfere," he argues. They both turn to start walking toward one of the tables where the champagne glasses are. "Besides, I'm going to see him after this. Our friends heard I'm back."

"Oh, that's interesting. Are you sneaking out of your chambers to see them?" he rolls his eyes again.

"I'll wait until Shane comes closer."

“Hello.” his soft voice behind him makes him jump.

“Prince Hollander, I know I said it before, but I’ll say it again: you look gorgeous. Blue is your color.”

“You’re very kind, Princess. Thank you,” he replies. “I like the green on you; it really brings out the color of your eyes.”

“You certainly know how to flatter,” she says, laughing.

Ilya bows when his gaze meets his, setting his glass down on the table.

“Prince Hollander, you are the most dazzling person in the room, in the entire castle, even.”

He notices the different reaction to his compliment, the way his cheeks flush crimson and his teeth gently bite his lower lip.

“Thank you, Prince Rozanov,” he murmurs. “I wanted to talk to you about the new book you’ve been looking for from the library.” he says, the alpha shoots a quick glance to his sister that delivers the message.

“Oh, the main course has arrived. Excuse me.” she says quickly, leaving them alone.

Shane smiles at him, approaches the table, and looks for an empty glass, which Ilya cups in his hand and asks, “What can I get you? Would you like some water?”

“Yes, please.” he answers, breathless.

The alpha moves to the adjacent table where the water pitcher sits and fills the glass, then he goes back to him and hands it over.

The omega drinks without any ceremony, and Ilya stands there watching as his plump lips moisten and the Adam's apple moves. It's strange, but he finds it both charming and attractive.

The moment he sets the glass back on the table, Shane blinks twice, realizing he's been watching him the whole time. "Sorry. All this talking has made me thirsty," he murmurs.

"No problem." he assures him.

"Regarding what I told you, they'll arrive right after dessert. I know it's not polite to leave before the guests of honor, so I'll leave first. I'll wait on the first floor of the stairs that lead to my room because it's much easier to get there. Do not rush, they'll wait."

As he speaks, the alpha can't help but smile. He's going to see them again, all thanks to what Shane is doing. He wants to hug him and thank him with a passionate kiss, but he has to hold back.

"Did you understand?"

"Of course," he says, then adds. "I'm excited."

"I can see it," he observes. "I think everything's going to be okay," he murmurs, to which Rozanov raises his eyebrows in surprise. Shane looks away. "With our friends, I mean," he clarifies.

What about us? Will you let me kiss you someday?

"I really hope so," he says, licking his lips. "If at any point you don't feel comfortable, I'll leave."

"What?"

"I don't want to make you feel like you have to put up with me. I know we used to be all friends, but some things are undeniable. I'm not going to make a big deal out of it or use it against you. I'm already eternally grateful that you're doing this. I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage, because I came all this way for you."

Shane's mouth forms an "o" that he finds adorable.

"That's very...thank you," he chooses to summarize. "They deserve to see you again too. I think they'll be happy," he adds.

"Can we make a toast to that?" he suggests. "No champagne," he quickly clarifies. "So it depends..."

"...on us," they murmur in unison, laughing afterward. "Okay, let's do it."

They keep their gaze fixed on each other as they raise their glasses. An old tradition that the omega isn't aware he's passed on to his battle companions as a way to motivate them.

His eyes flicker to his freckles for a split second, and his hands itch to cup his cheeks, connecting the freckles as if they could form constellations beneath his eyes.

Shane's beauty is otherworldly.

Once they've toasted and sipped from the cool water, the omega excuses himself to continue mingling with the rest of his guests, and he has no choice but to watch him leave.

"Oh," he stops in his tracks to turn around. "I haven't changed rooms, so the stairs are still the same."

The way he says it makes his heart leap; this omega would have him on his knees in an instant with the same vehemence with which he would want to create a nest to keep him safe from the world.

"Okay," he replies, with his characteristic smile. The *"I already know"* is on the tip of his tongue.



The moment he finishes saying goodbye to his sister and leaves the hall, Ilya walks down the corridor to the staircase and skips a few steps to reach the first floor quickly.

Shane is standing at the bottom of the stairs talking to Jackson. The alpha greets him and then turns to look at him, waiting to walk together.

“Go get some rest.” he tells his friend. “I’ll walk back with Minerva and the others.”

“Okay,” he murmurs and pauses to look at him for a moment. “Have a good night.”

As soon as he starts to go down the stairs, the omega points the way and they begin walking together.

They don’t speak at all; the silence in the palace is a little intimidating, but as soon as they approach the library, they hear murmurs from the next room.

“I’ll go in first to make sure they don’t shout and close the door.” He lets him know, he nods, but before he can turn the handle, he takes his right wrist to make him turn around. “Thank you, again.”

The prince nods and continues with what he's doing. Ilya hides in the shadows to avoid a commotion, and when the door opens wide enough for him to pass through, Jacob, Kai, and Niall are the first to rush to him and hug him.

“You son of a bitch!”

“Oh my God! Welcome back!”

He notices the warmth of their embrace affecting the armor he's been carefully building. He looks into their eyes, the memories he holds from when they were younger hidden behind each stare and wants to treasure all of it forever.

“We missed you, brother.” Kai pats his back. “How dare you have us find out by a greengrocer? Are you crazy?”

He shakes his head, unable to say anything because of the overwhelming emotion. The guys step aside so he greets the women in the group: Minerva, Isla, and Abigail. They all give him a kiss on the cheek, and the group forms a circle around him.

“How the hell have you been, man?” Jacob asks. The men look at him excited, while the women seem more curious of what he’ll say.

“Like shit,” he replies, not wanting to pretend. “I missed you guys so much, and I’m really sorry.”

“Oh, please.” Niall waves his hand, the beta of the group. “We didn’t come here to witness a trial. Just take a seat and tell us everything.”

“Always the gossip,” Isla says, in a teasing tone that makes her friends laugh.

Everyone proceeds to take their seats. Ilya scans the place like a tourist who’s just arrived in town and feels his friends sit down next to him. Shane stumbles into the seat opposite him, and the girls join in.

The alpha wants to keep the conversation lighthearted, even though he knows the purpose of the meeting is to see him again. He doesn't want to elicit pity or sorrow, nor does he want to reveal feelings that haven't yet been declared to the right person.

The omega never interrupts him, not even to join in on a joke, which speaks volumes about the kind of person he is, capable of setting aside his anger to maintain a good atmosphere.

Minerva is the quietest; when their eyes meet, it seems as if she's assessing him. He doesn't comment on it, as long as most are comfortable with his presence, he understands these things take time. Fortunately, he now has plenty of it.

His storytelling ends when Jacob suggests moving to the table where the cards are and playing. Kai pours whiskey into five glasses while Abigail prepares two gin cocktails. Shane goes to the small refrigerator and takes out a bottle of water.

Before they start playing, Ilya asks to be paired with Minerva, knowing it will get her talking to him and also stroke her ego.

“What? No. It was supposed to be my turn to play with her,” Kai protests.

“You didn’t just cross a continent to be Shane’s suitor, so don’t bother.” Minerva retorts, making the others murmur an “Ohh,” which brings back memories.

Ilya catches her eye, and she winks at him; he can work with that.

They play a game Jacob learned as a young man on one of his trips to Argentina, a game everyone loved. It’s about being quick and knowing how to lie. The alpha is known for being one of the best, and they used to play one-on-one games amongst themselves to pass the time.

He doesn’t expect the group dynamic to feel so familiar once he’s inside. Shane chats with Abigail and Niall while Isla makes sure the small snacks arrive at the table.

Back in the days, they used to bring in a musician to provide harmonies for the evening; today they opted for a record player, making everything more intimate.

Ilya is out of practice, so the opposing team gains an advantage in the first few rounds.

“Come on, Rozanov. I didn’t team up with you so you could knock me down,” she tells him, and it serves as motivation.

They end up winning the game by two points and always make sure to shake hands with all the players. “I fucking missed having a decent partner.” the alpha tells him, to which he laughs.

“Me too.”

The couples rotate, as do the games. Niall takes a cigarette from his jacket and raises it in the air like a trophy. Jacob opens the doors to the balcony and he joins them, though he chooses not to smoke tonight.

“So, how come you’re trying to win Shane over?” the taller man, Jacob, begins the conversation. He smiles and nods proudly.

“I always wanted to court him, even before he turned twenty-one,” he murmurs. “But I was too stupid, still a child.” he points out. “Not the kind of man he deserves, at least.”

“So you went off to fight the big boys, got some peace treaties, and now you came to woo your omega.” He nods to himself, taking a drag on his cigarette. “That’s good, man. I respect that.”

“How did he react?” Niall asks. “He didn’t mention anything about it, so I guess he was surprised.”

“Yeah, obviously,” he replies, turning his head to look inside. He finds the omega engrossed in his cards. “There are a lot of things I need to work through, still.”

“It’s good that you’re aware of that,” the beta tells him. He turns his gaze back to them.

“He’s the only one for me,” he tells them. “I feel it in my veins, in my heart.”

“You have to show him that,” Jacob murmurs. “That’s the only way he’ll be sure you won’t leave again.”

Ilya nods. Talking to his friends about his feelings is liberating.



The omega is sitting across from him, playing a different game, where they have to pass the cards around the table until they make a straight flush. From one moment to another, he decides to get up from the table and heads out onto the balcony.

Ilya keeps his eyes on him, noticing how he nervously moves the fingers of his right hand. He tries not to follow him as soon as he has his back turned, but he can't concentrate

properly; his movements slow and his expression changes.

Isla and Abigail are laughing beside him, so he presses his hand on Kai's shoulder to let him know he's not playing anymore, setting the cards aside.

When he joins him on the small balcony, he can hear him breathing heavily. He stays by his side without saying a word, letting him get used to his presence.

It's Shane who breaks the silence, standing up and turning to look at him. He can see the outline of his cross, almost hidden beneath his shirt, but it's there, bringing Ilya an unexpected calm.

"Why did you wait all this time?" he asks, his voice trembling. "You saw that nothing was going to change with them, they would still forgive you."

"Because I was selfish." he murmurs, to which he snorts audibly. "I wanted you, before anything else."

"You don't have me, yet." he replies, looking him in the eye.

"I know."

"And you never answered any of my letters," he points out. "If you were so...whatever it was you felt for me, didn't you think it was appropriate to let me know?"

He takes a step forward, entering his space. "How would you have felt if the first 'I'm in love with you' had been in a letter? Would you have believed me back then?"

The freckled prince remains silent. "You could have tried. I had to find out from my parents that you were fighting at the border. Why keep it a secret?"

"You would have worried ten times worse if I had told you. You would have found a way to convince your father to talk to mine and bring me back."

"Would it have been so bad? Didn't you want to be with me?"

"You're mixing things up." he murmurs. The omega shakes his head.

"No, I'm not," he insists. "Do you really love me, Ilya? Or are you just running from one place to another?" he asks.

The Russian prince clenches his jaw, his gaze turning more serious. As he takes another step forward, Shane takes one back, moving closer to the wall.

"I'm not running away," he says. "I came here for you, because I want *you*, not someone else. *You*."

"Because I was always available? Because I'm easy?" He shakes his head, taking another step forward, the omega's back pressed against the wall.

"Because our hearts still beat in sync, because I see you in my future. Let me show you I can be the man you dreamed of."

Shane swallows, his gaze dropping to his lips for a moment. "All my life, I only ever wanted an alpha. I longed for him to look at me the same way, I spent nights wondering if I could ever feel that connection, but he chose war over me."

"That's not true," he murmurs. "You know it's not true. Being away from you felt like constant agony, this lump in my throat I couldn't shake, this weight on my shoulders...unbearable."

"I don't know," he says, sounding sad. The wolf in his chest pleads for him to make it better and get Shane out of this miserable state.

Your fucking fault.

Ilya cradles one of his cheeks, forcing him to make eye contact. His eyes are glassy, and there has never been a moment when he's wanted to scent him more than now. He strokes his skin with his thumb as he watches him.

"I know my mistakes can't be erased, and I'm sorry for that. You deserved a love without complications. I know I brought this sadness to you, and I don't like it. I hate it." he shakes his head.

"But I still love you, with the same devotion. And I want to be the man who's there for you, who can hold your hand, kiss your cheek. I want to be your alpha, Shane. I want it badly."

The omega's lips part, surprise reflected on his face at hearing him speak. All of a sudden, he's placing his hands on his shirt to pull Ilya closer and press their mouths together.

He's never felt so ready for the impact, the taste of cherry lipstick on his lips drives him wild. The hand that he had over his cheek slides down his body, moving under his suit, while the other rests on his lower back, pulling him closer.

Shane tilts his head and opens his mouth wider, the alpha's tongue collides with his, eliciting a gasp from him.

"Fuck."

The heat of their bodies, followed by the sounds of their kiss, makes his pants feel tight. When he inhales during the kiss, he catches the omega's scent of arousal. *Cherries and damp earth.*

They pull away, panting, but their bodies are still pressed together. Ilya smiles at him, and Shane runs his hands along his neck until he reaches his collar.

"You're wearing it," he says, taking the opportunity to tell him.

"You gave it to me," he utters, stating the obvious.

The alpha nods, a feeling of possessiveness rising in his chest, and leans in for another kiss. The omega eagerly accepts, pulling him along by the chain.

Their feet are pressed together, so he decides to slide one between the other's legs, eliciting a gasp.

"Please, Ilya. Touch me," he begs. "I feel hot."

A smile forms on his lips at this. Shane tilts his head, revealing his neck, and the taller man has to suppress the growl that threatens to escape his lips.

Seeing him so malleable makes him feel like a lucky man, his heart leaping. The hand on his shirt caresses his right nub through the fabric while the one on his back slides down to meet the curve of his ass.

His mouth moves from his lips to his chin, passing over his cheek. He kneads the flesh of his ass with his hand while his hips begin to rock against his leg.

"How does that feel?" he asks in a whisper. The omega lets out a choked moan. "Huh?"

"Good...I-I don't know."

"Do you like having me touch you like this?" he asks, pulling his head back to look at him. The omega nods. "Good, you feel warm, don't you?" He nods again. "That's good, means your body is comfortable with me."

He leans in to kiss him again while rubbing his leg between his own. "You're so beautiful, *kotik*. You take my breath away every time you walk into the room." he leans close to his ear. "It makes me want to crawl on my knees for your attention."

"*Ah.*"

The canadian prince bites his lower lip, Ilya replaces his tooth with the index finger of the hand that was resting on his chest.

Seeing Shane suck on the finger like it's an ice cream makes his gaze darken and he lets out a low *fuck*.

When he looks up at him, the alpha notices that his hair is disheveled and his pupils are dilated to another level. He's never seen the omega like this, only imagined it, and he has to say that reality is infinitely better.

He withdraws his finger soaked in saliva and pulls him in for another kiss.

The sound of Abigail's laughter makes the omega freeze, they've both completely forgotten where they are, kissing like two hormonal teenagers.

The change in Shane's expression is palpable, from a state of pleasure to one of overwhelming terror. He shakes his head and removes his hands from his body. "They didn't hear anything, don't panic."

"This shouldn't—" he shakes his head, moving aside, away from him. He runs a finger along his lower lip, wiping away his saliva. "We shouldn't... I can't do this."

"We both wanted it," he murmurs cautiously. He can tell Shane is spiraling out of control and needs to calm him down. "Nothing's wrong, no one saw us," he assures him, but it feels like a switch has been flipped and anything he says will be met with a wall. The omega is already out of his reach.

If there weren't so many things between them, Ilya wouldn't hesitate to reach out and take him in his arms, soothe his fears, and scent him. Unfortunately, that's not their reality.

"You should go inside," he says, coughing right after. "I'll follow you in a bit," he assures. "I need air."

He nods because there isn't much more he can do, not when the prince has put this distance between them, and taking more risks could only make things worse.

"Okay," he murmurs. "Take all the time you need," he adds.

He nods, though he's no longer looking at him. The curly-haired man has to force himself to put one foot in front of the other and leave the confined space they shared, leaving the omega's trace of scent behind.



As it starts to get late and they begin to rise from their seats, he approaches the prince to ask if he wants him to walk him back to his room.

He receives a firm no, assuring him that Minerva will walk him instead. His alpha can't help but let out a sad howl but takes comfort in the fact that he won't be walking alone.

He accompanies his friends through the side exit of the castle and spends a few minutes alone smoking, his only company is the owl perched among the trees.



He realizes very quickly that the omega is avoiding him.

It starts the moment their eyes meet in the hallway, with Shane leaving breakfast with his parents and him heading outside. The omega's eyes shift to those of his friend Jackson as they turn a corner. He decides not to rush to him, knowing there will be time to talk.

A few hours later, when Ilya returns from riding, he sees the omega in the courtyard, talking to one of the princes while they sit on one of the wooden benches. His keen eyesight allows him to distinguish the exact moment the alpha puts a hand behind his shoulder and Shane is laughing.

His jaw locks and his expression hardens in that instant. Not towards him, never towards Shane, but towards the alpha who thinks he's allowed to abandon etiquette to get closer.

He knows how hypocritical that thought is, but jealousy is never rational. He walks over to them, not caring how he looks, and stands in front of them.

“Good afternoon, Prince,” he says, keeping his gaze on him and bowing. Shane shifts in his seat, glancing at the man beside him, who mistakes it for discomfort of his presence.

“Prince Rozanov, did you have a good ride?” the alpha asks, with an air of superiority.

He moves the arm that was on the back of the seat and Ilya believes, for a split second, that he has won. It turns out he is only adjusting his shirt collar and returns it to the same position.

“Yes,” he answers, without bothering to look at him. He needs to get Shane's attention, now more than ever.

He understands that he might feel self-conscious after what they shared yesterday, and for that very reason, the alpha tries to reassure him that there is nothing he regrets, hoping to lighten the weight on his shoulders.

He knows that, despite not being comfortable with most of the rules, the omega isn't someone who tests boundaries. Perhaps, when he was younger, only a little. Now that he knows what the image of a prince represents to his people, the responsibility outweighed it.

Ilya wants to be the one who comforts him, not a man who just appeared in his life and does not have the slightest idea about what worries the omega.

"One might think you came to Canada on vacation, the way you spend time in the stable." he hears him mutter, which makes Shane turn to look at him, taken aback.

The man looks arrogant and conceited, an ideal combination for someone who is always trying to prove them wrong. Ilya knows that the confident way he carries himself can easily be mistaken for that, but he doesn't care.

“I definitely didn’t come to Canada on vacation. I just enjoy riding,” he notices the omega’s eyes straying to his open shirt, revealing some skin. “I would recommend it, Prince. But I’ve heard you’ve had trouble with it.” he looks at him and grimaces. “*Sorry.*”

“I only did because...”

“I think you should go inside and hydrate, Prince Rozanov.” Shane interrupts, speaking to him for the first time. A smile forms on his face. “The sun may be hidden, but it’s essential for the body.”

The decorous way in which he's suggesting the alpha to leave makes him not want to insist. He finds it endearing, sweet, even.

"Thank you, my prince." He proceeds to bow again while keeping his gaze on his. "I'll see you later."

He nods, something hidden in his gaze, and the alpha does as he's told, glancing at Jackson, who is at the palace entrance, watching from afar, before going inside.

They have another exchange hours later, when he has already showered and changed into more elegant clothes. He wears black with green pants and fixes his hair in front of the mirror.

The duty of applying scent inhibitor every few hours is starting to become something that finds him sighing as he does it. After being so close to the omega, touching his body and recognizing the desire in his eyes, in his voice, the desire to scent him has grown.

Tomorrow, other princes will leave the palace, reducing the number of candidates and increasing his chances.

He hasn't considered the possibility that Shane might choose to let him go, not because he doesn't think he's capable of it, but because what they experienced felt too real and intimate to be quickly dismissed.

He wonders if that was his first kiss since presenting as an omega, if he felt as relieved when their mouths collapsed together as he did.

Once he's ready, he makes his way to the hall where they will be having dinner.

On this occasion, a long table has been set up in the middle of the room, and several people are already standing around it, waiting for the royal family to appear.

As is tradition, David and Yuna appear first to entertain the eager suitors, who also want to be in their good graces. Ilya greets them with a bow and receives compliments on his attire from the omega.

"Very elegant, it looks great on you, darling."

"Yes, very much like a king." the alpha adds, raising his glass. He bows his head, grateful.

The moment the guards announce the prince's presence, he straightens his posture and a smile spreads across his face.

The doors open, revealing Shane wearing a silver dress with rosy cheeks. He smiles, Ilya thinks he looks perfect and wishes he could spin him around so everyone can see his dazzling beauty.

The usual princes rush to greet him, bowing as Shane walks through them to reach his parents, who are standing a few feet away from the alpha.

“Good evening,” he murmurs, then turns to look at him.

“Good evening, prince,” he murmurs, his voice husky. “That dress looks like it was made for you.”

“Oh,” he blushes. “Well, thank you very much.”

“The prince is right, darling. You chose the right outfit,” she runs a hand over his cheek. “My beautiful omega.”

“Thank you, mom.” and then he looks at the alpha again.

He wants to say so many things, and he also wants to hold him in his arms and never let him go, but it’s hard to know where to begin.

His attention is quickly stolen by the sound of the door opening again, revealing two of the remaining princes, who raise their left hands and approach them to apologize to Shane.

The alpha resists rolling his eyes when they bow and explain that they were unintentionally late. Since his omega is an understanding being, he nods and assures them that it’s no problem.

When it’s time to sit down, he knows there will be a conflict over who sits closest to the prince. Fortunately, his sister’s presence makes him not feel so bad about being several seats away from the shorter man.

Multiple conversations unfold throughout the dinner; everyone is on their best behavior, offering to get Shane what he needs and asking him questions.

Ilya notices that eating is difficult with so many eyes on him, and he's about to say something when the Prince of Greece speaks first.

“Prince Hollander, I heard you plan to cut funding to the national newspaper, and I'm very intrigued by how you intend to do it.”

It's clear from the way he looks at his cutlery that the question has thrown him off. It might go unnoticed by the others present, but he presses his napkin under the table to contain his anger.

It's obvious the alpha is trying to test him, to see if his plans are clever enough for his own brain. It shouldn't bother him the way that it does, since it wouldn't be the first time the omega has dealt with someone like this, but Shane's reaction makes him want to fight him.

“It's not about cutting funding,” he murmurs. “It's about democratizing the media system. Several unfortunate events have occurred that have left journalists in our country without support.”

“But it’s the nation’s newspaper, isn’t it? What does it matter what some citizens have to say? They only vote when they’re needed.”

“I think that’s crucial for improving our system. We need people to be more involved instead of becoming passive recipients. We should encourage different opinions, not silence them.”

“Who tried to silence them?” another prince asks, leaning across the table.

Shane glances at his mother, who is watching him with raised eyebrows.

“No one, but that doesn’t mean...”

“Excuse me, Prince.” the man interrupts again. “But if you say no one is silencing them, then I don’t see the point in defunding the national newspaper, which is the only one that reaches every corner of the country.”

Ilya doesn’t expect for him to have the nerve to interrupt him and explain something he doesn’t fully understand because he hasn’t lived in Canada, but he continues. “Besides, people have public squares to gather in. If they wanted to be heard, they would go there. Believe me.”

He glances at the people beside them, and they nod in agreement.

“That’s not entirely accurate. We’ve noticed that the distributors don’t reach every corner of our country. On the other hand, there are several good writers across the country who deserve better opportunities.”

“That sounds like charity,” he murmurs.

“It sounds like an idea in touch with reality and what people need,” Ilya says, causing the table to fall silent at the sound of his voice. All eyes are on him, but he doesn’t care. “Prince Hollander, I’m sure the people will listen and support your idea.”

“I’d need more than the support of the villagers, politics isn’t played like that,” the other prince points out.

“How long have you been running your country? Seven months?” he asks, but doesn’t wait for an answer. “Do you think that’s enough to understand the game?” he tilts his head, irony dripping from his tone.

He knows he struck a nerve when he mentioned how little time he’s had to control things in Greece, due to the leave his father had to take to sort out marital problems, and it’s something he enjoys. The idea of seeing men flinch at the thought of putting his omega in an awkward position delights him.

“And what about you?” he asks, to which he smirks.

“I think that’s enough,” the omega interrupts, raising his voice. “We should focus on dinner, let’s not make the food go to waste.”

The princes who hadn’t spoken and were sitting near him nod. Ilya remains silent but is pleased with what he just did.



He genuinely believes that supporting him will make the omega want to talk in private, but he's wrong again.

When two princes bid him farewell, Ilya takes the opportunity to approach with a smile on his face.

"Hey," he murmurs, glancing around before meeting the alpha's gaze.

"You didn't have to do that. I know how to defend myself," he says, too quickly. The curly-haired man frowns.

"I know you do," he mutters. "I just wanted to show my support. I find it fascinating that you want to fight that battle. My sister and I did the same thi—"

"I didn't ask for your support," he says, his tone sharp. "Right after he interrupted me, the man had nothing valuable to say. I was going to prove to my father that I can stand up to big men, but you had to say something." he points out, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"I didn't know that," he murmurs. "I saw you..."

"What? Helpless? Lost? You just had to interfere." he shakes his head. "Unbelievable."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, I can go and talk to Da—"

"No." he cuts him off. "Don't do anything I don't ask you to. Let's hope I get another chance." he glares at the alpha who's talking to his parents a few feet away. "If you wanted to help me feel less adrift, you should have been here three years ago." he says and walks away, leaving him standing there stunned.

Fucking shit.



Early in the morning, Shane summons all the princes to wait in one of the rooms so he can speak with each of them individually and personally inform them who will continue in the race for his heart.

After what happened the night before, Ilya is nervous. He opens one of the windows after seven princes have passed through, having been summoned by Jackson, and prepares to smoke a cigarette, ignoring the rest of the alphas present.

The alpha fears that his blunder has caused them to go back to square one, where the omega couldn't give him a tender look unless he was taken by surprise.

From where he sits, he can't hear anything. As the princes pass by, he notices that some of those he considers the most terrible are still in the room with him. He wonders if the plan is to tell them all at once, which would devastate him.

He gazes toward the horizon and rests his left hand on the cross, praying that the omega can see beyond that and choose to continue spending time with him.

When he's the last one left in the room, he allows himself to sit in the middle of the large sofa and throw his head back, letting out a sigh.

He curses under his breath; the kiss is still replaying in his mind. He can't let that be the end of their story, there has to be more pages to write.

The doorknob of the door they entered through turns, making him lower his head and frown.

Shane steps into the room, closing the door carefully.

Ilya knows he should prepare for the worst, but the omega's figure in those khaki pants is easily distracting, making him want to take him by the hips and sit him on his lap.

His omega has a body made to be worshipped, and bred.

"I thought I had to wait to be received on the other side," he says, standing a few steps away. The alpha has his legs open so he closes them quickly and stands up.

"I was never there," he murmurs. "I asked Jackson to handle it. I wanted a moment alone with you."

His voice is so gentle it confuses him. "Are you going to kick me out?" he asks.

"No," he replies, unable to help but relax his shoulders at his words. "I want answers, and I'm willing to hear them."

His face transforms into one of astonishment, and he proceeds to stand, moving closer. "Are you serious?"

"If you're going to stay, then we need to have the unpleasant conversation. Just, no half-truths or running away," he murmurs, his voice firm, as if it isn't something he's not uncomfortable with, but he understands is inevitable. "We need to make sure this isn't beyond repair."

Ilya nods, looking into his eyes and then at his hands. "I agree with you. Of course." He mimics him.

"Shall we sit down?" he asks.

"Yes, let's sit down."

The moment he'd been imagining all these years is finally here, and Shane doesn't seem defensive, but rather willing to listen and try to understand.

"Okay, uhm. I'll start from the beginning, alright?" the omega nods.

Ilya knows that after this conversation, nothing might ever be the same, but this limbo they're in isn't a healthy situation for either of them.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed it, this is the [tweet](#) to the story in case you want to rt it.
don't forget to leave kudos and comments if you're feeling excited!
btw the word kotik in this universe means kitten.
i'll see you next friday with the last chapter.

Chapter 4: just you

Chapter Notes

hello there!

first of all, i am sorry for the delay in posting this one, i stayed up until very late to wait for the episode and i had a scene left to write. i don't know how many people might be waiting for this update (if anyone) but i want to thank everyone that supported me during these weeks and endured the intrigue that comes with starting a wip.

this chapter is really long, so I recommend that if you're in the middle of something and you get the notification, wait until you have some time to get comfortable and read.

i hope you enjoy it.

welcome to the final show.

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

For Ilya

It's my birthday today. I feel stupid just writing it, but I'm not sure you still remember. I'm sitting at the same desk where I wrote all those previous letters, trying to think of something that might make you write me back, as if I knew you opened my letters and didn't throw them in the fire.

I miss you so much. No one prepared me for this emptiness. Jackson told me to give it time, but it's been too long, and I should have stopped after the sixth unanswered letter. I can't.

I can't because I know what it means. It means I loved and I've lost. Did you know this? Was that the reason you left? I'm so confused and angry because I allowed myself to dream about a life with you, what that would feel like, and now I have to face the consequences.

I'm letting you go, Ilya Rozanov. Wishing you never go through the same pain and that you can find the happiness you were looking for. Even if that's not me.

Goodbye,

Prince Shane Hollander.



Shane had never felt so anxious in his life, but he had to maintain a calm demeanor and focus on what the alpha was going to tell him.

After a conversation with Jackson the night before, he concluded that the situation could no longer be sustained by what his younger self wanted and that he had to discover if this was a version of Ilya compatible with his own. For that, he needed to hear his side of the story.

He pondered this with his pillow, tossing and turning in bed, when he woke up he came up with the brilliant idea of separating the other candidates under the pretext of wanting to speak with them individually and isolate the two of them for a private, uninterrupted conversation.

There would be no suspicion about his choice, because the omega wasn't in the room when Jackson told seven of them to pack their things and go home. Everyone would assume he was off on other business; they would only know that Ilya was the last to speak with his friend. The truth would remain a secret between the three of them.

“My father always wanted me to focus more on my country. He noticed I was too distracted, coming here whenever I could. Escaping from him like the plague, he knew the only way to persuade me to return was by playing on my greatest fear,” he tells him. “He knew how I felt about you, even before I could say it out loud. He weaponized it, and I let him.”

Every word that comes out of his mouth seems honest. Even though he only had three encounters with the King of Russia, he knows he's nothing like the kind of king his mother is. His intense gaze always ended up making him feel self-conscious, small.

“When you presented, it was like a dream come true. There you were, in your embroidered dress, with a smile that radiated enthusiasm. You were happy with who you had become. I think I fell in love with you all over again,” he recalls, smiling.

“I knew I couldn't let you know I was leaving, because you would have tried to make me stay. I didn't want to put you through that, because I had already made up my mind,” he murmurs. “I genuinely believed that the distance would allow me to understand other things, to gain perspective and become the alpha you desired.”

“The alpha I wanted was right in front of me, after those five days, looking up at me with pride,” he murmurs. “I never felt like you had to prove anything to me or be a certain thing for me to be with you. I fell in love, and I wanted that to be all there was to it.”

“I understand. I know my feelings were mixed with the fear of disappointing you and the pressure of the expectations my father placed on me. I know I was an idiot and a jerk for not answering any of your letters, but you have to know I clung to them the whole time I was away,” he says, looking him straight in the eye.

“I wrote different versions, some brief, others far too long. I ended up not sending any, and I'm sorry. The thought of you wanting to travel to Russia to see me scared me. Not because

you weren't the first face I wanted to see, but because I didn't feel I'd learned anything worthwhile in that time. I wasn't ready."

"Well, I wasn't ready to see you step out of the carriage a week ago either," he points out. "Didn't you think it would be a good idea to let me know?"

"To be honest, your father sent a letter along with my invitation. I followed his advice, I'm sorry."

If he's honest with himself, the fact that it was a surprise has the potential to become a romantic gesture, depending on what the future holds. He talked it over with his friends, and all three of them emphasized that it was something he shouldn't hold against him.

"Don't apologize," he tells him. "It's okay, it wasn't the worst thing in the world," he says, gesturing with his hands. "I was just angry."

"Yeah, I know," he says, giving him a half-smile.

The omega sighs, and silence envelops them both for a few minutes. In his mind, he replays all the things the alpha said and wonders if he can truly look beyond that or if he's become a hopelessly resentful man for the rest of his life.

It's a complicated situation he's in, because he also doesn't want his younger self to feel like his pain is being ignored, but when he closes his eyes and thinks about his future, there hasn't been a day when Ilya's image wasn't present. Even when it was just daydreaming.

"It's hard," he begins. "Letting this pain go. It's been inside me for so long that I've grown used to the way it feels," he continues, the alpha looking at him with wide eyes. "It feels like I'm trying to forget something on purpose."

"It wouldn't be forgetting," he murmurs. "But making room for something else, a better feeling," he suggests. "You can trust me not to forget how my attitude made you feel, because I could see it in those letters."

"You don't have to keep it locked away, either. But you must learn from it," he tells him, and the alpha nods.

Shane looks down at his hands in his lap and then back at him. "I'm not sure I know how not to love you. Even with all this time apart."

"Me neither," he says, leaning in. "And I don't want to."

The omega inside him cries out for physical contact from the alpha, and he knows that denying him will only make him feel worse.

Ilya seems to sense this and raises his left hand, running his knuckles along his cheek in a caress. He closes his eyes and leans in for the touch.

"My heart beats your name," he whispers. "My alpha feels in sync with your omega even without being able to smell him. Constantly searching for you."

His fingers rest on his chin, and he strokes his skin with his thumb. Shane dares to look at him, even with his blurred vision. He wants to look at him as he says all these things and make sure it's not a dream.

“Being your alpha would be the greatest joy of my life. I promise I will take such good care of you.” The last part he leans in to whisper in his ear, making his skin prickle and his throat tighten.

“*Ilya...*” he says. He has no idea if it's a warning or a plea, but his lips are so close, and his neck too, that he can't stop his instincts from taking over.

“I will be your mate, the man who will be there to hold your hand when you feel down and to support your achievements.”

He closes his eyes, imagining the scene. “*Mmhm.*”

“You will be their king, and my omega.” he pulls away from his body to look at him, still caressing his skin. “Damn, I can't wait to see you full of my babies.”

Shane feels slick start to come out of his hole and straight to his underwear, his cheeks turning crimson, and he wants to look away in embarrassment, if it isn't for his hand preventing him.

“You'd like that too.” he utters, with a sly smile. The omega doesn't deny or confirm; his body has already spoken for him.

“Do you promise to be open with me? No more secrets or hiding your insecurities?”

The alpha nods. “I'll be honest, I won't hide the bad from you. Even if it involves me.”

He reaches out his right hand and presses it against his chest, right where his heart is. “I truly don't think you're a bad person, or cruel,” he says, looking him in the eyes.

Ilya doesn't seem convinced, a clear fear behind his gaze. “I am being honest, you have to believe me. I know how parents can be, okay? Because first and foremost, they're people, with their own flaws. That won't absolve them, but it also explains the way we were raised.”

“I never want to see him again,” he murmurs, a confession that shouldn't surprise him.

“Then you won't.” he tells him. “You're here, with me.” he feels it's important to remind him. “You've changed, you've grown. Are you proud of who you are?” he nods shyly. “Good, then that's what matters. You have people who love you, that's important too.”

“Thank you.” he smiles at him, and it's genuine. The wolf inside Shane purrs, content.

His gaze shifts to his lips, and all it takes is a small nod from the Canadian prince for their lips to meet.

The kiss is soft, less rushed than the first, but just as reverent. The minty taste of his lips is addictive. Shane misses being able to smell his cedarwood and coffee scent, and it's

becoming a necessity.

The moment he leans his head back on his palm, his tongue licks his, making a sound that makes him want to be closer. The hand that was on his chest moves up to his shoulder and grips the fabric of his shirt.

He's never experienced such a consuming sensation without being in a relationship. Now that he's tasted it, he suspects he won't feel this good with anyone else.

Alpha is here to calm us down. Let him.

They break apart from the kiss, panting, and Ilya presses their foreheads together, caressing their cheeks with both hands. "Fuck," he babbles. "That was nice."

"Hm, just nice?" he asks, teasing him. "Because the sounds you were making say otherwise..."

"Idiot." he says affectionately.

Shane has to pull away, but the alpha runs his thumb along Shane's lower lip, wiping away the remaining saliva. He suppresses the urge to lean down and suck on the finger, because that's not what princes do.

"So pretty." he murmurs, making him blush once more.

He stands, and the curly-haired man follows. "We don't start from scratch, we simply build on what we've learned." he states.

"I'll make you consider me worthy to stay by your side, prince Hollander." he says, bowing without taking his eyes off him.

He has to suppress the smile that forms at the corner of his lips and settles for a nod. "I'm leaving now, you'll stay a few more minutes."

"Would you let me take you out on a date?" he asks abruptly, making him blink in surprise.

The very words he had longed for in his youth finally escaped his lips. He can't play the mystery card, not when it means so much to him.

"Yes," he replies, realizing in that moment that it also means something special to Ilya.

"Great," he says. "*Tomorrow*. Save the day for me."

"Okay," he says, intrigued. "I'm leaving now."

"Yes, yes. See you later, *solnyshko*."

As he leaves the room, the Russian word replays in his mind, trying to find the meaning he learned back in the days.

Unable to recall it, he decides to head to the library before having tea and playing burako with his mother. The answer makes him blush a second time.



Shane can recall several moments when he felt nervous. His first time riding a horse, the days leading up to his first heat, his first speech in front of various lords and kings. The list is quite long, but nothing compares to how he feels now.

Standing in front of the mirror, he adjusts the straps of his dress so they aren't too tight while Jackson watches him, sitting on his bed.

After breakfast with his parents, he found Ilya sitting on a bench waiting for him. As soon as he saw him, he stood up and, with a smile on his face, told him he would wait for him in the stables.

Looking at him, the omega felt completely rejuvenated, and it reminded him of the times when they used to play hide-and-seek and meet in the hallway to devise a strategy. Easier times.

"How do I look?" he asks, because his enthusiasm doesn't make him stop feeling a little insecure.

Several years have passed since he last had a meaningful conversation with the alpha, and his omega plays tricks on him, reminding him that he must prove himself interesting to make the alpha want to stay.

The fear is still there, and it will be a daily task for him to make it disappear. He knows that communication will be vital to developing the trust he needs in the bond.

"Stunning. I think you're ready to sweep that alpha off his feet," he murmurs. The omega turns and smiles at him.

"You don't think it's too much, do you? I don't want to be the kind of person who puts too much expectation on something, but I'm nervous." he confesses, and it made more sense in his mind.

His friend moves closer and places a hand on his shoulder. "I think you'll be fine," he says, looking him in the eyes. "There's nothing not to like about you, besides..."

"It will always be his loss, not mine. I know that," he repeats. "It's just, I can't help it; it's like my brain is programmed to feel this way when it comes to him, regardless of the sadness." he says the last part in a lower tone, to himself.

He had longed for this for so long that now that it was just around the corner, it was hard not to think about everything that could go wrong. Still, he was ready to face it.

He left the room after giving his friend a hug and headed for the palace entrance with his umbrella to shield himself from the sun. There, he greeted the guards and made his way to the stables.

His keen eyesight allowed him to spot Ilya interacting with Eunice several meters away. A smile spread across his face as he saw the affection with which he treated him. Suddenly, the realization that he hadn't put on his scent inhibitor made him stop in his tracks.

He had been so engrossed in choosing his clothes with Jackson that he had completely forgotten about it, and it seemed the beta had too.

He debated internally for a few seconds whether it would be so wrong not to return to his room to apply it, whether Ilya would take it badly or be disgusted by his scent.

What if he didn't see him as attractive?

He shook his head and resumed walking. If the alpha really didn't like it, then that wasn't his problem.

As their pheromones fluttered freely through the air, the scent reached the alpha before Shane himself did, causing him to turn his head sharply and focus his gaze on him.

The omega swallowed hard but still didn't stop walking. He could see the other's nostrils flare and watched him close his eyes for a moment.

Once he was a few steps away, he stopped just a few meters away, and the most unexpected words escaped his lips.

"I've longed for seven years to be able to smell you again," he murmured. "You are heaven."

Shane's mouth fell open in surprise as he looked directly into his eyes, not a hint of jest in his tone, which made his omega purr against his chest. His compliment made him blush.

He whispered a shy *thank you* and moved closer to him. "What's the plan for today, Prince Rozanov?" he asked, changing his tone of voice, placing one hand on Eunice's fur and stroking it.

"We're going to have a picnic by the river," he announced. "Just you and me."

Shane glances into the stables. Libya is in her stall, eating. It's been three weeks since he last rode her; he'd gone on a trip with her father to patrol the palace borders.

"Don't worry about her," he tells him. "I'll take us both," he informs him, to which he makes a positive sound.

"That would be great, really."

"Promise you won't spy," he asks, his gaze catching a basket leaning against a wall a few feet away.

"You're tempting me just by saying that," he murmurs, raising his eyebrows. He narrows his eyes. "Okay, fine," he concedes. The alpha circles the horse and approaches him.

"Are you ready?" He nods, keeping his gaze on his face. He looks irresistibly good, his hair damp, and the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt reveal his muscles.

Not to be dramatic, but he's never met a man with such captivating beauty as Ilya.

He lets out a squeal as he slides his hands over his hips, lifting his feet off the ground and onto Eunice. "*Rozanov!*" he exclaims, gripping the ropes.

"Sorry, *kotik*. But you were a little distracted," he says, reaching for the basket to hand it to him. Shane tries not to put his weight on the animal so as not to bother him further.

The curly-haired man mounts the horse in one swift motion and grabs the ropes. "Are you ready?" he asks, his breath now close to his ear. The omega nods.

The sudden closeness has made him a little shy, feeling the cross on his chest press against his back.

Ilya keeps his hands in front of his body, barely resting his arm on his left leg as he talks about the weather.

"In Russia, this is practically impossible. We'd have to ride separate horses because of the amount of clothing we'd be wearing. Maybe a carriage."

"Yes, I still remember our little trip there. The snow was so cold on my face, I thought I was going to go numb."

The alpha laughs. "I remember how your cheeks looked like two cherries and your eyelashes had little bits of snow on them. I knew I wanted to lean in and kiss you."

At his words, the omega unconsciously licks his lips. It's nice to hear they were on the same page, even if they hadn't been brave enough to do anything about it. They were naive young boys, now they're adults.

They choose a spot under a flowering tree. The taller one lays the blanket on the ground and starts taking out the different things he brought. Shane is surprised to see two small canvases along with a box of watercolors and a water bottle. The alpha looks up and smiles at him.

"I never drew with you," he recalls. "I think today can be that day."

He nods enthusiastically; usually, ideas for what to paint come to him after staring at the blank canvas for several minutes. Now, he feels he has the perfect one.

In addition to the necessary supplies, the alpha prepares a board with various crackers, fruits, and cheese. For drinks, there's a bottle of orange juice and another bottle of drinking water.

The horizon before them invites them to fall into a comfortable silence and let the landscape draw them in as well. Shane is leaning back on the wood while Ilya is reclining with his

paintbrush resting on his chin, thinking.

"Want some ideas?" he offers. Ilya shakes his head.

"I know what I want to do, I'm just debating where to begin," he tells him. The omega nods and takes a sip of the water he poured.

As time passes, he feels more comfortable asking him questions about the things that genuinely pique his curiosity. The alpha answers each one calmly and dodges others that leave the omega pondering.

In the time they spend together, it truly feels like traveling back in time, to when the timing wasn't so oppressive, they didn't have to worry about appearances, and they were just Shane and Ilya. Two boys who felt love for each other before they knew what that meant.

"Will you miss it?" he asks, in a burst of confidence. Ilya looks up from his canvas, hopeful. "I mean, if you end up staying here."

"That's a bit of a loaded question," he murmurs. "I won't miss *him*, but my sister, at some point, must return to be queen of her nation. We were never as close as we have been lately, so I'm going to miss her," he tells him. "But, I think what I'll miss most is not having the chance to have you come back as my husband."

His lips go dry at such a heavy confession, the curly-haired man's gaze turning melancholic. "D-Did you want...?" He swallows. "Are you serious?"

"I wanted you to see Russia from my perspective, something I couldn't do when I was little. But that's just a silly, petty wish." He shakes his head. "It doesn't make a difference to me now. Being here with you is what matters the most."

He is resolute in his statement, as if his words have no effect on the omega and the fact that he is giving up becoming king to reign by his side is a decision as simple as breathing.

Shane sets aside his canvas and moves around the blanket, positioning himself in front of him. "You choose me," he says aloud.

The alpha locks eyes with him and sets his canvas aside, sitting up so they're face to face, his right hand cupping his cheek.

"I told you this. I'm here for you," he presses their foreheads together, the omega feeling him take a deep breath. "Nothing's going to keep me away again."

The Canadian prince knows it's unfair to the other suitors, but he can't even bother thinking about it when the declaration he's just made is so unexpected and deep.

He's certain when he leans in and kisses his lips that no one else will be able to come close.

"*Mhmm*," the taller one murmurs, pulling away with a smile. "I really enjoy tasting your lips; I'll never get tired of it."

"I'm glad. I never..." He stops, realizing he's about to reveal an unnecessary piece of information. Ilya tilts his head to get a better look at him as he strokes his cheek.

"What?" he asks.

"It's not important." he says, trying to dismiss it, but he narrows his eyes.

"Tell me."

Shane sighs. "I-I've never done this before," he confesses. "I know it's fucking stupid but..."

"Am I the first?" he asks, a hopeful tone in his voice.

"Just...yeah. The first one I kissed." he replies, and that makes Ilya shake his head.

"I'll keep kissing you so much that you won't want anyone else." he whispers against his lips. The omega smiles at him and they're doing it again.

Being this close with the alpha is special; his reverent touch and the way he looks at him, the hidden enthusiasm in his gaze, makes his mind focus solely on him.

They pull apart to finish their paintings and, once they're ready, they turn them over at the same time so the other can look at them.

He painted two wolves huddled inside a shelter, with fireflies swirling around them, while the alpha painted the omega's gaze, freckles included.

"Wow," he says, perplexed. "I'm starting to think you weren't painting so you wouldn't embarrass us." he says, laughing.

"Do you like it?"

"Do I like it? It looks very real, Ilya. It's beautiful."

"Well, thank you," he says, smiling. "Maybe I can have yours as a gift?" he asks.

"Do you want it?" He nods.

"I think it's beautiful," he says, looking him in the eyes. "I like how big you made me."

"Oh, piss off!" he says, rolling his eyes. "It could be anyone."

"Hmm, I'm sure," he says, sounding unconvinced. "Even so, will you give it to me?"

"I have to think about it now," he pretends, popping a grape into his mouth.

The curly-haired man winks at him, he knows he has won, and Shane isn't ashamed of being caught, he feels seen.



They part ways upon returning from the stable, Ilya holding the two canvases while Shane carries the basket. He waves goodbye, and the alpha bows.

On his way to enter the castle, the omega is stopped by the argentinian prince, who is on his way to where the other princes are staying. After a brief bow, he lets him know he was looking for him.

“I didn’t know you were busy,” he murmurs, glancing back at the stable. “Did you protect yourself from the sun properly?” he asks, catching him off guard.

“Yes, of course. I brought an umbrella with me.” the alpha nods.

“I was really intrigued, you know, seeing the Prince of Russia and heir to the throne on that first day was a surprise to everyone, or well, most of us.”

Shane blinks and fights the urge to frown as the alpha takes a step forward. “I understand he has a certain reputation that’s impossible to ignore, but I was also wondering how you feel about it. I understand you used to be great friends.”

Such an open-ended question is only meant to cause trouble. The omega knows this because he’s had too many classes with public relations professionals to know how to give vague answers. The alpha is expectant, waiting to hear him speak.

“I’m very happy to have suitors who want to be here because they want to have a connection with me,” he murmurs.

“Will that gratitude extend to the rest?” he asks, causing him to fall silent. “Forgive my indiscretion, but it’s something I must ask.”

“Do you feel you aren’t being valued enough?” he asks. The prince shakes his head.

“Not at all,” he replies. “What I can’t do is stop worrying. This is the third invitation I’ve received in my life, and I’ve never felt this lack of certainty.”

“Well, you agreed to the rules, and I won’t rush my decision.”

He takes another step forward and has to fight his instinct to retreat. “I wonder, prince Hollander, if you’re letting childhood dreams get in the way between you and your duty.”

“That’s not happening,” he replies, perhaps too quickly, too defensively. The alpha’s expression shifts to one of relief.

“Well, that’s great. Because I never saw you as the kind of person who gets stuck in past affairs. And I’d *love* for everyone to have a fair chance,” he murmurs.

It's hard to tell if he's being genuine or if the omega's anger at his words is clouding his judgment, so he simply straightens and nods.

"You can rest easy, prince. All my suitors have it."

"That's good, honestly. I'm glad I can talk to you openly about this," he says, letting out a sigh. "Can I have a date with you tomorrow? I promise there won't be a picnic," he says, gesturing to the basket.

His proposal takes him by surprise, but rejecting it carries more risk than simply saying yes, so the omega nods. Besides, he also needs to give himself the chance to meet other people.

"That would be great." he offers a fake smile. The alpha nods, as if lost in thought, and then steps back.

"Well, I will be seeing you tomorrow." he bows, and without wasting any more time, he resumes walking toward the palace entrance.

He doesn't know how to feel about it, but he bites one of his nails when no one is in sight and has to sit down in one of the couches in the hallway to catch his breath.

The tone in his voice wasn't threatening *per se*, but it really made him think that he had made a mistake. One that needed to be rectified quickly.

In the midst of being happy with Ilya's presence, he had neglected his duties and now felt guilty at the thought that the other alphas might feel like he was wasting their time.

His leg bounces against the floor, the only sound in the hallway, as he stares at the nail he's biting, tugging at the sides as if he were on a mission.

To make matters worse, the omega isn't wearing scent neutralizer, which means there's a chance he might have smelled his discomfort.

He knows he can't be careless. He'll be the king, for God's sake, but feeling the curly-haired alpha's lips pressed against his and his intense gaze, making him think he's the only one in the room, are major distractions.

He rests his elbows on his knees and runs his hands through his hair, shaking his head a few times because he shouldn't be feeling this guilty for feeling good when he's around the other alpha. It shouldn't be something held over his head like a punishment, and yet...

He tries to get his breathing back to normal and calm his racing thoughts before he spirals into a seemingly endless mess.

The worst part is that he was the careless one and then made the conscious decision not to go back to his room to put it on. Jackson finds him, of course, and runs over to him, kneeling beside him.

"What happened? I'm going to kill him," he asks, genuine concern in his tone.

Shane quickly raises his head, realizing his friend has misunderstood things, and vehemently denies it. "He didn't do anything."

"Then why are you like this?" he asks.

"It was me. I screwed up," he says, letting out a pitiful groan. "*Fuck.*"

"Do you want some water?" he offers. Shane notices his throat is dry, so he nods. "Okay, how about I take it upstairs while you get comfortable in the room? I'm sure that will help."

The prince nods, and despite his omega begging him to go after his alpha, he stands up and goes upstairs with the beta's help.

In the time he's alone, he takes the opportunity to undress and curl up in bed.

When Jackson returns, he pretends to have fallen asleep so he doesn't have to give explanations. He can't risk his friend finding out, because who knows how that might affect Ilya. He needs to keep this secret to himself and start behaving like a true prince, because that's what his people expect.

They don't want to see a great love story, they want the face of a revolution.



When the moment arrives, Shane sits on the bed cracking his knuckles, his mind elsewhere.

He can't find a single fiber of his being genuinely motivated to go through with this date, but he also can't tolerate any criticism about it.

There are six suitors left, and he deserves to give each of them a chance. If his human side can make perfect sense of his actions, then why is his omega so hurt by the fact that he'll be spending time with a different alpha?

Never, in the years prior, has his wolf behaved this way. It can be attributed to the deep sadness he felt once he realized that the alpha's departure was actually an escape, however, he shouldn't allow himself to forget that he has other options.

Two knocks on his door start him, making him stand up. Jackson peeks out from the other side with a shy smile and lets him know that the alpha is waiting at the palace gate.

"Okay, thanks," he murmurs. "Do you know where he is...?" The question slips out before he can stop it, his tongue working faster than his brain.

Jackson clicks it. "I'm not sure, but I can find out."

“No!” he says quickly. “I mean, it’s okay. I don’t need him right now,” he assures him, which makes the beta frown.

“Okay,” he murmurs, unconvinced. He takes a deep breath as his friend leaves his room and closes his eyes for a moment. Then he opens the door and heads downstairs to meet the prince.

The alpha wears a proud smile and bows as soon as he’s in front of him. Shane forces himself to smile and reminds himself not to look around, in case he runs into someone who might completely throw him off.

The idea of a date should excite him; the fact that he brought a book from his country for them to start reading together should make him interesting enough to make sense of the words he’s reading aloud instead of his mind wandering to a different place.

The alpha occasionally stops him to comment on the scenes, and the omega finds himself disagreeing more often than agreeing.

For a few seconds, he feels a deep self-loathing for not having handled the situation better the day before and digging a hole for himself.

He tries to focus on how the sun's rays warm his skin and how the breeze from the fan helps combat the heat.

The other prince stops to ask him some details about his school life and shares some anecdotes of his own, as well as some cultural differences. He can't tell if it's a genuine attempt or something premeditated, but it makes him feel bad nonetheless.

Having applied a scent inhibitor, the other man can't notice his obvious boredom.

The chain Ilya gave him is still around his neck, only now it's hidden beneath his shirt, not wanting to arouse further suspicion.

The light breeze rustles the leaves of the surrounding trees, making the atmosphere less uncomfortable. The alpha tells him that he has a vineyard in the north of his country to which he has dedicated a lot of time.

“I heard you mention that you're very close to your friends,” he says, and Shane nods. “Well, I'm the same way. Honestly, I think the most fun times of my life were during my university studies.” he laughs, probably reminiscing about something.

“We're a very close group. When they heard I was leaving, it was a big surprise, but they were happy for me.” he smiles at him, and the omega tries to return the smile as best he can.

When they reach the middle of the book, Shane feels a desperate need to hydrate, so he prepares to stand up, but the alpha wants to walk with him. So they move side by side to enter the palace.

They don't expect the Russian alpha to suddenly appear, with a bow hanging from his right shoulder and arrows in a bag. The moment his gaze meets theirs, a smile spreads across the

taller man's face, and he walks toward them.

Unconsciously, the omega puts distance between himself and the other alpha, quickening his pace. Once they are face to face, he notices the other's panting breath and a layer of sweat on his forehead.

"Prince, how is your day going?" he asks, looking at him with a certain gleam in his eyes.

"I'm good," he replies. "What about you?" he asks, intrigued.

"Oh, I'm good as well." he answers. "Your father suggested we play target practice. He said his aim has improved."

"Yes, so much so that he almost blinded one of the guards," he tells him, huffing. The alpha smiles at him. "Are you both hydrating? Do you need me to call the staff to bring you food?" he asks, concern suddenly appearing. "I imagine you're doing it under the shadows."

"Of course, prince," he reassures. "I was on my way to pick some fruit, and he suggested we head to the pool after. He told me to extend the invitation."

"Good afternoon, Prince Rozanov." the Thornvale murmurs, making Shane realize how little distance separates him from the russian. "We were on our way to the kitchen to get something to eat. The book we were reading is so interesting that we lost track of time," he adds, laughing.

Shane feels embarrassed, making a careless noise as he works up the courage to look him in the face. Ilya is watching him back, and there's no anger behind his gaze, which is a relief.

Even though he has no right to be angry, his omega is already offended by what his human side agreed to do, and seeing the rejection in the alpha's eyes would only make him feel ten times worse.

His gaze lingers on his neck, noticing the silver chain, and a quick smile flashes across his face. *I'm doing this for both of us*, he means.

"Good afternoon," is all he says, looking at him for a brief moment. "We can leave this for another day," he assures him, who nods faster than he should.

"Shall we go, prince Hollander?" the irritated alpha by his side asks, approaching him. He has to force himself to tear his eyes away from Ilya to turn and face him.

"Yes, of course," and then, "I'll see you tonight."

The blue-eyed alpha nods and bows, making sure the bow doesn't fall from his arm. "*Prince*."

The possibility of crossing paths with him was there, but he never thought it would leave him feeling excited and in a better mood. The fact that he wasn't upset to see him with the other alpha showed him that he was a level-headed person who understood what being one of his suitors meant.

It made Shane like him even more.

When the tedious date ended, the omega allowed him to leave a kiss on his cheek before turning to return to his room. He found Jackson in the hallway and they went upstairs together.

"I need to take a bath," he announced. "I feel disgusting." His friend burst out laughing.

"And I was going to ask how it turned out," he muttered to himself. The omega shot him a look that said it was best not to joke about it. The beta threw up his hands in surrender and went to find the maids to bring the water.

He lingers in the bathroom longer than usual, trying to regain his body temperature and carefully washing his hair. He emerges in a robe and begins planning his outfit for the evening.

The fact that the end is nearing its peak no longer frightens him so much, and he knows that a large part of that is due to having been able to clear the air with the person who used to be his best friend.

He stopped feeling that rampant guilt when he understood that it was necessary to have a difficult conversation rather than remain in a constant tug-of-war.

He feels it, in the way the others say his name and lose focus, in how the absence of a touch on his cheeks makes him yearn for it, but it's also in the words they exchange, in the carefully constructed thoughts, and the expressions of affection he's never experienced before.

It's difficult not to let his thoughts become clouded by a single face, which is why he decided to go on the date in the first place. He needs to be a prince willing to listen to criticism.



Shane enters the ballroom once all the alphas and their parents are present.

He chose a brown outfit with gold details; the hem of the top accentuates his hips, and Jackson assured him it would leave everyone speechless.

It's not a difficult statement to verify, since just by looking at some of the faces, he realizes it's one of the best outfits he's ever worn. Perhaps a little revealing, but he's not about to let his inhibitions show.

The alphas bow as he approaches them, while the orchestra his mother hired plays some jazz.

Hanging from his wrist is a small slip of paper on which each suitor has written his name. It's one of the traditions that troubles him the most, because he'd be lying if he said he hadn't

been waiting for the chance to dance with his alpha, but the ritual used to have another, more primal meaning.

"Good evening, prince," the husky voice murmurs behind him, making him turn around.

Ilya stands before him, wearing a black pinstriped suit and a watch on his right wrist. His hair is swept back, and the top buttons of his white shirt are undone, revealing the silver cross.

He can't help but admire him; being taller, the extra inches make him even more mesmerizing. His presence is not only demanding but captivating.

Shane has no doubt he could lose himself in his blue eyes. He would do so with pleasure.

"Ilya," he exhales, then realizes his mistake, though the man watches him with a smile.

"Prince Rozanov," he quickly corrects, the alpha offers his hand, which the omega slips into his.

When he presses a kiss to the back of his hand, without breaking eye contact, their lips part slightly, gasping for air. His gaze is mischievous.

"You look like you stepped out of a dream," he says. "The most beautiful of all."

"Oh, that's..." his mouth feels dry, so he pauses to swallow. "Very nice, thank you." he smiles at him. "You look very handsome, too."

"I have to keep up with you," he says, to which Shane laughs. "Did you enjoy your afternoon?" he asks, his tone friendly.

"It was okay," he replies. "The sun started to get annoying at one point. And I don't think I retained the plot of the story very well. Fortunately, it was a gift."

"You always liked reading on the couch," he recalls.

"Yes, it gives my legs a break."

"Exactly," he says, smiling. "I don't want to take up too much of your time, and I'm not sure how you feel about it, so it's best to ask."

He nods, eager to know what he means. "Would you mind if I wrote on your paper? Because if you don't, I can wait until everyone else is finished, and we can dance then."

An impossible-to-hide smile spreads across his face, and the omega shakes his head twice. "It doesn't bother me at all," he whispers, prompting a sigh of relief from the alpha.

Shane shows him his wrist, and Ilya takes a pen from his pocket, opens it elegantly, and writes down his name.

"Good. Because I really want to dance with you," he says, lowering his voice as if it were a sacred secret.

“I’d like that too.” he murmurs, unable to suppress his smile.

They stare at each other as if they were the only ones in the room until their parents approach, wanting to chat with him. Ilya lets him go. .

The omega eats and dances at different times; his mother arranged everything so that none of the princes would miss their dance.

When his father takes the queen’s hand, he can’t help but pause in the middle of their conversation to admire them.

A love this long-lasting, as strong as the first day, making them feel young, is all he asked of the stars. He watches them as they pace the room, his gaze tinged with longing, when one of his suitors touches his shoulder and he turns to look at him.

“Prince, I wanted to talk with you for a few minutes, if you’ll allow me.”

The man from Greece doesn't seem to be able to read the room, and it would be impolite to refuse, so he takes a few steps back to stand beside him, his gaze still fixed on the center of the room.

“What was it you wanted to discuss with me, prince Makris?”

“I’ve noticed that we’ve spent our time discussing politics, and I’ve observed that our ideas don’t always align.” He nods; it’s an undeniable fact.

“So I was wondering if, perhaps, we could find more common ground on a personal level.” Shane is intrigued by what the alpha is about to say, so he gestures for him to continue.

“I’m not someone who would like to have children, although I understand it’s mandatory, the burden is very…” he grimaces. “overwhelming.” he summarizes.

He can’t say it’s a surprising confession, coming from a man with an ego the size of the chandelier hanging in the living room, but he has to pretend.

“Well, it’s something really important to me,” he points out.

“Enough to prioritize your children over your kingdom?” he asks bluntly. The alpha turns his head and looks at him with a frown. “Because the day will come when you’ll have to choose between what your kingdom demands and what your pups require. What will you choose then?”

The idea of having to choose between his offspring and the people he is meant to rule is offensive to him; the fact that he wants him to choose, even more so.

“I—I…”

“Because it comes quite easily to me,” he continues. “I know where my loyalties lie, in this case, the people of Canada.”

“And by ‘the people’ you mean the big businessmen?” he snaps, a sharp blow to the head, accompanied by a sarcastic laugh. “Please, do you really think I’m deaf?”

The alpha leans close to his right ear, taking him by surprise. “So you know who must be chosen.” he whispers, the threat written all over his tone, and then straightens up, raising the glass in his left hand.

Shane fakes a smile, because he’s not going to show weakness to such a manipulator, and waits for him to leave before going to one of the tables and grabbing a drink.

He might have been stupid to prolong his stay so long, but he wanted to be on the same page. Now that he’s shown all his cards, he needs to calm down, reshuffle, and deal again.

What this man is offering would never have been something he'd consider, because he needs a partner who's willing to offer constructive criticism instead of imposing their views.

He needs to talk to Jackson as much as he needs to cool his emotions to calm down.

While this is the first time he's been threatened, the subtlety with which it was done is far more chilling. Being in a room surrounded by people who are unaware of what happened makes him run a hand through his hair in a sign of distress.

"Hey," the other Rozanov alpha appears beside him, making him jump. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's okay," he reassures her. "I was lost in thought." He smiles at her, trying to compose himself. "How are you?"

"Good, enjoying my time here," he replies. "I love your outfit, it's so classic."

"Thank you." he responds. "It'll be hard when you leave, won't it?" he asks her, moving toward one of the doors leading to the balconies. Alexandra follows him.

They leave the doors open, though the curtain makes it difficult to see anything from inside out. Shane needs the breeze more than ever to refocus.

“Well, Russia is too big, the meetings are constant,” she tells him. “I won’t be able to come back as often.”

He grimaces. They shared an afternoon together before her brother suggested the date, and they also had some conversations in the kitchen.

“You know you’re always welcome here, no matter how long your stay lasts. The King and Queen are happy to see you again.”

“Yes, it feels much more like family here.” she says, nodding to nothing.

“We’ll always be family,” he utters.

"Yes, but it's also time for you to have your own," she says, turning to look at the horizon. "Do you feel ready?" she asks him.

"To take the step all my teachers kept talking about? I guess." he shrugs, she laughs. "I feel like this is what I was meant to do, and having a partner to do it with will give it greater meaning."

She nods, the silence stretches between them, neither feeling compelled to break it.

It's the kind of conversation that tries to make up for lost time for two young people who were terrified of speaking to each other and losing a friendship that had become fragile due to external factors.

Shane feels more relaxed with Alexandra; he can feel his muscles loosening and his mind calming the spiral of thoughts.

"I'm ready too, you know?" she tells him. He frowns and looks at her. "I want to reign, I know I have to. So many things need to change there. It might be the same here, but..." she grimaces. "Different."

"What are you trying to tell me?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. She rests her head on her left hand, looking at him tenderly.

"You both deserve a chance to be happy. If my brother is that for you, despite everything he's done, you shouldn't feel guilty about wanting him for yourself." She blurts out, as if she hadn't just finished summarizing her thoughts from this past time. "Either way, Russia will still be on good terms with you. No matter who wears the crown."

"He would never take your place," he quickly says. Alexandra surprises him by nodding.

"I know."

Being able to say that out loud, the confidence required to assure someone of something so dangerous, speaks volumes about the alpha's character.

"It's my time to protect the family. He's done enough. He risked a lot," she acknowledges. He can do nothing but nod. "I hope you both come out of this happy."

"He's coming," he says, when he sees his figure start walking toward the balcony.

"He told me he signed last," she murmurs. Shane nods, showing the paper on his wrist, its weight becoming all too real. "He wanted to let you choose."

The sound of his footsteps crossing the threshold and stopping in front of them ends the conversation.

"Hey." He murmurs, with a shy smile. The omega mimics him. "I hope you're not plotting. I'd feel bad for Yuna if you ruined her ballroom."

His sister straightens her back, leaning back against the railing. “Well, do you want to join in?” she asks, raising her eyebrows. “That way we could, you know, get a less severe punishment.”

He raises his hands. “Sorry, sister.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re not fun.” Shane watches the exchange with amusement. Ilya winks at him quickly; it feels special.

“Anyway, what were you looking for, my dear brother? Or were you just trying to pry into our affairs?” she asks, tilting her head.

“I came to find the prince,” he replies, turning to face him. “I was hoping we could have that dance.”

“Of course,” he says, nodding. “Only...one thing. Would you help me untie the paper? The knot is very small, and since you’ll be the last one.”

The smile his words bring to the curly-haired man’s face makes the idea worthwhile.

The alpha moves closer, and he offers his wrist. The closeness is warm, and his gaze occasionally drifts to the exposed skin of his chest as he carefully works the knot.

Feeling his touch on such a delicate area makes his omega want to purr, having missed the physical contact.

When he finishes, Ilya hands him the paper, and he looks at it for a moment before extending it toward the alpha. “Will you take care of it for me? Your brother has very nice handwriting; I wouldn’t want to lose it.”

Ilya exhales, incredulous. Alexandra looks between them and then takes it. “Of course.”

“Don’t lose it,” her brother tells her, to which she gives him the middle finger. “Shall we?” he asks, offering his hand. He nods.

“Yes.”



The moment they walked to the center of the room and stood facing each other, Ilya bowed again before approaching him, placing one hand around his waist and the other intertwining with his.

He couldn't hide his smile as they began to move to the rhythm of the music. "Don't let me trip." he warned, to which the alpha shook his head.

"How are you feeling tonight?" he asked.

"Good," he replied. "I'm better now, though," he said, looking into his eyes.

"Yes, me too."

It was no secret that the Russian prince was a good dancer; one of his many memories of him was of several omegas surrounding him to ask him for a dance. Something that was only common in youth, when inhibitions were nonexistent.

The alpha was selective about who he danced with, only if they offered him an interesting conversation. Shane had had to watch from the sidelines on several occasions because of his fear of being rejected, since he hadn't presented yet.

The image burned within him, but now he was the one in it, and it truly felt like a journey he had to undertake to reach it.

At no point was he trying to show off his moves; instead, he was focused on how the omega himself moved and adapted to him.

"You're beautiful," he said, after twirling him around, taking his hand again. "No other omega possesses such dazzling beauty."

His cheeks turned crimson at the words, and he lowered his gaze. "I find it hard to believe that's true, considering my lack of experience all these years," he confessed. "But I truly appreciate the compliment."

"And I find it hard to believe that I was the only alpha in all of Canada with the desire to be by your side," he replied. "But if that's the case, I admit I'm glad."

The omega's lips lifted shyly. "It doesn't bother you that..." he swallowed, not able to finish the question, but the alpha was already shaking his head.

"No," he added. "I like you like this, unafraid to kiss me," he whispers in his ear, making him smile.

"I'm sure you've had better."

He makes a disapproving sound while keeping his gaze on him.

"I've never had anyone I want to kiss as much as you," he says, making his skin prickle. Ilya makes him twirl again, catching him off guard, and leans close to his ear. "No one I want to touch as much as you," he murmurs in a deep voice, and he begins to feel needy.

The hand that's on his waist slowly moves up his back and back down. "You're wearing the cross," he appreciates. "I feel lucky."

Shane's breathing changes slightly; the omega feels his body heat up while the alpha doesn't take his eyes off him. It's too intense, and their bodies are close enough for it to continue being an appropriate dance.

“Me too,” he whispers. “I haven’t stopped using it,” he adds.

“*Fuck*,” he says through gritted teeth. “Your pupils are dilated, are you getting wet?” he asks.

He looks away, trying to calm his racing heart and the adrenaline coursing through his body as he begins to feel a pool of wetness forming in his underwear.

“I’ve never...” he shakes his head.

“It’s okay, you’re alright,” he reassures him. “You like it when I say these things, don’t you?”

There’s a mixture of curiosity and teasing in his tone that doesn’t make him uncomfortable, but rather the opposite. Shane lets out a soft sound of approval. “How does it feel?”

“Too hot on my skin, there’s a need...”

“Yeah?” he urges him to continue.

“There’s something between my legs that I’m not sure about,” he murmurs. “It makes me want to...” he stops and shakes his head.

“Tell me,” he insists, searching for his gaze. “It’s just me.”

He's internally torn between saying it out loud or not, because he's certain it's against all the rules of behavior to talk about what he's feeling. He never heard his mother talk about it either.

He doesn't want Ilya to run away in terror, but the intensity in his gaze seems to prove otherwise, and his touch on his body hasn't faltered.

"It makes me want to touch myself," he ventures, his voice barely a whisper.

"You can." he replies. "You just have to listen to your body, figure out what you like."

"Shouldn't I wait until...?" he wonders, the alpha shaking his head.

"You feel it now, don't you?" he nods. "Then no, you don't have to wait," he tells him. "You do it because it will make you feel good, more relaxed," he murmurs. "You close your eyes and let your mind guide you."

"Will you do it with me, ever?" he finds himself asking.

A smile spreads across the blond-curled alpha's face. “When I become your husband, I’ll do it whenever you need me,” he sighs. “In the meantime, it’s okay to want to seek relief.” He bites his lower lip and nods. “I wish I could smell you now, but that might be a problem.”

The final chords of the song play, and Shane lets out a groan at that moment.

“You’re okay, omega,” he murmurs, close to his ear. “You were amazing. Do you want me to get some water?”

He can only nod. The moment his parents approach, Ilya presses a kiss to his knuckles and steps back. The lack of closeness shouldn't make him feel this way. He can't help it.

He tries to have a conversation with his parents, but his mind feels a little dizzy, making him respond more slowly than usual. The alpha's words repeat in his brain, whispered in a way that, instead of making it seem dangerous or forbidden, is sensual and even necessary.

When he returns, he rests his hand on his shoulder for a brief moment and passes him the glass of water. Shane is thirsty and doesn't even bother to hide it. The curly man's fingers pressing against the suit he's wearing makes his body relax more than it should.

"Thank you," he whispers, working up the courage to look him in the face. The taller man gives him a lopsided smile.

"You're welcome, my dear prince."

For a single second, he's overcome with the urge to throw his hands on his shoulders and lean in to kiss him, regardless of the world around them. Despite not being able to, he truly hopes he can convey his longing with his eyes.

Ilya winks at him and steps back, leaving him with a tingling sensation.



It usually doesn't take him long to undress, a task that always gets in the way of finally putting on his pajamas and lying down.

After the party ended, he asked Jackson to run a bath for him to cool down. Each of the suitors murmured their goodbyes, knowing it would be the last night for several of them at the castle.

Now, standing in front of the mirror, he feels a new interest in his body as he remembers what it felt like to be in Ilya's arms.

His secret crush for as long as he can remember, the boy whose attention he begged for, the only one with the right comment to lift his spirits, who always offered a different perspective.

The man who held his hips while they kissed, who touched his skin reverently and painted his gaze with a level of detail he never imagined. The one responsible for his love sighs, as well as his first tears of love.

Although the adrenaline has subsided, the omega still feels something electrifying beneath his skin. Carefully, he begins to undress in front of the mirror, the bathroom already waiting for him.

He undoes each button and slowly removes his jacket. He can see his nipples through the fabric, something that happens to him when he isn't dressed warmly enough.

Then he takes off his shirt, leaving his chest bare. His gaze traces a path from his breasts to his belly, where a pup will one day grow. The thought makes his left hand gently caress the area, knowing how sacred the act of creating life is.

He sighs, lifting his gaze again and lingering on his features. His lips are barely parted, exhaling his breath, and his freckles have become more pronounced from the time he spent in the sun.

He never thought of himself in terms of beauty, because he was too busy trying to navigate his responsibilities with a broken heart. He's received compliments at galas and other events, but for the most part, he brushed them aside with a simple thank you.

Now, standing in front of the mirror, with nothing but the moon as his witness, he can't help but feel handsome. As if there really was a side of him that deserved praise.

He lets out a shaky sigh as he pulls off his pants, sets them aside, and looks at himself again. The underwear he's wearing feels tight, and he turns sideways to examine his bum.

One thing he's always known is that he has a nice ass, which makes some pants stand out even more. He runs his hand over the skin of his cheeks and up to his waistband, tugging at the elastic with his thumb until it touches his skin.

He wants to go further, but standing in front of his reflection is a little unnerving.

When he's completely naked, holding his panties in his hand, he can see the wetness around it, causing him to blush.

He heads to the bathroom and slides one leg into the tub, the water at the perfect temperature. He sits down, letting his entire body get wet, and finally, his hair.

He surfaces for air and rests his head at the edge of the tub. He reaches for the shampoo with his left hand and begins to lather it on his scalp.

He thinks about how his skin feels underwater, how it's a protective barrier against the rest of the world, and the memory of the dance replays in his mind.

Ilya urged him to touch himself, confessing that no one had ever made him feel anything like he did.

The omega purrs as he places his hands on his hips, pressing where the alpha's hands had been.

He remembers being pressed against the cold balcony wall, being kissed hungrily, the way his hand traced the curve of his ass, making him press his fingers hard between his buttocks.

He watches his own chest, his nipples erect as he breathes heavily. His small cock begins to harden, and excitement starts to pool between his cheeks.

What happens next, Shane is unable to explain. As he closes his eyes, instinct takes control of his body, guiding two of his fingers toward his hole.

He moves them around, enjoying the goosebumps that rise on his skin, until he pushes them inside, letting out a muffled groan.

His other hand slides over his right shoulder as it moves down his chest, his thumb brushing one of his nipples. He imagines the alpha's large, strong hands roaming over his body and can't help but sigh with pleasure.

The way his hands cradled his cheeks on that balcony, how he had insisted on having his attention—it all feels like too much at this moment. He dares to curl his fingers inside, reaching a sensitive spot, and his eyes snap open, feeling an electrifying shock that makes him gasp.

Soon, his movements become frantic and relentless, searching for that spot again while his other hand moves to the base of his cock.

“Yes,” he exhales, relief sweeping through him, as he slides a third finger inside. “Fuck, alpha.”

The image of his crooked smile urging him on makes him groan. It would be so much easier with the alpha present, but all he can do is imagine it.

He desperately wants him to claim his mouth, with an intensity that leaves marks in its wake, wants the strength of his grip on his hips as he pushes him down.

“Please,” he murmurs, his breath coming in short gasps.

The sound of his heart pounding in his ears intensifies everything. Shane feels close to the edge, but doesn't know how to reach it. Will he do it with me, ever?

Whenever you need me to.

He curls his fingers again and his body shudders. The omega can only insist one more time before coming on his chest, letting out a loud cry.

As he lies there, boneless and trying to catch his breath, he can't help but think that this is a point of no return.

If just imagining the alpha makes his body react this way, then there's no way he can escape this feeling.

This love he feels runs deeper than anything else, and while that might be a risk to his people, Shane doesn't want to keep considering his options.

He wants to choose and be able to let go.

He knows that marriage is for life, that he'll be swearing eternal love in front of too many people. Despite that, no one can make him believe that it wouldn't be a deserved end, after

having wanted so much.

He lets the water wash away the evidence of his arousal and grabs another of the wooden buckets to finish washing himself.

It's just a matter of minutes before his body settles into the mattress and he ends up peacefully asleep.



The next day, knowing he had to see him again made him quite nervous.

During breakfast with his parents, he barely pretended to pay enough attention to distract himself.

The moment he woke up and the memory of what had happened in his shower hit him, he could feel his cheeks burning.

The dancing and the exchange during it had been so unbecoming of a prince, and even worse for an unmarked omega.

The most ironic thing about the whole affair was that Shane never felt uncomfortable with the alpha's words. He had forgotten about everyone else present and focused only on him, his presence, and the way he held him during the dance.

He had never felt that way with another alpha before.

Ilya never showed any disgust; instead, he adopted an encouraging stance, talking about how he should find pleasure too.

The talks he'd had with his mother about it had focused on procreation, and it was all so embarrassing that he ended up avoiding that kind of interaction. The other person was his biology teacher, who had a professional approach to the matter.

During his heats, the omega moved on instinct and manipulated his toys to satisfy himself. It was never enough, so he fell asleep after each orgasm; his human side never consciously experienced it.

Last night had been all his doing, the decision to undress in front of the mirror, as well as caressing his own body underwater. He had discovered a pleasant sensation while imagining that it was Ilya doing it for him.

Once he finished breakfast, he met up with Jackson and reminded him of his schedule for the day. He wanted to avoid the curly-haired man until this feeling disappeared as much as his wolf wanted to run after him.

He decided to start spending time with the other candidates and see if they were able to get his mind off what had been going around in his head the whole time.

He showed a willingness to learn a new game, as well as to listen to them talk about their travels and the great chefs they would have to hire if they were chosen.

When one of them suggested a horseback ride, he felt he'd done enough and ended the encounter, arguing that he should be doing something else soon.

He practically ran to his friend, telling him everything in a horrified tone, even though his suitor had behaved properly. He knew the beta wouldn't judge him because he knew too much too.

To avoid running into him in the garden, he told him it would be a great time to bake the brown sugar and white chocolate cookies he loved so much. Since it had been a month since their last time, Jackson gave in.

He knew something was wrong with him; even though he was his usual self, laughing and making interesting observations, there was something he couldn't hide. His eyes were practically screaming.

"I may not know what's going on right now, but I hope it's not some 'you ignoring problems' thing," he slid, while Shane took over kneading the dough. He made an evasive sound and responded with a question about something else.

Just thinking about Ilya's smile, his bright blue lips, makes him smile to himself.

Once the cookies are in the oven, he takes a seat at the table and brushes off any nonexistent sweat. The beta comments on how beautiful the garden is looking, and he suggests going to see it after having a glass of orange juice.

He doesn't expect to run into the alpha in the hallway, almost stepping on his foot as he comes out of the kitchen, letting out an "*Oooh*."

"Good morning, Prince," he murmurs, taking a step to the side and bowing his head.

"Good morning, Il—" his eyes widen as he realizes what he's about to do. "Prince Rozanov," he quickly corrects himself, though they both noticed the slip.

"How are you today?" he asks.

"Fine, we were baking some cookies," he tells him. He raises his eyebrows.

"That sounds like a fun plan," he remarks. "I've learned to enjoy cooking."

"Oh, well, that's quite an accomplishment," he acknowledges. "Considering how you couldn't keep your hands to yourself and kept burning your hands," he recalls.

"I didn't hear any complaints when I stole some cookies for you," he says, winking at him. Shane laughs.

He realizes Jackson is there as an observer, but the idea of politely dismissing him isn't an option because, with him present, the conversation is light, even mundane.

Being alone with Ilya means admitting he's thought about him too much, and being in touch with that realization represents one thing, and he fears his mother will judge him for not having been fair enough.

"We were on our way to the gardens, but I think Prince Rozanov might accompany you. The gardeners told me they saw him this morning."

"They did?" he asks, incredulous. The beta nods.

They both turn to look at him, and he has a shy smile on his face. "Nothing would please me more, Prince," he says, looking into his eyes making his heart swell.

Shane, cornered by his best friend and lacking the imagination to come up with another excuse, ends up walking with Ilya out of the palace and toward the gardens.

The conversation starts lightly; he makes a comment about the weather, and the alpha follows suit. He never tries to invade his personal space, keeping his hands where he can see them.

He decides to approach to admire the new flowers that have been planted, and Ilya tells him that they are traditional in Russia. "They are frequently used for weddings," he explains. "The omega carries three and gives each one to the most important people in his life."

With sudden interest, he tilts his head and inquires. "Is the alpha included among those people?" he shakes his head.

"The alpha only has the omega, because that's what matters the most. The reason he gets married," he says, looking him straight in the eyes. Shane licks his lips; it seems the other prince is taking this a little too seriously, and it's a relief.

"Before I started this, one of my biggest fears was having to settle," he blurts out, glancing at the roses in the distance. "Although I knew that, logically, the worst thing I could do was choose someone who secretly hates me and tries to make a coup," he shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, which makes him turn to look at him. "If I had been here, you wouldn't even have had to consider it," he says, looking genuinely sorry for the situation.

"Yeah..." he trails off. "But you're here now, and that completely ruined everything," he murmurs. "Because now I think about myself, about what I need instead of..."

He can feel the alpha approaching; he doesn't try to create distance.

"That's not wrong, Shane," he murmurs. "You've been carrying the weight of responsibility alone. Marrying someone who doesn't make you feel anything won't make that disappear. I'd venture to say it would make it worse." He runs a hand over his forehead and closes his eyes.

"I'm sorry, I just... I shouldn't have said that. I'm just..." he sighs. "I'm sorry."

“You don’t owe me anything,” he says, making him look at him. “You don’t owe *them* anything, either. Not even your parents.”

“What are they going to think?” he wonders aloud. “They always knew how I felt. It would confirm that I always play it safe, that I never let myself experience other things. How am I supposed to make a change like the one expected from me?”

Words that, from the outside, might seem hurtful, but the truth is the omega needs to say them aloud to ease the weight of his inner voices. He needs to expose his fears and frustrations to be able to let them go.

“Look at me.” his lower lip begins to tremble as he strokes his temples with his fingers. “Please.” he begs and Shane decides to open his eyes again. “No one is more qualified than you for this,” he wants to disagree, but the alpha speaks first. “No one,” he emphasizes, shaking his head. “The apologies you so graciously accepted speak volumes about your character, about the kind of leader you will be.”

“Love and duty have always been separate things for me,” he continues. “And I’m not saying they should be completely intertwined, but you shouldn’t despise yourself for this,” he points out between them. “I don’t want my love for you to be a burden.”

“It isn’t,” he says, shaking his head. “It’s like, the best thing that happened to me after presenting as an omega. I never wanted anything like this,” he adds, mesmerized by his blue eyes. “I’m ashamed to admit the things I did, but I feel them, and I can’t undo them.”

The corners of the alpha’s lips lift, and he rests one hand on his cheek, gently caressing it. “Will you tell me?”

“*No!*” he blurts out, scandalized at the mere thought. “It would be unbecoming of a prince to share it.”

Something flashes in his gaze that Shane can’t quite decipher, but he isn’t displeased about it.

“I’m not a prince when we’re alone, and I don’t want you to see me as one,” he tells him. “I’m just Ilya, someone irrevocably in love with you.”

His words make him gasp in surprise; he still hasn’t fully processed what the alpha has told him on two other occasions, which is why it always ends up taking his breath away.

The desire to kiss him after such a declaration, and the way he makes it seem so simple, only intensifies. His omega preems at receiving his attention, aware of the thoughts that swirled in his mind the night before.

He wants to offer, and the alpha is willing to take, a combination that would be perfect if they weren’t in these circumstances.

Rozanov seems to notice a small crack in his composure and decides to exploit it.

“You touched yourself, didn’t you?” he asks, his voice husky. He looks at him, surprised by his lack of shame; he supposes it has to do with being an alpha, destined to boast.

He tries to look away, but two of his fingers place themselves under his chin, and his thumb presses against his other cheek, leaving him no choice. "Yes, I did." he says, barely above a whisper.

"Mhm, and you thought of me," he murmurs, without even asking, like a conclusion he reached on his own.

Shane doesn't want to offer him an answer. "Did it feel good?" he continues asking.

"In a way, I was desperate. My fingers..." he stops, realizing what he's about to say.

"Weren't enough?" he ventures to finish for him, who shakes his head in response. "Still, you reached that point...right?"

"Yes..." he sighs. "I did."

"Well, that makes me happy," he says, smiling at him. "It's said that omegas prefer to give up control of their bodies rather than keep it, but not all of them do. Either out of fear or because they feel like something is missing. Did you feel like something was missing?"

"*You.*" he replies, breathless.

His entire face turns the color of a tomato, and he brings his hands to his mouth, as if that would make the words return and the alpha forget what he just said.

His reaction shouldn't surprise him, because Ilya is leaning into his space, just inches from his face, and gives him a lopsided smile. "You have no idea how much I want to fix that," he murmurs, sending shivers down his spine. "Just thinking about you like that makes my heart race."

"*Ilya,*" he whispers, as if his name were the perfect lifeline to cling to. The taller man looks at his lips and then into his eyes.

"I'll treat you so well," he whispers. "I'll make you feel good and full."

His words resonate between his legs, making his underwear feel tight and his skin too hot.

He lowers his gaze to his chest, where the chain he gave him rests, and smiles to himself. "Do you want pups, Shane?"

He nods. "Yes."

"I'll give them to you," he murmurs, and he doesn't make it sound like a chore, one of the items to check off his list, but like something genuine, as if their connection would guide them toward it and not the other way around.

He doesn't make him feel like a means to an end, but an end in himself. As if life, for him, begins the moment Shane wants to be his.

He breathes heavily, aware that the alpha can hear him. He admires his entire face as if afraid it might vanish in his hands. "You'll be the prettiest mommy of them all," he murmurs. "And I'll be the luckiest alpha in the world."

The omega's eyes well up at his words, a purr escaping his lips, taking him by surprise. The Russian prince lets out a low growl, their wolves communicate through them.

He has no idea who leans in first, but their mouths collapse together. Shane's hands grip his shoulders tightly as the alpha kisses him passionately, similar to the first time, only this time in broad daylight.

When they part, he lets out a groan, his lips still closed, and begs, "*Please.*"

"I know, omega. I know." He whispers in his ear, his deep, soft voice filling his ears, then presses a kiss to his temple and another to his right cheekbone. "Not yet, darling," he murmurs. "We must wait, you have to choose."

Shane fights his own instinct to reply: *I already have, it's you.* So he forces himself to open his eyes slowly, adjusting to the light again. Ilya holds him, looking at him as if he were hanging the stars in the sky, and leans in to give him another chaste kiss that he can't help but pursue.

"Mmhm, greedy," he murmurs. It takes him a few seconds to recover, the warm sensation in his stomach not quite gone, when an idea comes to him.

"The cookies should be ready. Would you like to eat them with me?"

The smile that forms on the alpha's face is something he's only seen that afternoon at the picnic, where his serious expression had completely changed to a carefree, content one. Seeing it on his face again makes his chest swell with pride for having caused it.

"Of course," he says, nodding twice. "Nothing else I'd rather do."

Saying it is one thing, feeling that he means it is quite another.

He feels it, in the way their hands lightly brush as they walk, in his gentle gaze as he and Jackson tell him about the recipe, along with others they tried together.

He can feel it even when he's not around, his presence hanging in the air.

Shane loves him too.



When the list is narrowed down to three candidates, David plans to fulfill what he announced on the first day: he has the three princes compete in a quiz of skill and general knowledge.

Something he finds beyond ridiculous, but he can't stop his father from doing so.

He invites some families to watch, and the omega realizes what's happening because he hears the sound of a bass drum while lying in bed reading a book. Curiosity gets the better of him, and he rushes downstairs until he finds several people seated in front of a lectern where the king is sitting.

"Oh, there he is," he says, in a pleased tone. "Come here, son. We've saved you the best seat."

He looks around, half incredulous and half amazed that his father was able to organize this with less than twenty-four hours' notice. Even though he's the most important man in Canada, he still maintains that playful spirit.

"Dad..." he begins, but his mother gives him a look that tells him it's best to stay quiet and follow along, so he decides to take a seat and see how it goes.

"You arrived at the perfect time," he tells him. "The suitors went to the forest, to follow your great-grandfather's tradition."

Shane's eyes widened. "Which one?"

"Oh, prince. You know which one," he says, winking at him.

His mind races. There used to be thousands of traditions in his great-grandfather's time, but those related to the forest always involved demonstrating the alpha's physical strength. They were all linked to killing an animal.

The thought makes him nauseous.

He has only changed form a few times, and all of those times were at his mother's insistence. She had told him it was important not to fear his second skin, but she did it because of the possibility of a war breaking out. She always wanted him to be prepared to his full potential.

The two times his father had taken him to the forest, he had never had to submit to a fight, but he had witnessed one between a guard and a deer that had been far too bloody. It had left him fainting.

From that moment on, he had tried to stay away from the tension that being in the forest caused him, even though his father spoke of adrenaline and was excited about unexpected encounters, he couldn't help but feel disgusted by the whole thing.

His thoughts quickly drifted to the curly-haired alpha, and his right leg began to bounce. Anxiety was spreading throughout his body with each passing minute.

If he had arrived earlier, he could have avoided this stupid challenge.

To emerge from the darkness, he turned to one of the guests and asked, "Just out of curiosity, what did my father ask to hunt?"

"It's a surprise for you, prince." she said, laughing behind her fan. He wants to ask what exactly is causing such jubilation that she's reacting this way, but decides to smile and turn his head back toward the forest.

The possibilities in his head are all terrible, especially considering the chance that Ilya saw their competitors and is trying to beat them by bringing something enormous.

He prays that he still has memories from that time in their lives as young wolves and that it will serve to calm his competitive spirit.

He doesn't think it will.

The first to arrive is the Thornvale prince. He identifies him from afar, mostly because of his lack of curls.

He sees him holding two doves as if he's solved the mystery of existence. As he approaches, murmurs form about it, opinions about his hunt.

"Why did he decide to go for that? Has he lost his mind?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to be king after all."

"Just look at the queen's face, she looks ashamed." Shane glances at his mother, trying to tell her to compose herself when his father starts applauding.

The alpha places the kills on a table, and David approaches to examine them, listening to him explain how he did it. He's not sure whether he should get up from his seat or wait for his father to make some move that will prompt him to approach.

His gaze can't help but drift back to the woods, and when the other alpha appears, dragging a deer by its legs, the omega's breath catches in his throat.

Please don't bring anything bigger, he silently begs.

His gaze shifts to one of concern as he swallows the lump in his throat. If this is supposed to be fun, then his father has completely misunderstood everything.

Perhaps it's his rational side that has instilled this fear in his wolf, when he should be amazed, even delighted, by the fact that another alpha hunted for him, proving that he is capable of providing.

He thinks it has to do with the fact that he has never lacked anything, so he doesn't have to consider a wolf that knows how to hunt, given that he always had people doing things for him. He definitely won't voice his thoughts aloud, but they are there.

People applaud as the greek prince approaches, and his father's expression changes completely. He looks ecstatic at what he is seeing and even shoots a glance at his mother, as if trying to prove a point.

The seconds tick by agonizingly slowly, and he begins to consider getting up from his seat to go after him, not caring about the audience.

The moment he sees the bushes rustle and his figure appear behind them, he feels like he's about to faint, clutching his knee tightly, his knuckles turning white.

Ilya isn't dragging any animal, but he has something in his hands that he can't quite identify. He'd be lost in the way he looks right now if it weren't for the fact that he's so damn worried.

When he's closer to his radar, he can smell the scent of cedar wood and coffee reaching his nostrils; it's as if his legs have come alive on their own, propelling him toward him.

"Shane..." he hears someone say, his mother, but it's like she's trying to make a mountain out of a molehill. He ignores her, walking toward the alpha, who looks at him and quickens his pace.

"Ilya." he says when he's right in front of him.

What did you do? It's the question that catches in his throat the moment the alpha separates his hands and shows him a small rabbit. He lets out a choked sound when he sees it.

The animal is alive, lying on his palm as if he had managed to calm it down.

He lets out a sigh of relief, and his eyes well up at the sight.

"I wasn't sure you wanted an animal to hang on your walls," he says.

"No, I don't." he says, shaking his head and stretching his fingers out to touch its white fur.

"I thought it would be best to show you one," he adds, making his omega purr and shed his first tears. Something that confuses the alpha. "Wait, are you okay?" he asks, his whole demeanor changing.

"Of course I am," he says, wiping away his tears with his thumb. "You remembered." he says, and he can see his whole face light up instantly.

"I remember everything about you, Shane," he mutters, in a whisper, as if it were meant to be intimate. "And I want to keep learning more."

He doesn't get a chance to reply because his father interrupts the moment, approaching them both and making him realize how close they are.

When he looks at the rabbit in his hands, Shane thinks he's about to disappoint him and can't allow that.

Instead, the older alpha looks at him and says, "I didn't know you wanted a pet," to which Shane simply smiles broadly.

"I didn't know you wanted my suitors to kill animals for entertainment, so we're two of a kind." he replies through gritted teeth and shoots one last look at the curly-haired alpha

before approaching the other two.

He realizes, from the way the guards have to rearrange everything that was ready, that his father decided to change the schedule on the fly, a small victory for him.

The three alphas are subjected to questions about battle strategies and others related to the Canadian people, their festivals, and traditions that don't involve slaughtering an animal.

Ilya answers most of the questions correctly, but he doesn't gloat about it. He wishes it bothered him so he'd have a reason to cheer on the other two alphas, but it doesn't.

The way he speaks, gestures with his hands, and even mutters an insult under his breath is captivating not only to him but to all the guests present. He commands everyone's attention, even if he isn't the one who ends up winning.

Shane has to stand to congratulate the Greek prince and hears him whisper, "At least you could pretend to be glad." which makes him tense up instantly.

Jackson had told him that the best thing would be to let him go and ban him from the palace, but the omega refused, arguing that it would be much better to keep him close to discover his intentions.

Small moments like this, where his omega becomes more alert and he has to swallow a response that would make him look like he's overreacting, make him think it would have been better to listen to him.

He tries not to look at the Russian prince to prevent him from deciphering the discomfort in his eyes, if his body language hasn't been indicative enough.

The moment he approaches to greet and congratulate him, the alpha extends his hand in his direction to kiss his palm. He shakes his head slightly, but his unwavering gaze makes him do it. The taller one takes the opportunity to move a few centimeters closer.

"He said something to you." he states, leaving no room for discussion. "What was it?"

"Nothing... I'm just drawing too much attention to us, there are other people," he points out.

"You're the prince." he reminds him.

"You are too, I must be respectful," he insists.

"You don't owe them anything, we're the ones who must prove ourselves to you, not the other way around."

"Ilya..."

"You have to remember that, *solychniko*. Don't let him intimidate you," he adds, his voice low. The scent of cedar wood and coffee again helps his body relax and regain focus.

His parents are leading the guests to the living room for appetizers; he must follow them to be a good host and endure their intrusive questions, even though he's not in the mood.

He doesn't want to see the alpha leave, so he decides to slip away first, bidding him a soft farewell.



The next day, Niall and Minerva show up at the castle, arguing that he needs some time to rest instead of constantly focusing on the whole competition.

They go straight to David, who agrees, and they arrange a day by the pool.

When Shane finds them, they're already settled on the lounge chairs, and he can't help but chuckle to himself.

"You two are a menace to the people of Canada," he tells them, but sits down in the empty spot between them.

"Uh oh. That one's already taken," the blond beta informs him. He frowns. "Did you think we wouldn't go looking for him?"

"Speaking of..." the alpha murmurs, starting to fan herself. The omega turns his head and sees the curly-haired alpha walking toward them, one eye closed against the sun.

"Guys, prince," he murmurs, bowing. The alpha is wearing black swim trunks, and his gaze drifts to the happy path across his fully exposed chest.

He swallows and realizes his throat is dry, so he glances at the table beside him and takes a sip of lemonade, earning a complaint from the beta. "Hey!"

"Prince Rozanov, good afternoon," he murmurs and tries to stand up again, but the alpha stops him.

"No, it's fine. I can sit there," he says. "I was going for a swim anyway."

"No, no. I'll move."

"You can share it, no one cares," his friend murmurs, gesturing with her hand. He hears Niall laugh as they exchange a smile with Ilya.

"You'd love that, you fucking pervert," he mutters, winking at him. Shane feels as red as a tomato. "Okay, I'm going for a swim," he announces. "You can tell Jackson to join." He slides, which makes him frown.

“Oh, yeah. That would be great.” the beta supports his comment. “Who knows? Maybe he’ll fall for another prince and be free of you.”

“Okay, wow. That’s not cool.” He points it out. “Jackson would never do something like that.”

“And I would never have slept with another alpha, but here we are,” Minerva tells him. “You should tell your sister, Rozanov.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he replies, making everyone laugh.

Eventually, both Alexandra and Jackson join them. The alphas, with too much pent-up energy, quickly propose competitions and games in the water. Shane watches everything from his lounge chair, shielded from the sun by the umbrella to the side, and smiles.

Ilya proves to be a great host and even gets a few laughs from his best friend. What once made him feel a pang of irrational jealousy now gives way to tenderness.

Every time he walks past him and glances at him, he feels his body unconsciously become warm. He's lucky he's automated the use of inhibitors all these weeks, though he suspects the alpha is aware of his effect on him.

He enjoys seeing him relaxed in his pool and having fun; it reminds him of the young man he used to be before the pressure hit him like a hammer.

A pang of sadness settles in his chest just thinking about the moments he had to endure surrounded by strangers, where he must have felt lost and chosen silence so as not to worry his loved ones.

Shane can't imagine himself in a similar situation without someone there to support him when things go wrong. Despite his various victories, loss is inherent in war, and having faced so much unavoidable brutality makes him close his eyes, shuddering.

The fact that Ilya chose to renounce the honors after fighting for his country for so long, that his mindset hasn't changed, even with people kissing the ground he walks on, is admirable.

“Come on, Shane. You can't stay there all day!” Minerva exclaims, snapping him out of his thoughts and prompting him to get up and jump in the pool.

He feels younger too, in a way, because his thoughts aren't dwelling on his responsibilities, and he isn't pacing anxiously around the room, rehearsing his speeches. He feels more in touch with that carefree, fun-loving side of himself.

After getting used to the water, he joins Alexandra and Jackson to play volleyball. Niall and Ilya set up the net, which is stored in one of the barrels, and they start competing.

Even though he doesn't like the sport, he finds it entertaining thanks to the company and the occasional banter. His team unexpectedly wins, and the alpha gives him a high five.

When he gets out of the pool, he realizes he's hungry and thirsty, so he starts drying off to go to the kitchen. Just then, Minerva starts clapping from the pool, causing him to turn around. Three assistants approach the table and begin setting out lunch for everyone.

He goes over to thank them and asks them to bring the apple juice he prepared the previous afternoon.

Everyone gets out of the pool and helps themselves to the various salads and sandwiches they prepared. Shane looks at his friends and thanks them.

"Oh no, honey. It wasn't me," the alpha tells him. "Ilya thought of everything." This makes him turn his head in her direction. He's still wet as he takes a bite of his sandwich, standing next to his sister who is talking to him.

A lopsided smile appears on his face. The man always seems to have everything covered. Shane doesn't understand how it's possible, but he feels deeply grateful.

Are these the kinds of thoughts clouding his judgment? Is he being selfish by comparing himself to a past that no longer exists and denying his other suitors a chance?

The idea that the others might think it was all a charade, and therefore that he is one, makes him tense.

"I think I should invite the others," he blurts out, causing both Niall and Minerva to turn their heads and look at him in confusion. "It would be rude of me, much worse if they find out."

"Shane, this is your home..." the beta begins, but the alpha stops him.

"You're right, darling," she murmurs. "We should have invited them too. I'll go tell them myself. Okay?" she says. He nods, his gaze distant. Minerva runs her hand along his arm and squeezes it once. "Go have lunch. I'll tell them to join us now." She urges him on.

He approaches the table without making eye contact and begins filling his plate with a small portion of salad and two sandwiches. Jackson quickly notices his stiff posture and furrowed brow, so he soon appears beside him.

"What's wrong? Do you want me to get you something?"

He shakes his head, unsure of how his voice will sound, and proceeds to cough. "I'm fine."

"Mhm." He makes a sound that lets him know he wasn't convincing. Shane turns to look at him and sighs, exasperated.

"Stop it, nothing's wrong with me. Don't act like this," he says, his voice rising.

"So where did Minerva go, then?" he inquires, and he shakes his head. "*Shane*," he insists.

"I told her to go find the other princes," he blurts out, the expression on his face making him feel guilty.

“Why would you do that? Aren’t you having fun?”

“Yes, I am.” He snorts and sets his plate down on the table. “It’s just so disrespectful. I’m a prince, and they’re my suitors. I can’t just exclude them.”

“You’re not excluding them; you’re spending time with your friends,” he reasons. “Did you even consider that they still see me as one of your servants?” he asks, frowning, to which the omega frowns in return. “Because they do, no matter what you say, and that’s fine. I don’t care what they think, but did you stop to think about how I would feel?”

“I just... Ilya’s here too, and you said yes.” he argues.

“Yeah, because we’ve known each other since you were ten,” he murmurs and shakes his head. “You know what? Fine, forget I said anything, let’s keep it peaceful.”

“I didn’t mean to...” he raises his hand and waves it in the air.

“It doesn’t matter now, just leave it at that.” and he walks away from him.

Shane can’t help but feel utterly stupid for what he just did, but even worse for not noticing how his best friend was treated, as if he were invisible to the other two princes.

He goes to the table next to his lounge chair and looks for his sunglasses to cover his eyes; he doesn’t want to cry because he damn well doesn’t deserve it.

He spiraled through his thoughts and tried to make the least damaging decision for himself, but he didn’t consider how the others might feel.

He bites into his food as if it were a chore, instead of something to enjoy. He doesn't want anyone near him until he's cleared his head and his emotions, staring at the pool water as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

"Okay, some news. I found out the other suitors were finishing lunch, so I invited them to come later," Minerva announces, making everyone turn in her direction. "We can have some more fun until I get bored by listening to high school stories," she says, and he would laugh, if it weren't for the fact that he risks looking at the alpha and notices his jaw clenching.

His blue eyes find his, and he bites his lower lip, ashamed of his own decisions.

He knows he doesn't deserve anyone's comfort and that this might separate them more than it might bring them together. Shane wants to run to his room and call it a day, but that's not what a prince does.

He must live with the decisions he makes. “I hope they’re decent at cards,” Niall murmurs, making Alexandra laugh. His gaze is still fixed on the blond-haired alpha.

Sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, is what he’s trying to convey through his eyes. After leaving to fight for his homeland, is the alpha able to understand that his duty is tied to other things?

“We could have a tournament and have my brother beat them,” he suggests, to which Minerva gives a look that suggests she’s considering it.

“Not a bad plan, I’d pair him with Shane, just to make them more nervous,” she says, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

“God, you’re so clever,” the alpha replies, to which her friend winks at her.

“What do you say?” she asks her brother, nudging him. Ilya surprises him, starting to walk toward him, and stops in front of his face.

“You look scared. What are you scared of?” he asks him, an octave lower, just for him.

“I don’t want to disappoint anyone,” he replies. “I’m the prince.”

“You are, no one’s going to take that away from you,” he murmurs. “This has to do with that fucker, he’s got a big mouth and he likes to talk shit,” he figures out. Shane shakes his head.

“No, it’s not like that,” he says, not wanting the alpha to get into a fight. “It’s about being kind.”

“You’re not being kind to yourself,” he mutters, leaving him dumbfounded. “I don’t give a shit about them, if they’re going to be here then fine, but you don’t have to let the shit they say get in your way. It’ll affect your leadership.”

He nods twice, like a kid who’s just been apprehended.

“Okay.” He looks into his eyes for a moment longer and nods too. “Good.”

When the other two alphas arrive, he no longer feels the unbearable urge to cry, but he can’t help feeling uncomfortable, though he does his best to hide it and asks the Thornvale prince directly if he has a problem when he notices him staring at Jackson for too many seconds.

“Not at all, prince Hollander,” he assures him, though he doesn’t buy his lie.

Minerva asks them questions, quickly changing the subject and keeping things lighthearted. The omega is inwardly grateful that someone has taken on the role of host, because it’s clear that Ilya can’t continue doing so without raising suspicion.

He surreptitiously scratches the back of his neck and excuses himself to go to the bathroom just as Niall is telling an anecdote that has everyone’s attention focused on him.

He walks as calmly as possible until he reaches the door and quickly opens it. Inside the bathroom, he sits on the closed lid and tries to control his breathing.

He knows perfectly well that he got himself into this mess and that, to be able to handle worse crises, he must navigate this one. The only thing is that the omega in his chest is growling, showing his displeasure, and he has no grounds to call him an exaggerator.

His leg begins to bounce anxiously, and he feels his pheromones fill the small space, letting him know the inhibitor is no longer working. Shane can't help but stare wide-eyed and shake his head.

"Shane, open the door." the unmistakable Russian accent comes through. "You're on the verge of a breakdown, let me help you."

He reaches for the door, still seated, and lifts his head. The alpha's chest rises and falls, the cross in the center. "I don't want to drop," he whispers. The taller man kneels in front of him.

"You're not going to," he says, his certainty sacred. "Look at me," he says, focusing on his blue eyes, feeling him run his fingers along his wrist, bringing his hand to his chest. "It beats for you, it always has and it always will," he murmurs. "I stayed alive so we could have this. So you do the same. Okay?"

He nods twice and swallows hard. "I can't take it anymore," he tells him. "The days are dragging by too slowly, I need to choose." He lowers his head, a single tear escaping. "Before you leave."

"Shane, *omega*." he lets out a whine. "Look at me, that's it. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving you again, I want to be with you forever and..."

"Would you have come back, if it wasn't for my father?" he ventures to ask, something that's been on his mind for weeks now.

The thought of the unexpected answer sends shivers down his spine.

"Yes, I would, of course I would." he insists, nodding. "I don't want you to cry anymore, not about this, not when I'm right here."

"I'm sorry, Ilya." he says, gasping and shaking his head. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I start thinking and I can't stop." he murmurs, almost breathless.

The alpha cradles his head in his hands and rests his forehead against his. "It's okay. You're here with me. Damn it, I want to scent you and I can't. You have to calm down, *kotik*." he murmurs. "Come here."

Shane doesn't even hesitate, surrendering to the prince's arms and sitting on his lap.

He cries silently; hearing his heartbeat helps calm his mind, and his right hand rests on the back of his neck, not gripping, simply lying there as his fingers trace gentle circles.

He becomes docile under his grasp, and his omega lets out a purr that the alpha answers with a low growl.

"If your father hadn't done it, I would have come back regardless," he murmurs. "The thought of never seeing your eyes again haunted me every night, but when I made it out of all that alive, I knew I was coming back for you."

He pulls his head away from his chest to look at him. "Sorry for my outburst, I didn't mean to ruin the afternoon."

"You didn't," he reassures him. "They're probably wondering why you're taking so long." he grimaces, the omega takes a hand to his forehead.

"Fuck." Ilya laughs. "I need to apologize to Jackson."

"You go do that while I get more sunscreen," he tells him, helping him up.

Before heading back to the others, he grabs him by the wrist to stop him. "Thank you." he whispers, to which the alpha shakes his head.

"No need," he replies, looking him in the eyes. "You look really handsome when you smile," he compliments, making the corners of his lips lift. "There it is, my love."

The nickname makes him feel light, a pressure building in his stomach. The prince leans in and presses a fleeting kiss to his lips before leaving for his chambers, leaving the omega feeling every part of this emotion.

The day doesn't end so tensely; they are able to overcome the situation, even with unwanted guests, and he decides to speak with his parents after dinner to let them know that the competition is over.

Naturally, his statement is met with resistance because it comes with a request.

"I want you to leave the castle tomorrow."

"But, darling, the gala isn't until Friday." Yuna murmurs.

"We agreed that you would announce it that day; you were on board when your mother planned everything," his father reminds him.

"Well, things have changed," he replies, trying to convey seriousness and not a whim. "I don't want to keep playing house with the three of them; it's not fair to anyone."

"These are the rules the three of them agreed to, we have to follow them," his mother says firmly.

"I don't want them anywhere near me!" he says angrily. She gasps in disbelief.

"Well, I'm not going to change all this just because you want to be with him. Did he suggest you do it?"

"What? *No!*" he quickly denies. "This is my idea."

"Well, we're not going to change it, son. I'm sorry."

"You can't keep throwing tantrums like this, Shane." David warns him. "You'll be king, and if you can't handle a little pressure, then..."

“Okay, fine. I get it,” he interrupts abruptly, earning a stern look from his mother. “Thank you for nothing, I’ll keep parading around like a cow about to be auctioned off.”

He withdraws with a bow that seems ironic, and he can hear his mother reproaching her husband, saying, "This is all yours," as if he were twelve years old and not twenty-four.

He doesn't want to go to his room yet, so he heads back to the garden, taking a breath to calm himself so he won't go to sleep resentful.

He thinks about the alpha, about the conversation they had in the cramped bathroom, about how he was able to calm him without resorting to his scent, and takes a deep breath.

He truly can't imagine what his life would be like if he hadn't chosen him, and it might be alarming to some, but his brain seems wired that way. Just like his omega's.

When he was younger, he saw trust as something that could be granted naturally, because his parents never surrounded him with bad people, and they had quite a few opinions about everyone.

As he grew older and some bonds became stronger than others, he realized that the implicit trust that came from human interaction would sometimes leave him feeling foolish.

The filters he acquired never completely broke that yearning to have someone he could trust unconditionally. His emotional side is reflected in the small things, like a change in expression or an extra comment that holds another motive.

The life he leads often clashes with that; this is one of those times. Even though there's nothing he wants more than to run down the hall and bang on a certain curly-haired alpha's door, he has to settle for looking up at the sky and asking the moon not to let anyone ruin it.

"I thought I'd find you here," his best friend murmurs, a small smile on his face. Shane shifts his stance so he can step through the doorway, and the beta moves to the side.

"I've been so stupid," he mutters. Jackson makes a sound with his mouth.

"*Eh*, it could be worse." he shrugs, and the omega swallows.

"I wish you hadn't had to tell me, that I could have figured it out on my own."

"There's no point in dwelling on it, the important thing is that you know now." he reasons.

"I'm scared," he finally confesses aloud. He can't meet his gaze. "Not of the Thornvale prince, he's just an egomaniac," he clarifies.

"You're afraid the other one starts running his mouth?" he nods.

"I haven't given him any indication that I might change my mind. What will happen at the gala if I don't choose him? He has powerful people supporting him," he empathizes.

"He won't touch you," he assures him.

“You know I’m not the one I’m worried about.” He swallows. “What if it makes him regret coming back?”

His best friend sighs; the brunette’s thoughts are a mess right now, and the waiting isn’t helping in the slightest. “I think you’re giving too much credit to a prince who doesn’t know his way around this castle,” he remarks. “And who hasn’t been in combat the way the other one has.”

“He doesn’t care,” he says, looking toward the tree. “I could see it in his eyes, he just doesn’t care. He sees it as a game, and I’m the missing piece.”

“Shane...” he tries, but he shakes his head. “He’s not going to reach you, or him.”

“I can’t risk it either.” he sniffs. “If something happens to him, my omega won’t survive.”

It takes him a few seconds to get those words out of his mouth; the lump in his throat is impossible to hide.

“Did you talk to him about this?” he asks, emphasizing the word *him*.

He shakes his head. “I talked to him about other things I needed to know,” he says. “This, I won’t.”

Jackson says nothing, but he can feel his discontent hanging in the air. He, who had been fidgeting with his fingers, stops to bite his nails.

He imagines Ilya in that same garden, waiting for two puppies to snuggle into his arms, smiling, knowing that to protect what doesn't yet exist, he must take risks.

I have to shoot first.



The next morning, Shane sends the maids to inform the Greek prince that he wishes to have breakfast with him alone, knowing the man will make a spectacle of it all.

He nods at every dull story he tells and forces himself to engage in the conversation in a way that will lower his guard. He makes sure the plant he gave him is in one of the four corners, conspicuous enough to be unintentional and elegant.

From several encounters, the omega can revel in the fact that he perfectly understands the kind of partner he expects: one who doesn't impose conditions but guides gently and with the tenderness of an omega.

When they discuss tactics, he does so with a condescending tone, as if he were eighty years old and had fought in five wars. He tries to maintain his relaxed posture to show him that he

trusts his judgment. It helps that Jackson is present, making faces behind his back.

Breakfast lasts two hours, and the alpha isn't ashamed to show how pleased he is with his change of attitude.

"I'm glad you considered giving us an honest chance," he murmurs, then offers his hand. He suppresses the surprise in his expression as he watches him mimic the other alpha's behavior, something that has been uncharacteristic of the rest, and presses his hand into his palm. He can feel him applying pressure with his thumb.

He keeps his gaze steady on his and forces a smile, even though his omega whimpers for him to pull it away quickly. *He's dangerous, don't trust him. Where's alpha?*

The moment he steps out of the room, his shoulders vanish like a spell broken, and he leans back against the chair. Jackson is by his side in seconds, taking his hand and inspecting him.

"I'm fine," he tells him. "He didn't leave any marks."

"Hmm, I could see he wanted to," he observes. He closes his eyes for a moment, trying to catch his breath. "You need to see Ilya now, before he starts talking."

"No, I won't," he murmurs. "If I see him right after, he'll think it's a joke," he reasons. "I have the wardrobe fitting this afternoon, right?" he nods. "Great, I need to have this man trying on a suit," he tells him, to which Jackson's eyes widen.

"Isn't that a bit much?" he asks, and Ilya shakes his head.

"He needs to feel like he's won, let him gloat, but don't be around him any more than necessary," he instructs. "I'll strike when he least expects it."

"I feel it's my duty as a friend to reiterate how important it is that you talk to Ilya about this."

Shane sighs, massaging his temples. "Message received. I'll see him today when I can."

"Will you tell him?"

"No," he replies. "I can't yet, but when this is over, I will."

"This could go wrong, Shane. This man might find out and retaliate against you."

"He won't, end of discussion," he says, patting his thighs. "Now you have to tell me about your sexy lumberjack, or was it a woman?" he asks, quickly changing the subject.

Ilya finds him before his wardrobe fitting in the kitchen. "Hey," he says, trying to sound casual and normal.

The alpha is in front of him in an instant. "*Kotik*," he murmurs, his left hand rising to stroke his cheek. "How are you?"

He knows there's too much risk in being this close, but it's the indulgence he allows his wolf, after all he had to fake this morning.

"Fine, I'm fine," he replies, lifting the corners of his lips to convey that he means it. "And you? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, of course," he answers, frowning slightly. "I was wondering if you were available now, we could go horseback riding together," he suggests.

"I'm busy right now," he replies. "I have something to take care of with my mother," he adds, because admitting exactly what he's going to do might cause him some emotional pain, and he doesn't want to make it worse.

"Well, perhaps later?" he asks, his tone hopeful, making him think for a second that feels too long. His answer sounds strained and unbelievable.

"Sure, we can talk about it later."

Ilya is quick to decipher what's happening behind his gaze, so he shifts it to the kitchen table—anywhere but those blue eyes. "What's wrong?" he asks, his posture shifting.

"Nothing," he replies, his voice hurried, making him sound unconvincing. He narrows his eyes and tilts his head. "Nothing, I told you I'm fine," he reiterates.

He notices the way his nostrils flare, subconsciously searching for any clue in his scent, but the omega is using suppressants, making sure no one can identify what's going on.

"I have to go, my mother's waiting for me," he says, but the alpha takes a step forward.

"What happened?" he repeats, his voice low, it takes too much strength not to stammer out the honest answer. "*Shane*," the way he says his name makes him look at him. "Tell me."

"Nothing bad happened," he offers. "I'm just a little nervous about the gala," he forces a laugh. "You know, omega stuff."

The taller man shakes his head, not believing him. "That doesn't sound like you at all," he murmurs, words that fill him with relief, even under these circumstances. Then, it's as if all the pieces of his puzzle fall perfectly into place.

"He said something to you. *Again*," the lack of reaction on his face is confirmation enough. "I'm going to kill him," he announces, which makes Shane quickly grab his arms, stopping him from leaving.

"You won't do such a thing," he warns, looking him in the eyes. "He didn't say anything to me," he whispers.

"Baby, I need you to move so I can cut his throat for scaring you like this," he argues. "You're shaking," he says, looking down at his hands. He pulls them back, hiding them behind his back.

He starts to thrash about, and it makes his vision blur. "Please, don't do anything," he pleads, still standing before his body. "I have it under control."

"What do you have under control? The way you sent him to try on clothes?" he pressed.

"Ilya..."

"You need to communicate with me, Shane," he says. "I don't like feeling like you're hiding something from me."

"I'm doing this to protect you!" he yells, throwing his arms over his chest. The alpha doesn't even flinch at the movement, but his expression changes.

His hands go to his hips, and he thinks he's about to run to make good on his declaration, so he puts his hands on his shoulders to stop him from letting go.

Instead, the Russian prince presses him against the wall next to the table, inches from his face.

"You don't have to protect me from absolutely anything," he says, emphasizing each word. Shane stares into his blue eyes, dumbfounded. "I'm your alpha, I'll protect you."

"If you're my alpha, then you'll respect my decision not to involve you and you'll let this go," he replies, breathing heavily.

"No," he says, to which Shane blinks in surprise. "I'm not going to let this go because you seem two seconds away from a panic attack, and yet you're still willing to go on."

"You're exaggerating," he retorts, though it doesn't sound like a convincing argument.

Ilya tilts his lips to his left ear and whispers softly. "Do you want me to keep you pressed against this wall, omega?"

"Please," he begs, his eyes instinctively closing at the closeness. He feels too safe, too close to peace when the alpha is near, even without being able to smell him.

"Talk to me," he insists, his voice still low.

"I can't let you kill him," he says, sighing. "I won't put blood on your hands before..." he swallows, the alpha lifting his chin with his hands.

"Open your eyes," he orders, and Shane forces himself to do so. "Before what?"

"Before we start our new life," he says, almost breathless.

At that moment, Shane thinks he's going to fight it, talk about how little it matters to him to have blood on his hands when it comes to a manipulative man like that. Instead, he's met with silence.

"You're planning to do it," he concludes. "I'm not going to let that happen, Shane."

“No, no.” He shakes his head vehemently. “That’s not my goal.” he murmurs, then turns his head to confirm that no one is watching in the hallway.

“Then what is your goal?”

“You can’t know.”

“Try me.”

“If he realizes you’re involved in any way, he’s going to try to do something, and I can’t have that. Do you understand? People are going to talk, the rumor will spread all over the country,” he argues.

“I have years of training, I was in the war,” he points out. “I’ll kill him before his body hits the ground.”

“No.” he mutters. “You need to trust me, Ilya. Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do, but you’re trying to keep me out of all this when it clearly involves me.” he sighs, exasperated. “I need to know so I can protect you properly.”

“What you need to do is act jealous so he doesn’t get suspicious,” he counters.

The alpha seems to read his determination in his expression, because he finally nods, like a pup who's just been told playtime is over, rests his forehead against his, and sighs. Shane lets him cup his cheeks in his hands.

"I trust you more than anyone. I'd take out my heart for you to tear apart if that's what you want."

He shakes his head. "I want you pretty much alive."

He knows his wolf might still be restless, so he decides to lean in and kiss his lips. It's a quick caress meant to soothe his worries for as long as it lasts.

"I love you," he whispers, those tender words that manage to soften his prickles. "I love you so much."

Shane presses one of his hands to his chest. "I can feel it."



His routine is disrupted as the days go by because his mother has organized several meetings that require his presence, and even though he had dreamed of marrying the love of his life, the preparations only stress him out.

They are supposed to get married in two weeks, so there are several things he must figure out with his fiancé, but his mother wants to interfere in even the smallest detail, rushing things along.

All of this leaves him with less time to take care of what's important, which does nothing to calm his nerves.

He agreed to a few brief moments talking with Ilya in the garden and didn't push for answers, which was enough for him to continue, even though he couldn't take his worried expression off his face.

With only one night left before the gala, his parents invite the three princes to dinner and spend the evening showering each of them with compliments. Something that would be quite amusing to watch if it weren't for the fact that the omega is focused on making sure the maids don't mix up the glasses so the Greek prince gets the correct one.

He didn't want to involve Jackson in all of this, so he contacted one of the witches his mother had consulted when she was pregnant to find a way to ease the pain.

Shane also didn't want to enter this new stage of his life with blood on his hands, and the idea of killing someone was inconceivable to his inner wolf, unless absolutely necessary.

So the plan was underway, and it seemed he wasn't doing a great job of feigning composure, because the Russian alpha pulled him aside and gave him a stern look.

"You're acting like someone's about to attack the castle, *kotik*," he mused.

"Yeah, sorry," he grimaced. "I think I need more water."

The alpha went over to one of the tables and poured him a glass of water, which he finished in two gulps, letting out a satisfied gasp. "Thanks."

"If you keep this up, you might trigger your heat," he murmurs, making Ilya blink in surprise and his grip on the glass loosen. He looks up to meet Ilya's gaze, and Ilya inclines his head.

"I'm serious, whatever you're doing—which isn't hard to see—you need to relax," he says. Shane frowns and moves away from him, offended.

"I've been doing perfectly fine, there's no reason to be so pushy, thank you very much."

The Greek alpha seems to mistake his expression for anger, so he hurries over to his side.

"Prince Hollander, are you alright?"

"Yes, thank you," he replies.

"It's nothing, I noticed the exchange left you a little upset, so I came to show my support."

"You're very kind, prince," the alpha bows his head. "Don't worry, I do get angry when my abilities are judged, but it passes quickly," he says, a dart that, in his mind, is aimed at him,

but the alpha misinterprets it and nods solemnly.

“You’re a wonder, prince. I’m truly grateful that you gave me a chance.” He nods, feeling him take another step closer. “I wouldn’t worry about Rozanov; whatever he says about you doesn’t affect us. He’ll return to Russia as soon as we make it official.”

The omega tries not to grimace at this and forces himself to stay still when he runs his hand along his left arm, reminding himself why he’s doing all this.

He feels fortunate to be using suppressants so as not to risk his scent betraying him, showing discomfort.

“Always with the right words, my prince.” he replies, smiling. The alpha puffs out his chest, proud of his performance, making him want to throw the canapés he’s holding onto his clothes.

When they sit down to eat the main course and dessert, his mother encourages him to talk a little about the wedding preparations. David takes the opportunity to talk about his wedding, which gives him the green light to eat.

With their bellies full, Yuna proposes a toast, and the whole thing feels rather cheap, but he smiles and nods as if this part were truly important. He reminds them that, no matter what happens, it has been a pleasure meeting them and tries not to look at Ilya too much when he speaks.

Ilya keeps his temper under control, only rolling his eyes when the other prince requests to say a few words and slipping in a comment meant to throw him off balance, but it doesn't go any further.

Shane can tell the sedative is having effects on the other alpha, from the way he blinks several times to stay focused and has to hold onto something to avoid swaying.

His father notices this and looks at him, confused, but doesn't comment on it.

From the moment he began devising his plan, he knew it was crucial, for it to appear genuine, that one of his parents begin to suspect something was amiss. So, when the alphas retire to their chambers, the king can't help but make a comment about it.

“That guy, the blonde one.”

“Please, dear, he has a name.” his wife says.

“I never bothered to think about it. It seemed strange.”

“Mhm, I don’t know. We had a good conversation.”

“Don’t tell me now you’re sending my boy home.”

He tilts his head. “Dad, please.”

“We should go get some rest,” Yuna says. “Preparations will begin early.”

He nods and says goodbye to both of them with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

He doesn't expect to find the Russian prince at the foot of the stairs leading to his room, so he blinks twice to make sure his eyes aren't deceiving him.

“What are you still doing here?” he asks, confused. He tries to contain the wave of fear that threatens to shake his world.

Ilya moves closer and they are face to face. “I couldn't go to sleep without telling you this.” The omega nods, urging him to continue. “I'm deeply grateful for the opportunity you gave me, for the fact that you didn't slam the door on my face and listened to me.” He murmurs.

“I am a landless man, who was only able to compromise because, in the end, it meant I could return to your side. If you choose me and I become king by your side, I will care for your people as if they were my own, I will put their well-being before my own. I will protect you with my life,” he says, looking him directly in the eyes.

“I will be your first ally in this coming change, but you also need to know that you are capable of doing it on your own, Shane. You don't need an alpha to guide your people; your judgment and your tenderness are enough.”

“I truly hope that's true,” he says. “I saw the example of my parents; I noticed the good influence they were on each other. It's as if their intelligence is amplified to its fullest potential when they are together.” He shakes his head. “I can't explain it any other way.”

“We can't be your parents, but we can try being Shane and Ilya, which I think is better.”

“Yes, you're right.” He says, nodding.

“I love you,” he murmurs. “Forever.”

His words bring a smile to his face. “I love you too, Ilya. It will always be only you.”

He notices the way his shoulders relax and lets out a sigh, his gaze softening.

“*Fuck.*” he lets out a breath. “I want to kiss you so badly.” His honesty makes him chuckle.

“You should go to sleep, prince. So you can be ready for me tomorrow.” he winks.

“Okay.” he nods. “Goodnight, *solyschniko.*”

The alpha steps aside and Shane starts going up the stairs. He can't look back because he's afraid his omega will make him run back and melt into his arms.

Less than 24 hours, you have to be strong, he tells himself.



A wave of adrenaline courses through his body as he finishes getting ready to go downstairs.

Jackson, a few steps behind him, watches him button his shirt in the mirror, looking nervous, which does little to calm him.

He spent the last few hours as far away from the three princes as possible, having breakfast in the garden to avoid his mother's orders, and then taking a long shower.

As the sun began to set on the horizon, his best friend summoned the seamstress, and they began to finalize the details of the suit he had been longing to wear since the moment he saw it hanging on the rack.

Of course, they added some details that made it a much more sophisticated outfit, one that aligns with the omega's tastes. These are the last few hours in which he will have to use suppressants, something that has made him quite anxious.

His mother has always been against using pills to regulate something as natural as a scent, but he considered it the only efficient way to ensure that his emotions wouldn't reveal his plan.

Now that everything is about to end, he finds himself more nostalgic than ever, remembering the times he used to run through the corridors without a care in the world. His time studying in the library and the furtive outings with the rest of his friends for fun.

He is destined to become a king and, as such, he cannot leave any loose ends.

He couldn't trust that his employees might start to suspect something or be seduced by the prince's charms, so he sent the beta to investigate what the three of them were doing, and when he heard his response, he felt his heart race.

"I haven't seen him anywhere; the maids say he's still resting."

He let out a huff to feign indifference and rolled his eyes but said nothing.

Once he's ready, he thanks the seamstress and, along with his best friend, they leave the room, leaving him these last few minutes alone.

He raises his gaze to meet his reflection and adjusts the necklace he religiously puts on before going out to face the world. Being silver, it matches the edges of his shirt. He runs his left index finger over the cross and takes a deep breath, closing his eyes.

His world turned on its axis the day he heard the trumpets and saw him step down from the carriage; tonight will be a testament to their crossing to the other side.

The corner of his lips lifts at the mere thought of a young Ilya, looking at him with that characteristic intensity, the number of touches that held meaning and that he mistook for

camaraderie, because allowing himself to dream of anything more while he was a casteless adolescent was pointless.

He wonders if the overwhelming feeling of joy that springs from his chest is something they can share, if his wolf calls his name with the same insistence. He swallows and lets the necklace lie just above his shirt, then turns around to check that everything is in order and heads to the door.

When he opens it, his friend is already waiting for him to go downstairs together.

The moment they reach the door, the guard informs him that not all the guests are present, to which he shrugs, dismissing it.

“I’m the main attraction, and I’m ready.”

“We know, prince,” says the guard beside him, the same one who broke the news that Ilya had left the palace, looking frightened. “What we mean is that not all the princes are present yet.”

“Who are present?” Jackson asks. He turns his head to look at him, looking worried.

“Thornvale and Russia’s princes are already inside,” he replies, to which he has to try to suppress a smile.

It means his plan has worked.

“Has the Greek prince fled?” he asks them, frowning.

“We have no idea, Prince.” They exchange glances. “We’re just guarding the doors.”

“I see...” he murmurs, feigning thought. “Well, I’m not going to be denied entry to my own engagement celebration, so get everything ready for me to come in.”

Before they can announce his presence, the omega nudges him with his arm and points to the side door. The beta looks at him, confused. “What?”

“You’re going in, I already spoke with my mom.” he says.

“No way. How come you didn’t tell me before? I need to change clothes.” he looks at himself.

“It was a surprise, and you look good.” he assures him. “Nothing out of place.”

“Oh, screw you. Just because you’re a prince dressed in expensive clothes doesn’t mean you can judge mine.”

“I’m not,” he says, shaking his head. “Go inside now. I’m not going to wait for someone else.” Jackson seems to decipher the puzzle pieces with just a glance and lets out a surprised gasp.

“You...”

“Shut up and go inside,” he tells him. Jackson shakes his head in astonishment. Shane maintains his composure.

Seconds later, the guards look at him for final approval, and he gives it to them.

The moment the doors open and he crosses the threshold, he doesn't raise his head to admire the decorations like a child would, nor does he seek his parents' gaze.

With his shoulders straight and his hands at his sides, he meets the rest of the room with a bow and takes the opportunity to scan the space.

A wave of relief washes over him at the confirmed absence of the prince, because it means he can't harm them and that he'll be able to savor these final moments, maintaining the suspense until he pronounces the name aloud.

"Welcome, everyone. I hope you enjoy the champagne," he begins. "Tonight is very important for the Canadian people, but all of you will be the first witnesses to this moment."

His gaze falls on his group of friends, and a smile threatens to break his composure; he swallows hard.

The same group of people he usually sees, either too drunk or shouting over a card game, is present as well.

Even though he had kept so much to himself, they had watched their friendship grow and become close, witnessed the jokes and the mischief, even if they didn't recognize the other kind of love hidden between them.

He doesn't look at Ilya, because he doesn't want to ruin the makeup he put on less than twenty minutes ago, but he can feel his deep gaze tugging at him.

"Let's enjoy the evening," he concludes, prompting applause.

His parents approach to congratulate him and compliment his attire, reiterating how important this announcement is but emphasizing how proud they are of him, regardless.

The idea of having a crown on his head is something he hadn't even considered, but now that he sees it above his parents' heads, he can't help but blink in surprise, because this is happening and it's only a matter of time.

The Thornvale prince approaches him, offering his hand to place a kiss on his palm and reiterating his gratitude for the invitation. There's something in his tone of voice and his demeanor that sounds like a farewell, and Shane feels relieved not to have had to deal with him, too.

He moves over to the tables to get some water, and his friends approach first. He greets each of them with a smile as they compliment him.

"You need to be photographed like this," Isla murmurs. "You're practically glowing."

Minerva and Abigail nod; they all look happy for him. Something that isn't very common when you grew up in an environment where luxury and envy are commonplace.

He thanks them, urging them to help themselves to the food that has been prepared, and asks about their outfits.

Alexandra joins the conversation with her characteristic insight, although tonight she seems sensitive. She reminds the omega that, no matter what happens, she will continue to be a stable presence in his life, and it makes his eyes well up with tears.

"You can't be making me cry, damn it," he says, laughing. She shakes her head.

"Don't think I'm any better off," she murmurs. "I want you to enjoy this moment. Look at all the people who love you and are proud of you."

He nods, glancing at his group of friends. "Yes, I couldn't ask for anything better," he tells her.

Ilya is chatting with the rest of his group, but his gaze lingers on him every time his hazel eyes turn in his direction. Shane wants to be the last one he greets so he can make the most of his time and speed things up. He's not sure how many hours the Greek prince can last in his chamber.

Niall approaches, gesturing for the others to do the same, and Alexandra squeezes his hand once before excusing herself to go elsewhere. He can't smell him yet, but it will only be a matter of hours.

"Good evening, your Highness." The beta bows. "How are you feeling on this beautiful night?" he asks, in an elegant tone.

"Good, thanks for asking," he replies. "Although I'm a little wary of the drinks, I hope everyone remembers that my parents are here," he says, looking at each of them. Jacob shakes his head.

"Don't worry, we don't plan on ruining your night," he says, looking between them. The corners of the Russian prince's lips lift, and he feels his cheeks heat up.

"That's very kind of you, guys, really," Minerva interjects, her tone sarcastic. She stands next to Ilya. "Have you told the prince how perfect he looks?" she asks, narrowing her eyes.

Their gazes meet, and it feels as if the whole world stops, existence reduced to that brief moment.

The alpha extends his hand, and Shane doesn't hesitate to run his fingers over his palm. How can a simple kiss make his skin crawl like this?

"My prince, your beauty is still breath-taking. I am in awe of the beauty you hold."

Despite being surrounded by his friends, Ilya doesn't seem uncomfortable or reluctant to accept the displays of affection. In fact, he shows no interest in letting go of his hand after kissing the back of it.

“Thank you.” he replies in a whisper. He’s not used to acting this way in front of so many people, but it’s something he wouldn’t mind getting used to. Not when he’s been longing for this for so long. “You look very handsome, too.”

The alpha winks at him, and everyone lets out a groan, as if they’ve had enough of his antics, while Shane’s body vibrates with anticipation.

What will it be like next time, walking into a room with the curly-haired man by his side? Will he gently guide him through the situation? Will he notice his discomfort if it arises? The mere thought makes his heart race.

“Are you nervous?” he asks, as the group gestures to disperse, leaving them alone to talk. The omega shakes his head.

“I’m anxious. I’ve been told about this moment for as long as I can remember, and being surrounded by so many people is a little overwhelming,” he replies. “Still, I’m happy our friends are here, your sister, too.”

“Careful, prince.” he murmurs, lowering his voice. “You’re about to make me start believing.”

Shane looks him in the eyes and smiles. “You yourself have told me that love would prevail under any circumstances,” he reminds him. The alpha looks at him in disbelief.

“Do you remember everything I say?” he asks, tilting his head.

His eyes are captivating; it’s too easy to get lost in them, so Shane looks away toward the room. Ilya gasps in surprise.

“That means you have to be careful what you say,” he murmurs, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, amused.

“Okay,” he nods, and leans closer, his breath fanning his neck. “Just for the record, I never changed my mind about you.”

The news of the Greek prince's absence is discussed by his parents throughout the event, so the omega tries to show a degree of offense without overdoing it and takes the opportunity to chat with the rest of his guests.

They don't ask about his absence, because they don't have the right to do so; they simply talk about how he feels and bring up anecdotes from the past in which the prince was the protagonist.

Upon seeing his best friend, he tries to move as naturally as possible to run to his side. Jackson hands him some appetizers he collected from the waiters, and Shane puts them in his mouth, trying to maintain his composure.

"Do you have any news about...?" He doesn't allow himself to finish the question; despite trusting his job, he doesn't want to leave any loose ends before his announcement.

The beta shakes his head and puts another canapé in his mouth. "Looks like we're not going to have any," he observes. Shane suppresses a smile.

As the night progresses, the omega must have one last dance with each of his suitors, at his father's request. He has the band play very traditional Canadian songs and senses the worry in Thornsvale prince's eyes. He ends up leading him, still a little clumsy.

Immediately after, it's Ilya's turn, and the contrast is striking in the natural way their bodies move against each other. The alpha offers a charming smile as he spins him around the ballroom, the wolf in his chest leaping with excitement, ready to be marked.

The thought of the alpha sinking his teeth into the skin of his neck and breaking it makes his pupils dilate, his body feeling warm. "So beautiful," he says, his breath coming in short gasps, as the song ends.

The ballroom applauds, just as expected, and he bows again. The omega turns to approach his parents and says, "I want to do it now. Without further waiting or delay."

Yuna turns to look at David, who seems overly pleased with himself, and they eventually agree. The three of them go up to a small stage that has been prepared, and once everyone has their champagne glasses in hand, the queen begins to speak.

"The moment for the prince to announce his decision has arrived. We thank both suitors for being here tonight and for walking through this path with us."

Both bow their heads when Shane looks at them. His mother turns to look at him, and he takes a step forward.

"After much thought and time spent with my suitors, I can say that there was someone with whom the chemistry felt innate, where words flowed naturally, and I felt understood," he tells them. "There is an alpha who I believe will be able to reign by my side because I have witnessed his dedication and composure, as well as his courage," he continues.

The room is plunged into complete silence, everyone watching him, mesmerized by his voice, some nodding after a few words, others completely still.

"The man I have chosen to spend the rest of my springs with, with whom I will reign over this beautiful land, is the alpha Ilya Rozanov." *and I would never have it any other way.*

Naturally, all the guests begin to applaud.

Ilya is in the center at the front, looking at him as a wave of relief washes over them both. Shane lets out a shaky sigh when he feels his mother's hand on his shoulder. "Go to him, darling," she says softly. He can feel the emotion in her tone.

As if a barrier has just been lifted, the omega descends the stairs and finds the alpha in the middle, who extends his hands in his direction.

"Please don't tell me I'm dreaming," he says, completely astonished. "From the moment I met you, I knew I wanted to be a part of your life forever. This is the greatest joy of my life."

His eyes sparkle in the dim lighting of the hall, and he can't say for sure that he's feeling much better. Saying his name out loud in front of so many people feels like a declaration of intent.

I am Shane Hollander, heir to the throne, omega like my mother, and hopelessly in love with my best friend.

The alpha's hands rise and caresses his left cheek with his knuckles. He closes his eyes, savoring the touch.

"You're going to be my alpha, we're going to..." He swallows, the curly-haired man nods. "We're going to be a family, you and me."

"What I've always wanted," he says, and that causes the first tear to fall down his cheek. Ilya is there to catch it.

"Fuck, I love you so much," Shane murmurs.

The alpha is about to reply when they hear the sound of two doors bursting open, startling everyone.

The brunette tenses the moment he sees the Greek alpha enter the room and shoots a look at Jackson, urging him to leave and stay somewhere safe.

"Prince Shane! Oh, by all the gods, I'm so sorry."

He doesn't expect the suitor to throw himself at his feet, so he takes two steps back. "I don't understand how this happened," he stammers. "I was fine yesterday, I promise I hadn't gone anywhere."

He takes the opportunity to turn and look at his parents, and they approach the three of them.

"The fact that you chose to interrupt a moment like this speaks volumes about your lack of manners," the king begins, causing him to look up from the ground. "Who do you think you are, entering a place this way?"

"I-I..."

He shoots a look at Shane, who should feel some empathy, considering he's the one who put him in this situation in the first place, but he can't. His body has tensed; if it wasn't for Ilya's hand on his hip, he's not sure he could stand on his own feet.

"Stand up, prince," he says, his voice stern. The alpha, finally realizing there are other people around, listens.

"I'm so sorry. I have no idea what happened to me. Two guards woke me up, and I dressed as fast as I could," he explains.

"What you did was disrespectful to the crown and to me," he murmurs, without hesitation. "I want you to leave this instant. You're done embarrassing yourself."

His eyes shift to Ilya's figure, and he stops breathing.

"You chose him," he observes.

"Be careful how you speak to the future King of Canada," his mother interjects, and he lets out a sound of disbelief.

"Of course, you were always going to choose him."

"Leave, *now*." Shane says, raising his voice to make sure the guards heard him.

"What? Aren't you going to say anything now?" he asks, looking at Ilya and completely ignoring the order. "Have you forgotten your English?"

A sudden wave of fury surges through the omega, and he has to clench his hands to stop himself from slapping him.

The Russian prince remains unmoving at his side, with an expression that could be described as terrifying if you were the one receiving it.

"No." he replies. "But if you continue talking, I will kill you."

The way he says it and his impassive gaze make the wolf in his chest find it tempting, instead of repulsing at the idea.

Even so, he doesn't want a bloodbath in his hall, nor does he want to endanger Ilya's life. No matter how many battles he has lived through, the idea of him ending up harmed by his actions will never cease to haunt him.

"You chose a monster to lead your people," he says, turning to look at him once more. In that second, he regrets not having had the stomach to end his life. Even though he knows he's doing it on purpose. "I hope you're happy."

"Shut the fuck up and get out of my house right now."

He finally obeys, partly because the guards are already surrounding him and he has no escape. Shane feels his throat begin to close, and the moment the doors shut, announcing his departure, his vision blurs.

"That's it, it's over," the alpha whispers beside him, turning to face him. The omega blinks, trying to maintain his composure. "Hey, what do you need?"

"A moment to compose myself," he replies, letting out a shaky sigh. His head feels light.

"I'm here, I'm not going anywhere," he assures him, pressing his lips to his forehead. Shane gasps.

“Sorry, it’s probably the suppressants,” he explains quickly.

His mother moves closer; he can feel her scent reaching his nostrils, and that reminds him he’s safe.

“Honey, take this,” she says, holding out a glass of cold water. He can feel everyone’s eyes on him, like he’s carrying tons of rocks in his pockets.

You're embarrassing yourself.

Everyone will notice.

He manages to raise his hand to hold the glass and drinks its contents in large gulps. Ilya looks at his face, but the intensity of his gaze makes it difficult to maintain eye contact.

"He wasn't wearing the inhibitors," someone behind them comments, the Thornvale prince. "Using suppressants generally affects your sense of smell. I have a friend..."

"Thank you for your comment, prince." his father thanks him.

"Mine wears off in two hours," the blond alpha tells him. "I can try to find something that speeds it up."

"I think it's best to wait for the effects of the pills to wear off. The mix of scents will only confuse him more," his mother adds. Ilya nods.

"Yuna, that can't happen between mates," his father remembers, his omega starts jumping on his chest.

"David, we can't be sure," she argues.

The alpha turns to look at him; something flashes in his blue eyes. "I'll never do anything you don't want," he murmurs.

“Okay,” he whispers. “I’m better now, I can...let’s not let him ruin our moment.”

“You are so strong, *solychniko*.” He caresses his cheek with his knuckles, a smile forms on his face.

He turns in his grip to look at his parents, while Ilya takes the glass to hand it to one of the servants. “Ask the band to play again, I want to dance with him.”

“Do you feel strong enough to do that?” his mother asks, frowning. He gives her a look that leaves no room for argument. “Okay, darling. Whatever you want.”

I want Ilya, he thinks, not for the first time.

Soft music begins to play and the omega intertwines one of his hands with hers while slipping the other over her shoulder. “You’re my fiancé now,” he says, unable to hide the excitement in his tone.

“I am,” he replies. “In two weeks, your husband.”

“And alpha,” he adds, but the taller man shakes his head, starting to move toward the center of the room.

“I always was,” he assures him, making him spin around. “Even when we were miles apart.”

The way his presence and words make him feel allows him to overcome the unpleasant experience of a few minutes ago. He appreciates the alpha's calmness and support.

“I love you so much,” he murmurs, a smile on his face. *“Ilya.”*

The man lowers his lips to his left cheek, positioning them at ear level.

“I will always love you more, Shane.” he whispers, causing his skin to prickle for all the right reasons, making him feel drunk in love.

Chapter End Notes

i'm so happy because I proved to myself that i can do wips and actually finish them.

my gratitude to everyone who took a moment of their day or night to read this is beyond words.

while writing this last chapter, I realized that these guys deserve an epilogue after so much waiting and frustration along the way. So I've decided to give you one last update next Friday, where you'll get a glimpse into the wedding preparations and their married life.

kudos and comments fuel my inspiration, so don't forget to leave one (or both).

Chapter 5: epilogue

Chapter Notes

first, i want to apologize to everyone that's been waiting for this chapter on friday.

to be honest, i hadn't managed to finish it by then, and part of me wasn't inspired enough to force myself to publish something I wouldn't be happy with in the future.

this epilogue was made with a lot of love, i hope you enjoy it.

see you on the other side.

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

When they finish dancing, their gazes remain locked for several seconds, not wanting to lose that connection.

Holding hands in front of a room full of people is a small preview of what their life together will look like; the omega truly can't wait.

Their friends approach again, this time intending to congratulate them. Shane receives kisses from the women and hugs from the men. When Jackson approaches them, he can't contain the emotion in his chest much longer.

"Prince Hollander," he bows, as if that had ever been necessary between them. "Prince Rozanov, congratulations on this moment."

Alpha and omega look at each other, both with smiles plastered on their faces. "Thank you so much, Jackson," the one with the wavy hair says. "The fact that you're saying it means a lot to me. I know how important you are to him." he looks at Shane. "And that makes you important to me, too."

The beta looks surprised by his words but quickly recovers. "I hope you both treat each other as you deserve," he murmurs, to which Ilya nods solemnly and then turns to look at him.

"I'll give you two a moment to talk," he says, and he nods. Then he grabs his left hand and places a kiss on the back of it. "I think your father is eager to toast with me."

"Of course he is," he replies.

When it's just him and his best friend, he gestures for him to approach one of the tables. Even though his stomach is in knots after what happened recently, he forces himself to eat some canapés in sight.

“That was close,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, for a moment I thought it was going to get bloody.” he leans in to whisper in his ear. “But I can’t say I wasn’t going to enjoy it.”

Jackson laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t think he’ll bother you again, at least not after embarrassing himself in front of so many important people.”

“I would think the same, but one can never be completely sure.” he looks him in the eye. “I can’t trust those who parade around boasting over being my enemies, no matter how clumsy they are.”

The night ends with a toast, the moon illuminating the scene from afar, proudly observing its creation. The King asks everyone to raise their glasses as they take the center of the room.

Looking into the eyes of his loved ones, noticing the affection in their features, the omega feels he can breathe, having properly fulfilled his duty without neglecting what his heart desires.

“To the future King and King Consort of Canada!” David says, raising his voice.

The whole room responds with a “Hooray!” and he turns his head to look at the alpha, who has a huge smile on his face.

“May luck always be on our side, *zaichik*.” he murmurs.

“As long as you’re by my side, I think it’s a done deal.” the blonde man replies, before pressing their mouths together in a kiss meant for everyone to see, but no less tender. Shane can feel it in every part of his body.

Ilya accompanies him upstairs, only to make the walk last a little longer. Neither of them can hide their smiles as their hands brush from being so close.

“We’ll have to meet with my mother to talk about the ceremony, it’ll be a bit tedious since she’s very keen on working everything out as soon as possible but I promise she means no harm by it. She can be a lot sometimes.” he tells him, the alpha nods.

“*Mhm*. Will you be wearing a dress?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I might,” he replies. “But you won’t see it until I walk down that aisle.” He places his index finger on his chest, the alpha pouts.

“That’s unfair.” he complains, then looks around before leaning close to his ear and whispers. “At least I’ll be the one to take it off.”

Heat radiates through his words, the closeness is tempting, he wonders if they would be in a different situation, were it not for the fact that he's still using the scent inhibitors. His cheeks heat up and he bites his lower lip.

He had told Jackson that he wanted to walk with his fiancé to his room, so they said their goodbyes before the guests began to leave. They lingered a while longer, saying goodbye to each other and chatting briefly with his parents and sister.

“I can ask the maids to do it for you.” he suggests, working up the courage to look him in the face.

The alpha frowns. “Why would I want that?” to which Shane chuckles.

When they are in front of his door, Ilya leans in slowly, giving him time to step back if he wishes. He meets him halfway, his lips pressing against his as if they have all the time in the world, making him close his eyes.

His hands itch to touch him, but the alpha hasn't, so he tells himself he must learn to control himself and wait. His lips move in a slow rhythm, as if waiting for the invitation instead of simply taking it, making Shane sigh during the kiss and his mouth open wider.

That's the moment he slips his tongue inside, he tastes him, drawing him closer. His body seeks his warmth, but the kiss ends before it can lead to something else.

He lets out an unconscious moan, and the alpha raises his hand to caress his left cheek. He closes his eyes for a moment, blushing.

“My precious omega,” he whispers. “I can't wait to cross this threshold with you.”

He runs his thumb over her freckles and then pauses at the corner of his lower lip, gently pushing it down.

He opens his eyes again, meeting his blue orbs. “I'm a little nervous about it, but when we're like this, it's like I forget.” he confesses. “I feel safe with you.”

The alpha rests his forehead against his. “That's all I want,” he says with a sigh.

Shane works up the courage to lean in and place a fleeting kiss on his lips, then walks to the door and puts his hand on the handle. “Goodnight, Ilya.” he murmurs. “I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast.”

“Rest well, omega.” is the last thing he hears him say before crossing the threshold and closing the door behind him.

He goes into his room and brings his hands to his face, shaking his head in amazement.

He finally did it, he's going to be able to rest next to the alpha he's dreamed of since he was a child. Only ceremonial matters separate them from that future together, he couldn't be happier.

To muffle the cry that threatens to escape his lips, the omega runs to his bed and puts a pillow over his head. The emotion finally catching up with him causes tears to stream down his cheeks.

Another moment of relief, brought by the alpha's return to the country. This time, with a completely different meaning. He managed to instill in him a sense of security, where before he had been sunk in a sea of doubt.

Ilya let him handle the danger as he saw fit and remained by his side as an unconditional partner. That made him cry harder.

Shane, in particular, can have negative reactions to the idea of killing someone, coupled with the fact that his nature goes against it, but when he had the other alpha in front of him, seeking to destabilize Ilya, it was as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes.

His omega considers the alpha part of his family, even without a bond, and that means that the disgust he feels for blood is set aside when it comes to the people he loves.

He wipes his cheeks and grabs the cross hanging from his neck, deciding to murmur a thank you to the moon for bringing him back to his path.

He's never felt a connection as strong as this; it's the way his body vibrates with anticipation at the mere thought of having him near, how it takes just a single glance to interpret his doubts, his fears. He's certain he feels it too, he doesn't even need a verbal confirmation.

He undresses slowly and goes to the bathroom to wash his face. The box of suppressants resting beside the sink, which he'd left as a reminder, no longer serves any purpose, so he throws it in the trash.

Then he puts on his pajamas and lies down in the middle of the bed, the adrenaline of the moment still coursing through his veins. He stares at the ceiling for a while, daydreaming about tomorrow.

This might not have been the plan he envisioned for his future, but now that he's living it, it's impossible to deny that he's enjoying it. Just thinking about those fangs sinking into the side of his neck makes him run a hand over his scent gland and let out a sigh.

What comes next requires a certain seriousness he's strived for his entire life when it comes to his personal affairs. The kind that doesn't need much explanation, that guarantees him the freedom to choose, and reminds him how pleasant it is to be human.

His mind recalls the kiss, the desire spoken aloud, and the caresses on his face, as he feels wetness begin to gather between his legs, causing him to let out a broken moan.

His hands begin to wander slowly over his body, taking the time to rediscover himself, motivated by the words the alpha once spoke to him.

He lets out a sigh as his fingers begin to circle his entrance, teasing himself until he slides them inside. Shane muffles the moan with the pillow and closes his eyes, beginning the back-and-forth motion until he finds the sweet spot.

"Holy shit," he mutters through gritted teeth. "Yes."

He thinks of Ilya's long fingers caressing him, and that only makes him more aroused.

How would he take it? Would he be just as desperate as him, or would he want them to take it slow? He imagines his calloused fingers, which have encircled his hips so many times, how it would feel if he applied a little force to bend him onto the bed. Would he need to?

His mind feels light as he creates scene after scene in his head: the way his hand squeezed his ass that night on the balcony, his breath fanning his neck as they rode to the river.

It all becomes too much, he ends up staining his pajamas with his own release and soaking his hand with slick.

It's the second time an orgasm has allowed him to untie the knot in his lower belly, sending him into a state of relaxation, and he fears this will become a habit. Can he grow tired of this pleasure?

When his legs stop trembling, he carefully stands to remove his pajamas and rings a small bell to let the maids know he requires their services.

He finally goes to bed after 2 a.m., feeling refreshed. He curls up in bed, thinking about that lopsided smile and the way his hands fit with his.

He feels lucky. He hopes Ilya does too.



When he woke up, memories of the previous night flooded his mind, and he smiled into his pillow before stretching and preparing his outfit for the day.

The plan was simple: they would meet in the parlor to discuss the wedding over breakfast.

Shane couldn't contain his excitement at hearing the alpha's thoughts on how he hoped it would occur, as well as discussing some of his country's traditions.

Two knocks on the door as he stood gazing out the window pulled him from his thoughts.

"Come in," he murmured. Jackson entered with a bright smile; he supposed he could say he had one that matched it.

"Good morning. Can I help you choose your clothes to see your fiancé?" he asked. Shane nodded twice and walked over to the closet.

The word *fiancé* sounded completely unreal, like something out of a fairy tale.

He felt something similar when someone talked about mates, only he knew they were real because his parents existed. And so many other people in the village as well.

During a period of his youth, he developed a particular interest in this topic, following his mother everywhere to get a detailed account of her experience.

Does your heart beat faster? Can you hear him in your head? Does he feel your pain?

Yuna had answered each of his questions calmly, in contrast to his hyperactivity. She never treated the subject or the fact that David is her mate as if he was the center of her world, which lowered his expectations.

“Many people bear the mark of others who are not mates; that doesn't change anything. Sometimes, your mate doesn't arrive in the form of a husband, they may appear as a friend you must take care of.”

He had memorized her words, etching them into his mind. That's why, when his father mentioned it, he really didn't want a sensitive moment to become a test for the alpha, Shane didn't need that confirmation.

When he presented as an omega, Ilya and him barely had a conversation about it. His first heat was intense, which meant it took him a few extra days to recover.

Once he felt he could walk without his legs trembling and the thought of the alpha wasn't going to instantly arouse him, he asked his mother to invite his friends over for lunch.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, Shane felt self-conscious at the claps he received, followed by congratulations from each of them. Although he couldn't hide his smile, he had always hoped to be like his mother, even knowing that his leadership qualities would be questioned.

The alpha was leaning against the window, watching him with a smile, but not approaching. At one point, the omega became curious about the distance and decided to close it. Back then, he didn't doubt himself so much when it came to them.

"Hello." he murmured, standing beside him; the breeze behind him was refreshing.

He realized he was using inhibitors, because his nostrils flared without thinking, searching for his scent of cedarwood and coffee, he let out a disappointed sigh, which the alpha did not comment on.

"Hey." he said, in the same tone. *"How are you feeling?"*

"Better than these past six days," he replied. He never felt the need to give the rehearsed answer.

When it came to the two of them, he could say whatever was on his mind without fear of judgment. Except about this crush, of course.

"Yuna told me you handled it really well," he said. It wasn't news to him that his mother had talked about it with his best friend; she tended to overshare with those she trusted.

Besides, Shane had made sure to avoid calling for him when she entered the room. His omega had granted him that favor.

"Yeah..." he nodded, looking down at his lap. *"I imagine alphas have it a little easier."*

"I couldn't tell, since I go through my ruts completely alone."

Those words caused his mouth to go dry, forcing him to instinctively run his tongue over them. Ilya was watching him, and he forced himself to meet his gaze to make it seem like a natural conversation between two friends.

Afraid of ruining everything, he couldn't let the alpha discover his infatuation in this way.

"What about your mate?" he asked foolishly. Ilya narrowed his eyes for a second and tilted his head. *"I mean... you must have one, we all do."* he tried to amend.

Instead of dodging the question or changing the subject entirely, something he could have done upon realizing his nervousness, the curly-haired man stared at him for a minute after saying, *"I don't think they're ready for that yet."*

The way those words were spoken, even in a room with other people present, sent shivers down his spine. His raspy, deep voice was like a siren's song to an omega who had just emerged from the cloud of his heat. Shane wondered if it was possible to go into heat again just by looking at an alpha.

"How do you know?"

His words tumbled out of his mouth faster than he had time to process them. A playful smile flickered across his lips. *"I'm their alpha, I can feel it."*

His lips parted, forming an "o". He was stunned by what he said, his heart racing, and in that moment he felt he had no reason to say it, even though it seemed intentional.

His shoulders unconsciously relaxed, and his wolf lay back down on the ground. His words had been soothing after spending so much time, once his heat was over, to imagine how this exact moment would unfold.

"Congratulations, Shane." he said again, as he swam in his thoughts, bringing him back to the surface. *"I hope this is everything you dreamed of."*

He didn't even hesitate to nod, a smile spreading across his face once more. *"It is."*

Once Jackson helps him finish dressing, choosing a delicate emerald green dress, he stands in front of the mirror to apply some lip balm, having noticed a small bite mark on his lower lip, evidence of what had happened the night before.

He leaves the room, descending the stairs carefully, and heads straight for the living room where the breakfast gathering will take place. There's no need for the guards to announce his arrival, so he glances one last time at his best friend, who gives him a thumbs-up, and enters.

His mother, Ilya and his sister are already inside. As soon as he sees him, the alpha rises from his seat, placing his teacup on the table and bowing.

"Good morning, dear." Yuna says, gesturing for him to come closer.

"Did you start without me?" he asks, raising his eyebrows.

The alpha shakes his head vehemently. His sister answers. "Your mother was telling us about some of the traditions they have regarding the ceremony, not much more."

"Oh, well, it seems I arrived just in time," he says.

Alexandra stands up as well and moves to the side of her brother, taking the chair instead of the couch. "Your place, prince," she murmurs, and he smiles at her.

Once he is beside him, they gaze into each other's eyes for several seconds in complete silence.

"Good morning, fiancé," he whispers, offering his hand to take his. The usual ritual.

"Good morning, Ilya," he says his name, watching him place his lips on the back of his hand. That intense look that sends heat through his lower body.

"After you."

Shane takes the seat first, and he follows, their knees touching, and that's how he wants it. When he turns his head to look at the two women with affectionate expressions on their faces, his cheeks flush. "Shall we begin, then?" he asks them, and the three nod.

While he explains each symbolism behind his entrance, his mother tells them why this tradition exists. Both alphas give their full attention to what is being said, nodding for them to continue.

"The omega must be dressed in the colors that represent us, but is allowed to wear something related to the alpha, as proof of their affection."

"I want to do that," he says, looking at him. He gives him a lopsided smile.

"I could, *uhm*," Alexandra clears her throat, and everyone looks at her. "We usually wear a lot of jewelry during the ceremony, but we take it off when we get to the altar," she tells them.

"I'm not about to let Shane walk around with kilos of gold around his neck," the alpha says.

"No, I know," she rolls his eyes. "But we can make something for him to wear, something he doesn't need to take off."

"I'm fine with both things. If you have the tradition of removing jewelry, I'll do it."

"That's not necessary. We're not in Russia," he murmurs. "You have my necklace," he says, looking at his chest. "I want you to wear it."

"I wasn't planning to stop," he says, intentionally. The curly-haired man smiles again.

They talk for an hour. Shane feels confident enough to express the things he wouldn't be comfortable with, like shaking hands with everyone present after ending the ritual and that he prefers to enter to the music of a harp and bandoneon instead of a choir.

Ilya confesses that he doesn't want to wear his medals when they're vowing eternal love, and Yuna is about to make a comment against this, but Alexandra quickly explains.

"It's a way for the alpha to express his devotion to the omega, leaving his conquests behind to focus exclusively on him."

"That's..."

"Wonderful," he whispers. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asks, tilting his head. The alpha nods once.

"You mean more to me than all the land I managed to reclaim," he says, with an electrifying certainty, and turns to look at Yuna. "I think it would also send a message to those who doubt, letting them know that I can become one of you."

"Darling, you already are one of us," the queen says, in a reassuring tone. "But if this is something you would like to do, then it will be done."

"Shane can't be present at that moment," Alexandra says. "The alpha does it for himself, because it's a decision he makes on his own terms; he willingly gives himself to the omega."

"Okay." The omega swallows the bittersweet feeling of not being able to witness that moment but quickly composes himself. "Let's talk about the oath."

"Yes, but before that, the officer will ask you some questions regarding whether you promise to care for the land, defend the water, and guard the fire. This must happen while Shane presses his hand on the Foundation Stone, then you will do the same." The alpha nods. "Regarding the oath..."

"We must swear by our people, our union, and our blood," he informs him. "Which will be united from this moment, for all eternity."

He repeats the words he learned during his etiquette classes, now his tone much softer, having accepted that this is no longer a dream. Ilya listens and looks at him affectionately.

"That's fine with me."

"I have a question," his sister interjects, and he snorts.

"It seems you have several."

She ignores his brother. "Excuse me, Queen, Prince, but at what point will my brother promise you his eternity?"

Shane blinks, surprised, and turns to look at him. "It's another tradition, the alpha makes the promise because..."

“He’s lucky enough to stay with the omega,” he says, connecting the pieces. “That’s truly beautiful.”

“Really?” he asks, and he nods.

“It’s like a final testament before they bond. Their lives are intertwined forever for that very reason, it’s like...a confirmation of everything we’ve been feeling.”

“It’s a lesson for those who listen, nothing before the omega. It sends a message to those who might find him an easy target, letting them know he’s properly protected.”

He nods and then looks at his mother, who is thoughtful. “I’m not sure how they might take this, but it would be too hasty of me to give you permission to do it, Ilya.”

“Okay, I’ll wait,” he says, just as the omega is about to open his mouth to argue with her. He turns to meet his gaze. “I’ll do what’s best for Shane.”

“B-But I want to...Why can’t you let him, Mom?” he asks, feeling like he’s fifteen again and has been forbidden to ride. She looks taken aback by his words. “It’s sweet and proves I am in control, the country wants to see that I’ve chosen a selfless alpha, and I want to hear what he has to say,” he points out.

“I’m not going to argue about this with you now, darling,” she murmurs. “Let’s talk about the reception,” she says, quickly changing the subject. He has to suppress the snort that threatens to escape his lips, even though everything in him wants to argue.

The alpha places his hand on his lower back, a touch that serves as a reminder of what is truly important, and nods for Yuna to continue speaking.

First, she tells them about the guests, a little about the decorations, which she has kept a secret even from him, and then refers to the first dance. “It’s the one you’ve seen at all the parties we’ve organized, except that it will be your turn to do it.”

“Does it have to be at the beginning? Because I don’t want to be sweaty for the rest of the evening,” he says.

“No, it’s not necessary. First, you will arrive and thank everyone for coming, we will have dinner together, and then you will dance. It would be important for you, Ilya, to interact a little with the ministers and members of the Court.”

“Understood.”

“No,” Shane interrupts without thinking. “He’s not going to parade around the room seeking their approval. He’ll be the king. It’ll make him look desperate.”

“Darling, we know how these people are.”

“Yes, we also know they don’t have much time left,” he argues. “I’m not going to have Ilya working as a publicist at our wedding, and that’s final.”

“And if they come to you? You won’t let him speak, either?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

“If they come to us...” the alpha begins. “I’ll tell them we’re very pleased with their presence and that I’m very happy to be the king consort of this nation.”

He turns to look at him; it seems this isn’t a battle he wants him to fight.

“*Fine.*” the omega reluctantly says.

They talk until the tea runs out and only a few pastries remain on the plates. Both alphas manage to set aside his tension with his mother and talk about lighter matters surrounding the wedding.

“You’ll have the most beautiful dress ever made, I know because she only makes incredible pieces.”

“You should arrange a meeting for me with this designer, see if I can get some information out of her,” the alpha jokes, Shane playfully slaps his chest.

“I won’t know about yours either, so don’t complain.”

“Yes, I’ll have the fitting this afternoon. I’ll make sure everything is in place.”

“Oh, darling, I don’t think you have to worry about that,” his mother waves dismissively. “You’ll both look stunning.”

“Thank you, Yuna,” he says. “It certainly isn’t easy balancing your duties, I’m glad you’re here with us.”

“God, how I missed you all,” she murmurs, standing up. The three of them mimic her.

She approaches the alpha to kiss her cheeks and then Ilya, looking directly into his eyes and stroking his cheeks. “I knew you’d find your way home. I’m glad you made it in time.”

They both turn to look at him. Shane can’t help but smile and feels the alpha approach him.

“Yes, me too.” he murmurs, looking into the omega’s hazel eyes. He licks his lips, feeling his cheeks burn.

The queen takes her leave, having other commitments to attend to, leaving the three of them alone.

“I know I might be a third wheel, but I was going to propose a plan,” Alexandra says, standing in front of them.

“You’re never a third wheel,” he says. “What’s the plan?”

“Well, since the temperatures are going up today, I thought we could make some food and go to the pool. If you both want to.”

"I really want ice cream, so we can try making that and some sandwiches," he suggests without thinking. Then he turns his head to the alpha.

"I'd better get changed, then." he says, the smile that appears on his sister's face holding a touch of nostalgia.

None of them say it aloud, but all three know that the time they're spending together is borrowed, that the princess must return to the country to become queen and assume the duties her father is no longer capable of performing.

They all agree to meet in the kitchen hallway in about thirty minutes. Shane says goodbye with a wave and a quick kiss on the alpha's lips, who remains still to receive it.

When he closes the door behind him, all the annoyance he felt moments ago has evaporated, leaving room for the excitement of sharing a day with the two brothers.



The dress fitting goes smoothly, although of course several tears are shed during the time he shares with his mother and best friend, once he's put on what he's going to wear.

"I'm so proud of you," she tells him, having forgotten the tense exchange from the day before, while cupping his cheeks. "You'll be the most handsome groom in the whole world."

Jackson looks at him fondly while fighting back tears. Shane is moved just by the sight. He's been there for him during his darkest nights, when he'd lost all hope, and had helped him put the pieces back together. He knows exactly what it means that it's Ilya having the dress fitting on the other side of the castle.

"Your mother is right, this dress looks absolutely gorgeous on you. It flatters your figure like no other. I'll make sure you wear something red to the ceremony to ward off any bad vibes."

He laughs and shakes his head, then takes a deep breath and looks at himself in the mirror. He can tell he's glowing, and it has nothing to do with the sunlight filtering through the curtains; this is something that comes from within, something that can't be forced.

Just imagining the Russian prince waiting for him at the end of the hall makes his skin crawl. He dodged the bullet, and now he's going to marry the love of his life.

Once it's over, the omega wants nothing more than to go find him, but his friend lets him know he hasn't finished his fitting yet, so he decides to head to the library and spend his time there.

It's harder to get distracted because every so often he looks up from his book to glance at the door, waiting for him to appear. His mother took care of getting each prince's measurements when they arrived at the palace, so there shouldn't be any problem.

Even so, his mind can't help but play tricks on him, twisting his excitement into something awful that makes his throat tighten.

What if he doesn't like what they've done for him? What if he gets upset because he's not dressed the way he wants? What if that makes him think all this isn't worth it?

He pushes the book away from him and rests his arm on the desk to support his head. His ears start to ring, and his lips feel unusually dry.

He tries to focus on the ticking of the clock in front of him, but all his mind can grasp now is the image of the alpha packing his things and leaving. This time, for good.

His breath comes in ragged gasps as he blinks repeatedly to focus his vision. In the distance, he hears footsteps coming up the stairs. He curses himself inwardly as tears begin to well up in his eyes.

He tries to sit up straight in his chair but realizes it takes too much effort, an effort he lacks now. He hears someone call his name a little closer, but he can't quite place it.

He feels weak, his mind preoccupied with the idea of being abandoned, only causing his omega to scratch his chest in the hope that he'll turn into his second skin and go looking for him.

The scent of cedarwood and coffee reaches him, making his nostrils flare and allowing him to exhale through his mouth.

"Shane," he hears more clearly. That's Ilya, his alpha is here and he hasn't left but, perhaps he came to tell him exactly that?

He lets out an unconscious groan. "Kotenok, I'm right here." he murmurs and hears the sound of a chair being placed next to him. Then, a hand rests on the back of his neck. "Your alpha is here, *mhm*?"

Please don't leave me again, he wants to say, but he knows it would be too selfish to burden him with the way his mind works sometimes. So he simply stays silent and cries.

"I understand that what happened earlier was very emotional. I'm sorry I couldn't be with you right away; we were sorting some things out," he explains. "But I'm here now, okay?" his thumb caresses his scent gland, and he can feel his body moving closer. "There's nothing to worry about, *solychniko*."

When his breathing returns to normal, he uses his other hand to wipe away his tears with his thumb, making sure Ilya doesn't see him like this. Ilya gently coaxes him out of his spiral of thoughts, letting his pheromones reach him but without forcing them on him.

He lifts his head, certain that he has just imprinted the bookend on his arm, and the alpha is quick to open his arms and receive him against his chest.

He hugs him like a lifeline and closes his eyes again, enjoying the warmth radiating from his body along with the caresses.

“My beautiful omega, you’ve been through so many emotions these past few days,” he soothes him. “It’s okay to take a moment alone. I sensed your worry and came as fast as I could,” he explains. “Now you’re safe with me. You don’t need to keep up your armor anymore. I’ll protect us both.”

His words resonate deeply, followed by a low vibration that rises from deep within his chest as a way to calm his omega, who had been pacing impatiently.

He lets out a purr and closes his eyes again. Ilya kisses his hair as he traces circles on his back.

“We’ll be alright,” he whispers.

He has no idea how long he spends lying on the alpha’s chest, but at some point, he decides to straighten his back and gathers the courage to speak.

“I started thinking,” he says, swallowing hard. “I had finished and I was excited to see you.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” he takes his hands and kisses his knuckles. “Now I’m here, with you. Not going anywhere else.”

“I should be the one apologizing,” He shakes his head. “You shouldn’t have found me like this.”

“*Breathe,*” he commands. “That’s it, take the oxygen, it’s yours,” he instructs. “Now exhale, good job,” he runs his right hand gently along his cheek. “I’m right where I’m supposed to be,” he murmurs. “Let me take care of you, Shane.”

He nods slowly, and the alpha leans in to place a kiss on his forehead, then another on his temple. “I love you,” he whispers, just for him.

“I love you too.”

In the silence of the library, the omega allows himself to be held, like that boy who longed for the same thing years ago, letting Ilya be his strength when he can’t be.



The day begins very early at the palace.

Shane wakes up before Jackson knocks on his door and heads to his closet to choose something to have for breakfast.

He knows it's his enthusiasm that's making him so energetic, and his task for the day is to learn to manage it. That's why he wanted his breakfast routine with his parents to remain unchanged.

Even so, when he arrives in the living room and his father gets up from his seat to give him a hug, he knows that today will be anything but normal.

"My son," he says, pulling him into a tight embrace. "We've waited so long for this moment."

"Yes, dad. Thank you," he murmurs.

"David, let him sit down and eat," his mother tells him.

"Yes, honey," he pats his back. "God, I can't wait."

"Does he think he's going to get rid of me?" he asks his mother jokingly.

She rolls her eyes. "He's just really excited to have a son-in-law to practice target shooting with, leave him alone." she replies, laughing.

"Hey, don't talk about me like that. I'm just glad things are working out for you two. I was bored with all the waiting and that crap about not being the right time," he argues, reaching across the table for one of the small sandwiches in front of him. "It's finally happening."

His mother nods. "I wonder how Ilya woke up."

"Excited, I hope." he jokes again. "I wouldn't mind going to see him and coming back with an update, mom."

"Oh, no." she shakes her head. "It's enough that you had dinner together yesterday; tradition dictates that you have to see each other again on your way to the altar."

He turns to look at his father, but this time, he doesn't let himself be swayed by his eyes.

"Your mother's right. What's a few more hours of waiting to do?"

They eat breakfast, reminiscing about childhood moments with affectionate glances. Shane can't help but blush when his father emphasizes how obvious the attraction was to everyone.

"I remember that time you fell off your bike and he picked you up like you'd broken your leg," his mother laughs. "You were crying so much, he took you all the way to the nursery because of the tantrum you threw."

"Well, maybe he was right at the time," he argues.

"Oh no, honey. You were barely taking your first steps on a bike without training wheels, you get worked up so easily," Yuna recalls. "It was really surprising, when you came back I could barely smell your cherry scent."

"He was always careful with me, that's no surprise," he murmurs. "I still remember my sixteenth birthday party," he says wistfully.

It was one of his first times wearing a dress in public, and he was incredibly nervous, given that he was the only male omega in his entire circle. Being seen in clothes considered

feminine and receiving criticism was one of his greatest fears.

Neither of his parents had given him that impression; they simply cared about his happiness. But having grown up around other people, he knew that judgment existed. It would be foolish to pretend it didn't, because it is something that carries on to this day.

He remembered Ilya being the first to approach, offering his hand and maintaining a secure grip on his. He remembered Ilya calling him dazzling, and he felt electricity surge through his body.

Even without him presenting, the alpha was already treating him as if he were the only person worth caring for, something that the passage of time allowed him to recognize.

"I'm so lucky he's back," he says, letting out a sigh. "I never could have imagined doing this with anyone else."

"No, darling," his mother murmurs, reaching out to stroke his hand. "He's lucky *you* took him back." she emphasizes. "Which is why he should always kiss the ground you walk on."

He laughs and takes a sip of his tea. He knows she's saying it not out of resentment; she's simply an omega looking after her pup. In fact, he risks thinking that if the curly-haired man were in the room, he'd say something similar.

Once they finish breakfast, the family says their goodbyes and starts getting ready. Shane finds his friend at the door, who tells him everything is ready in his room.

Before heading there, he decides to go through the garden, encountering one of the gardeners who, a few weeks ago, had given him a flower to put on his desk. "Good morning."

"Prince, good morning." she bows. "Congratulations," he adds.

"Well, I'm not married yet, but thank you very much," he replies. "I was wondering if it was possible to make a bouquet with those flowers." he indicates the chamomile. "I would only need three, if you don't mind."

"What? Prince, of course." she shakes her head. "We are here to serve you in any way you need. I'll get right on it."

"Thank you." He smiles and turns to go back inside. In the doorway, Jackson is waiting for him with a knowing smile. "Don't say it.."

"I won't say anything, but you could have asked me sooner," he murmurs.

"I must admit I like the adrenaline rush of doing things at the last minute," he acknowledges. "It also helps take my mind off other things."

"He woke up early, too," he says, which causes his steps to slow. "Even earlier than you," he points out. "He grabbed Eunice and went to watch the sunrise."

"How do you know all this?" he asks.

“Alexandra told me. They finished breakfast a little while ago. I found her in the hallway. She was hoping to give you the update in person, but I told her it would be better if I did it. She’s very polite,” he emphasizes, to which he raises his eyebrows. “No, not like that. Don’t be silly.”

“What? I didn’t say anything,” he defends himself.

“Yeah, sure.”

Knowing that the alpha spent some time alone makes him curse himself for not waking up sooner so he could join him, although then he thinks better of it and supposes it was a moment of introspection that he didn’t mention during dinner for a reason.

The omega opens his bedroom door and finds his dress already on the bed. The maids have closed the curtains to keep the sun out. “When are they going to bring his things here?” he asks his friend, taking a seat in the chair to begin undressing.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Your mother suggested you move to the suite in the other wing so you can have more space,” he tells him.

“No, or at least not today,” he replies. “I want to be able to sleep in my own bed the night after we get married, otherwise I’ll be tossing and turning from discomfort.”

“Well, sleeping in your own bed doesn’t guarantee you won’t spend the night awake,” he says mischievously. He can’t help but blush at the thought.

After the ceremony and the party, the alpha and omega are supposed to meet in their room to consummate the marriage.

There will be no witnesses, given that things have changed enough to allow for that moment of intimacy, but it’s what the collective unconscious expects. Perhaps followed by a mark on his neck.

Thinking about being skin-to-skin with Ilya for the first time fills him with warmth just with imagining how it will happen. Will he be able to meet his expectations? Will he want something he’s not comfortable offering?

He shook his head to banish the doubt, because the man had shown him at every opportunity that he longed to be close to him in any way he would allow. So there was no point in considering negative outcomes.

“Everything’s going to be alright, Shane,” the beta said, leaning against one of the corners of his bed. “Just lie back and look pretty, he’ll do all the work.”

“Oh my God,” he says, bringing his hands to his face. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Okay, well, I’ll leave you alone to shower and I’ll be back in a little while to continue with everything we have left to do,” he nods.

In the solitude of his room, accompanied only by the birds chirping from the nearby trees, the omega finishes undressing and enters the bathroom, where the water is already running.

He takes a deep breath and holds it as he wets his hair, then begins to sponge his body, imagining what his life will be like with Ilya as his husband.

He thinks of Ilya's strong hands, his crooked smile, the wrinkles on his forehead that appear when he pouts, his scent, and the warmth of his chest. He thinks of small puppies running through the garden, of Ilya's strong arms wrapping around him, and he clutches the collar around his neck.

Once he's ready to head to the ceremony, David lets him know that his mother and the alpha are already on their way to the church. Shane smiles, and Jackson hands him the bouquet the gardener prepared for him, taking it in his hands.

It's hard to hold back the tears on the journey, because his father murmurs words of support and some advice about marriage, and suddenly, everything feels too real to be a dream. The clothes he's wearing, the cross on his chest, and his crown remind him to cherish the present.

Before getting out of the carriage, the omega looks out the window. It's a sunny day with high temperatures, so he brought a fan to keep his makeup from going to waste, even though he'd only applied a little lip balm and highlighter to his cheeks.

"When you're ready, son," his father says, showing him his hand.

He repeats the instructions in his head of what he has to do once he steps through the enormous doors ahead. His father approaches but doesn't press a kiss on his cheek, before letting go of his hand to enter through one of the side doors.

Shane waits until the guards open it, and the moment they do, he feels like starting over.

His eyes land on the alpha before his brain can process it, but he has to remind himself to start walking, so he keeps a neutral expression and his gaze fixed on a point on the wall.

He walks purposefully, taking slow steps until he looks around, spotting a few familiar faces.

He has to think quickly about who to give each of the flowers in his hand to, so he chooses his mother first, standing in the front row, looking at him with wide eyes.

She accepts them, though her face is one of pure confusion, then he gives the next one to his father and another to Jackson, who is in a corner, so he asks him to give it to him.

Once his hands are free, he turns to look at the alpha and can see a bright smile on his face. He climbs the remaining steps and stands beside him.

"Pretty." he whispers, which makes his cheeks flush and he can't suppress a smile.

"You look very handsome, too," he replies, oblivious to the pastor in front of them. Ilya winks at him.

In his black suit and cape, now without his medals won for numerous battles, the alpha looks as imposing as ever, and now that he has his pheromones nearby, he feels less nervous than before.

The ritual begins, in which the member of the church gives a brief explanation to the curly-haired man, and then Shane proceeds to swear on the Foundation Stone.

The hall is shrouded in silence, all eyes turned in their direction. The omega can feel a pressure on the back of his neck, being the one leading and not looking ridiculous doing so.

Fortunately, his voice doesn't falter when he speaks aloud; it comes out powerful, and he can see the pastor give him a brief nod of approval.

Next, it's Ilya's turn, who moves carefully to avoid stepping on the dress. Having nothing to hold onto, the omega is tempted to cross his arms or grab his dress, but he focuses on breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth as he watches the sculpted profile of his future husband, who brings his hand toward the stone.

Although its tip is slightly warm, the heat he feels in his palm is bearable. It also reminds him of his duty and what he has come to do.

Thousands of Canadians have high hopes for his assumption; he is expected to lead a country that, while not currently experiencing an economic crisis, demands to align itself with history.

Ilya returns to his place, right next to him, and finally they begin with the most romantic part of the entire ceremony.

He knows that, for most of those present, this is the part where a future heir to the throne must appear most serious. Not because the rest of the ceremony doesn't deserve it, but because behind him are people with egos too big and too much power.

People who, at the slightest sign of weakness, will be quick to exploit it, because getting married was his duty, and the fact that he's doing it with the one who quickens his heartbeat and softens his expression doesn't interest them in the slightest.

The pastor asks for the rings; two shiny pieces are brought to them. Shane notices they are engraved but can't stop to examine them. *It's probably today's date.*

What he does is marvel at their delicacy. He had asked his father not to show them to him until the day; in his mind, he wanted to be able to look forward to something in case he ended up choosing someone he didn't feel a connection to.

It's time to repeat their vows, the ones all the guests eagerly await. They turn to look at each other again, and for a microsecond, he almost forgets to offer his hands for him to take. His smile distracts him, and are those tears?

"I, Ilya Rozanov, promise to stay by your side from this day forward, forevermore, no matter the trials of our journey on Earth, and cherishing the place you have given me as your

husband." he murmurs. "In sickness and in health, I will be your partner and your ally. I promise to love you unconditionally and I am eager to share my eternity with you."

The omega's eyes sting, wanting to shed tears that are unbecoming of a prince. He can't stop the way the corners of his lips lift, even trying to bite his lower lip.

His gaze is enchanting, and it makes him want to travel into the depths of those blue eyes just for fun as he slides the golden band onto his index finger, gently grasping it.

Shane notices his throat moving, trying to maintain his composure, and it only makes him want to take him by the shoulders, to kiss him deeply.

"It's your turn, prince." the pastor murmurs softly, a reminder that they are not alone.

He nods and turns to take the ring that belongs to the opposite's finger. He swallows, and although his lips feel a little dry, despite using balm, the omega proceeds to speak.

"I, Shane Hollander, promise to stay by your side in sickness and in health. I promise..."

Memories of simpler times flood his mind as he speaks. He knows he must be brief, even formal, and besides, it would do him good because how can one summarize so many years of longing for someone until finally having them?

He licks his lips, feeling the light pressure of his hands on his fingers, another anchor that ties him to the present. "To be the light that guides you through difficult times. I will be honest with you and I will respect you."

The alpha gives an almost imperceptible nod, and Shane slides the ring onto his finger, pushing it all the way in.

They turn to face the pastor, their hands intertwined, and repeat the formal vows aloud.

"For our people, our union, and our blood, which will be joined from this moment forward, for all eternity."

"By the power vested in me by God and Canadian law, I now pronounce you married." the pastor says, and he nods. "You may kiss the prince." He turns his head to tell the alpha.

The audience rises to their feet, waiting for this moment. Shane can turn to look at him again, emotion coursing through his veins.

"I love you." the one with the sandy hair tells him, caressing the back of his hand with his thumb, the other rests on his cheek and when he leans in to kiss him, he feels like thousands of fireworks explode inside him.

The applause fades into white noise, dissipating into the background as all he can feel is him, *him*, *him*, pressing his soft lips to his. More delicate than silk, not pushing, unlike anything else.

Now he's married, and while "belonging" is an outdated, almost colloquial term, Shane can't help but feel that in that moment, it's not him who belongs to the story, but the story that belongs to them, being written with the pen of all the letters he sent, enthusiastically.

"I love you, too." he says, the moment they part.

There's no doubt left for the people, for the members of the Court and the Council, that they have just transformed into a united front.



After hearing so many rehearsed congratulations and seeing so many heads bowing in respect, he's very happy to be able to share the tedious protocol with Ilya.

Despite his impassive demeanor, the alpha continues to caress the hand that now holds the proof of their union.

He knows that, behind the serious expression he must maintain as a first impression, there is happiness at being there, right by his side.

Once everyone in the church has left, leaving the newlyweds with the king and queen, Shane feels he can breathe normally. And it seems to have the same effect on his husband. Just thinking about that word brings a smile to his face.

Instead of receiving criticism, his mother hugs him tightly and takes out one of her handkerchiefs to wipe his face. Meanwhile, his father doesn't hesitate to embrace his new son-in-law, patting him on the back.

"You did wonderfully, darling. Everything went as planned," she assures him.

"You're right, the flower detail was a lovely moment," his father agrees, prompting Ilya to turn his head to look at him and nod. "Oh, if you had seen him removing all his medals, he didn't even hesitate."

"Of course not," the alpha murmurs, finally dropping his protective husband persona. "There was nothing to hesitate about."

"And the others noticed, they were surprised, but when you walked in, it was like everything fell into place."

"Yes, it was a good moment," Yuna agrees. "Now the carriage is waiting for you; we'll be in the next one. If you're planning on changing your outfits, it would be a great time to do so before everyone else arrives."

They nod, listening to their mother's instructions, not because they don't know them, but to reassure her. *Yes*, even on his big day, Shane can't help but think about his mother's

nervousness. Partly because the happiness he feels is hard to put into words.

"I suppose you decided to stay in your room, right?"

He nods twice and glances quickly at the alpha, who doesn't protest.

"For tonight, at least. I want to be comfortable."

She nods and then proceeds to approach Ilya, kissing him on the cheek. His father hugs him and reiterates that everything was perfect, that his voice was natural and steady—things that matter to him, but not too much at this moment, when the levels of emotion he's experiencing are clouding his judgment.

Once they enter the carriage, both sitting side by side with their knees touching, Shane turns to look at him closely. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Like I could climb Mount Elbrus in a few hours," he replies. "Seeing you smile is..." he sighs. "Everything."

His cheeks warm; he looks at his lips and then back into his eyes.

There are times when happiness doesn't need to be proclaimed or shouted from the tallest skyscrapers, when it can be shared in a moment of silence, gazing into the depths of another person's eyes, and that can be enough.

He leans in, his nose brushing his for a brief moment, their eyes closed in an Eskimo kiss.

"Thank you," he whispers, for lack of better words to express what he feels.

"Loving you isn't something you need to thank me for," he murmurs. "But, just for the record, I'm very grateful that you allow me to do so."

He nods once, their hands finding each other tentatively and intertwining again.

The silence is comfortable; knowing that everything has changed for them isn't a threat to their peace. Ilya raises his hand to leave a kiss on it before stepping out of the carriage and suggests going to the garden to spend some time, given that neither intends to leave their clothes. At least, not until late at night.

They chat a bit about their plans; Shane tells him what he has in mind for his future, and he listens attentively as they watch the flowers grow.

The castle is bustling as they enjoy the lack of responsibilities, like two children who have slipped away from authority for a while.

"I know you already know your way around this place, but I plan to make it much more homey for both of us," he tells him. "My mom and dad will probably want to move out once their time is up, to have some quiet time, and that means we can make our changes, add our own touch to everything."

"You did the thing with the flowers," he says, taking him by surprise. His father mentioned it earlier; he nods. "Something I said to you in passing, you remembered it."

"Of course I did," he murmurs, his cheeks flushing. "It's impossible not to...with such a beautiful face," he remarks as he passes by, eliciting a laugh. "I wanted to."

"Seems like it," he observes. "A stubborn prince."

"Well, those are the consequences of being an only child," he says, fluttering his eyelashes.

The alpha's gaze shifts to his lips for a second, then he places his right hand on his cheek, leaning in to kiss him. It's sweet, tender; neither of them tries to take things further. It's filled with devotion, to the point that something inside him stirs, and he has to blink to hold back tears.

"My omega," he murmurs, for the first time since they married, in a whisper. "I exist for you. You are the reason behind all my actions, the guiding star of my life."

Shane's lower lip trembles at his words. "I just want to make you happy, to live a long life with you. To see you achieve every goal you set for yourself."

"I love you," he whispers. "No one has ever made me feel this way, you're the only one."

Soon, Jackson finds them, which means they have to stand up and continue with the expected choreography for the newlyweds, enter the hall, and be greeted with applause and cheers.

The good part is that they can meet up with their friends and sit down for a while to have dinner.

"Do you think you're ready to have another dance with me tonight?" he asks, raising his eyebrows. The alpha winks at him.

"I was born ready to have all the dances you want, Shane," he replies. "I've been waiting for this moment for years."

His words motivate him to cross the threshold and not want to turn back. Now, he has a partner to go through all of this with, someone who isn't his parents, with the millions of rules they remind him of.

They spend the night in close proximity, and Shane has to introduce him to a few people who approach to offer their congratulations, hoping to make a better impression than the rest. Ilya displays his dazzling charisma while maintaining a smile reserved only for him.

Whether he intends it or not, it's a small test of how they'll work together, so the fact that the alpha notices when the conversation is becoming tedious and elegantly interrupts to save him from boredom speaks volumes about their connection—romantic aside. Although, perhaps, one leads to another.

Ilya runs his hand along his hips and makes sure they both stop to eat something instead of resorting to his previous tactic of interacting with as many people as possible to get the

matter over with.

He elicits genuine smiles from him, whether by cracking a joke or pointing out something he missed.

When it's time to sit down and eat, he has to stifle a sigh of relief as he leads the way to their seats. It's not just a Canadian tradition, but a sign of respect to wait for the omega to start eating before everyone else.

He quickly realizes the alpha takes it seriously because, after listening to his parents say a few words, he receives a question from one of the Canadian dukes' wives and decides not to fill his mouth with food until he's finished answering.

When he turns to look at him, Ilya still has his hands resting on the seat and doesn't even glance at his plate, keeping his gaze fixed on it.

"Don't you like the food?" he makes the mistake of asking, leaning towards him.

"You start, darling," he replies. "I'm your husband now, I wait," he reminds him.

"That's..."

He swallows, looking at him. It's not an argument he thinks he can win, so he turns back to his plate and picks up the utensils to cut the meat. It melts in his mouth immediately, revealing how well it was prepared in the kitchen.

The alpha follows after two bites, as if to make sure he truly enjoys what he's eating and isn't just pretending.

Dinner passes with brief conversations with those around them, receiving questions about the ceremony as well as politics. Some are specifically directed at his husband, all curious to know his stance.

"What does Prince Rozanov think about our weather? Are you enjoying it?"

"I certainly am. I've come to visit Canada often, but I've missed it quite a bit lately."

"Oh, I can imagine. Walking around in so many layers must be tiring."

"Yes, partly that," he murmurs. "Horseback riding is also much more enjoyable in these conditions," he notes, while Shane wets his lips with the champagne they've been served so as not to be impolite. Who knows who might be picking up his every move now?

"We truly wish you all the best when it's your time to assume the throne. We believe the only way to keep Canada united is by continuing on the same path." A man tells them, Shane tries not to show any emotion on his face that might be misleading.

"Fortunately for us, the Queen and King are doing an excellent job." He turns to look at Ilya, who quickly offers his right hand for him to take. "We are in no hurry to take their place," he says.

“That’s true, Elián. They are still very young. You must let them enjoy the fruits of their love. You remember how we wou—”

“I understand your point, prince. But I’m sure you are eager to learn the place that history has reserved for you, aren’t you? Alongside great men and women, of course, who have made this nation great.”

“I am certain, Lord Rubenick, that whatever happens will be for the best for all our people,” he says, leaning slightly across the table.

They have some similar exchanges, but with a full stomach, it's much easier to dodge the compromising questions posed by anxious or detractors. His alpha is quick to read intentions; after all, they're written in their faces and tones, so he joins him in this task.

When it's time to dance, an acceptable moment for whispering without being judged, the omega apologizes for the intensity of the Canadian upper echelons, to which he shakes his head.

"If you had seen the number of men I had to tell were wrong while I was in Russia...this is child's play." he assures him, twirling him around. "I can't get over how good you smell," he says, inhaling his scent, his nose close to his neck.

Shane's heart leaps, and a smile spreads across his face. "Every birthday I wished for the strength to be able to feel you close, look how it turned out." he murmurs. "Now you're my husband."

"And your omega, don't forget that." he adds mischievously.

The alpha positions him face to face again. “Do you really want that?” he asks, and the other takes a moment to process the implications.

“What do you mean? We’re already married.”

“I mean,” he leans slightly close to his ear. “If you truly want my mark on your neck someday.”

“Oh, of course I want it,” he replies without hesitation. “I want us to be bound together that way.”

He can’t help but frown at this question, doubts arise.

“Relax, I want it too,” he says. “But more importantly, I want everything you’re willing to give me, which means we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

It’s a loaded statement. He nods cautiously. “I want to be yours in any way there is, alpha.”

“You already are, solychniko. I know it. Our hearts beat in sync.”

Shane considers fighting the urge to kiss him, but seriously, why does he have to keep holding himself back from what he wants? It doesn't make sense.

His skin prickles at the sound of his voice; it could send him to sleep as easily as it could jolt him back to reality. "I want you to..."

"What?" he asks. "Anything, I'll give it to you."

"A kiss," he replies. "I want a kiss."

A smile spreads across the alpha's face, and he doesn't even hesitate to lean in and press their mouths together, his hands tracing his hips. And yes, they have more than fifty spectators, but when the dance ends, he hears them applaud, so that must mean something.

"Of all things..." he murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief as they part. "I love you so much, Shane." He takes a deep breath, inhaling the scent of cherries and damp earth. "I'm yours."

A wider smile spreads across his face, and the canadian prince runs his left hand along his cheek in a gentle caress. "I love you, Ilya. Forever and always."



The moment they cross the threshold of his room, greeted by a silence eager to be broken, Ilya's clothes already have a place in his closet.

Nerves about what's about to happen surface, prompting Shane to speak.

"Do you like it?" he asks, looking around his own room.

It's curious how nervousness can sometimes reveal a lack of self-confidence. But the alpha remains silent, scanning the room as if searching for secrets, making him feel a little exposed.

"I think it's very fitting for a prince as delicate as you." he says, and from the way he's looking at him, he realizes it's not teasing but just an honest thought.

It takes him three steps to approach him, standing face to face. This closeness may not be new, but it's loaded with meaning. "Do you want us to take turns taking off our clothes?" he asks.

"Oh, *uhm*." he swallows. "What do you mean?" he asks, just to be sure.

"You go into the bathroom to change, and then I'll do the same," he explains.

"Oh," a brief smile appears on his face.

Did he change his mind? A part of his subconscious haunts him with that possibility. Instead of sinking into a pit of negativity, the omega chooses to move away from that place. If his husband doesn't want it, then he'll have to say so out loud.

"I was hoping that...we would do it?" he says the last part, with a hint of doubt, biting his lip to avoid saying more and making things worse.

"Okay," he replies, as easy as breathing. "I can hear your heartbeat from here; your shoulders are tense."

"That's not true," he says, very quickly and defensively. The alpha raises an eyebrow. "Sorry, you're right."

"No, no apologies," he murmurs, taking his hands in his own, kissing his knuckles. "We only say what we really think, we don't hide anything because I can tell," he says, and he nods slowly. "Do you want to start with me, zaichik?" he asks.

"Okay," he shakes his head. "I will," he announces, to which the alpha smiles.

"I'm all yours."

His words give him the courage to reach for the jacket and take it off his shoulders. While it starts out mechanically, as he exposes the skin of his body, the omega feels a blush spread across his cheeks.

"It's okay," he assures him. "You can touch."

Despite having fantasized about this, he doesn't understand why he feels inhibited. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that this will be the first man he shares his bed with and that he has waited too long.

Shane hears him and delicately places a hand on his chest, caressing the skin until he reaches the toned abdomen. All this while avoiding his gaze because he fears fainting from embarrassment, yet he can still feel it in him.

His breathing becomes labored without him noticing; the sight of the cross hanging over his chest makes his mouth water, wanting to let out a moan. His hands finish removing the shirt, and he takes a few seconds to fold it, placing it on the bed next to the jacket.

The Russian prince watches his movements with a smile; he must keep everything in order. Then, his fingers move toward the top of his trousers without pausing to think because he knows that if he does, he will lose this burst of courage.

Suddenly, a hand encircles his left wrist and forces him to look up. "I can do it," the man offers, but he quickly shakes his head; he doesn't want the rules to change now. He has to be able to undress his husband, for God's sake.

"But I want to do it," he insists, his voice almost a tantrum; the blue eyed man tilts his head slightly. *"Really."*

“Okay, go ahead then.”

He unbuttons his pants and lowers the zipper, revealing the top of his boxers. The image makes him pause for a split second before continuing, because he’s about to see this man he’s fantasized about naked, and he has no idea what to expect, or if it’s even okay to expect anything.

But then, his pants slide down his legs and Shane doesn’t even hesitate; he drops to his knees like a man on a mission, thinking, *How could I have forgotten his shoes?* And he feels like he’s made a big mistake.

“Stand up, sweetheart.” he says, his tone not commanding but also leaving no room for doubt. It’s clear, *here and now*.

Shane manages to stand again, and the alpha places his right hand under his chin so he’ll look at him. The alpha makes it look simple as he takes off his shoes and pushes them aside, leaving him in just his boxers.

“You don’t kneel for me unless it’s something I ask for and we’ve agreed to beforehand, understand?”

He nods. “I’m sorr—” but his apology is cut short by a shake of the taller man’s head. “Right.”

“Good boy,” he says, and he feels heat begin to rise in his stomach along with an unusual rush of adrenaline at those two words.

“Now it’s my turn, right?” he asks. He nods foolishly and proceeds to place his hands at his sides. “You look so beautiful, *zaichik*. I’ve been to many weddings, and I can confirm there isn’t an omega as stunning as you.”

He moves his hands over his bare shoulders and down his arms, his chest rising and falling with the closeness, imagining what will come next.

“I’ve been thinking about this too much,” he says. “From that first time we kissed, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much I wanted to have you all to myself.”

When he finds the zipper, he slowly begins to lower it, letting the dress slide down his body. He feels his body temperature rise and licks his lips.

His pheromones float in the room, proof of how aroused he is and doesn’t want to stop. However, the moment he stands almost naked before him, wearing only lace underwear, he feels as if he has stepped into a dream.

He wants to lean into him, into the warmth of his embrace, but he is also too self-aware in this moment, and no, he won’t let his mind start playing tricks on him.

When their eyes meet, time seems to stand still. The growing tension between them cracks with every breath, the alpha’s hands continue moving until they reach his hips, and the weight

of the heat spreading through his body becomes too much, so it's Shane who ends up leaning in to kiss his lips, Ilya following suit.

The certainty of his touch on his body is all he focuses on: the caresses on his back, the light pressure on his hips, and the way his lips part to whisper a compliment. "God, you're beautiful." that's what finally breaks down the last layer of doubt, his heart swelling in his chest.

They move to the bed like that, and his mind, so consumed by desire, doesn't focus on thinking about his dress or the right way to take off his shoes; he simply does it, conquered by a need too great to pay attention to anything else.

Ilya is here, with him, and demands that he focus on them. How can he do anything else? As they lie back, the omega finds the courage to run his hands over his shoulders and pull him closer again. The alpha settles on top of him, his mouth tracing a path along his jaw, leaving open, wet kisses in its wake.

He makes sure to ask him, "Is this okay?" and "How does it feel?" to which he always replies, "Yes," and "Good, great." just in case his moans aren't enough.

Each kiss feels like a question, each of his sounds being the answer.

When the alpha reaches his underwear, his husband takes a deep breath and lets out a grunt before starting to shower the area with kisses. Kisses that cause slick start to burst from her hole and gather in the fabric.

"Ah."

The silence is quickly filled with guttural sounds escaping from both their throats. When Shane finally dares to open his eyes to look at him, he finds the alpha already waiting, his pupils dilated and barely a trace of the sea in his gaze.

They move slowly until the urgency and desperation of having spent so many years apart comes knocking. The touch remains delicate, as if they were trying to memorize every curve, every mole and scar in a single night.

"Do you have oil, zaichik?" he asks, as he runs his fingers along his right cheek, admiring his beauty. He nods.

"The first drawer on the right."

His husband leans in to kiss him in thanks and then proceeds to wet his fingers. Shane blinks in surprise at seeing three of them covered in oil and is quick to reassure him.

"I'm not going to let it hurt, I just need to prepare you properly." he explains briefly.

His small dick rests on his belly, still hard and dripping, but the alpha wants to focus on his ass, so he asks him to bend his legs.

“This is the best view,” he says, looking at him. He begins to prepare him, as he says, his fingers teasing over his hole at first, making his skin prickle and feel the heat concentrate in a specific part of his body.

Then, he pushes in the first one, and even though it’s an intrusion he’s not used to, his previous attempts at discovering himself better in that area help him.

“All this time needing you, longing to be near you,” he murmurs to himself. “Look at you, you’re a goddess.”

He feels his compliments on his body with every caress and reverent glance. One finger becomes two, and two becomes three before Shane realizes he’s gripping the sheets tightly and his eyes are rolling back, spilling over his body in an orgasm filled with words of encouragement mixed with groans.

His breath fans his neck, his fingers still inside him but not moving. “I’m so proud of you, my pretty boy,” he whispers. “You’re my faith, the only being I trust. I’ll make you so happy, I swear.”

When his limbs feel like his own again instead of separate parts of his body, Shane reaches out and places his left hand under his chin so he looks into his eyes.

“Make love to me, Ilya.”

One look is all it takes for his body to melt under his touch. Eager to resume what they were doing, the alpha gives him a sloppy kiss on the lips before moving down his body.

He captures one of his nipples with his mouth and closes it, gently sucking, which makes him let out a loud moan. “*Fuck,*” he says breathlessly. “Yeah. Love it so much.”

Then, he moves to the next one, running his tongue over the nipple as if it were some kind of ice cream and proceeds to utter the most unexpected words of the night.

“I’ll make you a mother someday,” he says, his voice deep. “And I’ll feed on these.”

To make it even clearer, the alpha places his free hand on one of his breasts and begins to massage it, while the other resumes its movements inside him.

“Yes.” he swallows. “Yes, I want that.”

He winks at him and continues down, his breath caressing his ribs, causing him to arch his back, and then presses a kiss to his hip bone. He quickens his movements, causing his hips to begin moving back and forth, seeking friction.

“First time I’ll fuck you like this.” he says, taking the oil to put it over his cock. “Next time, on your side, and when you’re ready, I want you on your hands and knees.”

His thighs tremble at his words; it’s not fear, it’s the peak of arousal, when his slick is so intense that it wets not only his fingers but the bed as well.

“Yes, yes,” he nods maniacally. “I want it. I want everything with you. Please, alpha.” he begs.

He starts slowly, pushing the tip in just enough to enter, and while that eases the slight pain he feels, Shane lets out a muffled groan at the intrusion.

This can't be rehearsed, it can only be felt with every fiber of one's being. So Ilya leans down and begins to pepper kisses across his cheeks, trying to distract him while showering him with compliments.

"My sweet, smart omega." he says, against his skin. "The mother of my pups, my king." he moves down to his neck, sucking the skin and then licking, a wolf leaving trails. "I love you, I want you to feel it, all my love is reserved for you. *Moy malish.*" *My baby.*

When he pushes in completely, the alpha moves his hands over his body until he captures his, intertwining them together.

He begins to build a rhythm and the omega lets himself be held, taking in all the pleasure he offers. What once felt like an intrusion is now surpassed by the pleasure of connection.

He is gentle and sensitive, there are pauses where he makes sure he's feeling good, to which Shane responds with "More," followed by a "Please."

His fingers tremble, as do his thighs, and now that he knows himself better, he knows what's coming. What was once a place of solitude is now filled with moans and mingled groans, the sound of skin slapping together, and the omega's pleas.

"You're mine," the taller man says, his breath ragged. "You always were, you always will be." He nods frantically.

The flesh and breath intertwined with every moment they've shared so far cause his vision to blur, and he blinks back tears.

"I'm so glad I met you," he says, with what little strength he has left, the orgasm a persistent buzz in his body, the kind of edge that looks tantalizing.

"And so am I, darling. So much." he says, resting his forehead against hers. "My husband, my everything. Come for me, *zaichik*. Let me watch you come apart for my cock, I know you want to."

“Oh, shit, fuck. *Ungh*, alpha.”

“Look at me,” he orders. “Look at me when you come, omega. I want to see you, *fuck*. Your pretty eyes, that’s it. Come, Shane.”

He doesn't know if it's the command that triggers his orgasm or if it was just a time bomb with only seconds left to explode; either way, he spills over himself and squeezes his cock inside him, the biological part of him seeking to milk him.

His wolf becomes desperate, begging for a mark, and with a cry that comes from the depths of his throat, he experiences something ten times better than anything he's ever had alone.

"You too, alpha. Oh my God, I want to feel you, please," he begs.

Ilya connects his lips with his at that precise moment and feels him spill his seed inside him. His eyes close reflexively, and he tilts his neck to the side, another biological reaction.

Bite me, bite me, his wolf chants, but his rational side knows better, and slowly the cloud that formed in his mind begins to clear. It's not the right time yet.

The realization of what they've just done, of what it means for both of them as a couple, not as princes beholden to their crowns, dawns in his body like the sun in the sky at sunrise.

They haven't just consummated a union; they've just exposed themselves to each other, trusting that they would know how to take care of each other, and they've done so in such a loving way, capable of rebuilding their souls, that he can't help but feel overwhelmed as much as satisfied.

Ilya slowly pulls away from him and lies down beside him, placing one hand on his hip and the other on his head, drawing him to his chest.

"Did it feel good?" he asks, with a hesitation he recognizes as his own, only not from this time, but from when he was younger and afraid.

Shane tries to dispel it instantly, running his hands down the alpha's back and pulling him into a hug, letting the warmth of their bodies speak for itself.

"It was everything," he replies. "I could only imagine it, but this exceeded my expectations." He hears him let out a sigh of relief and presses a kiss to his chest; the alpha returns it with one on his hair.

"We're husbands now." he says, when their breaths are in sync and his body no longer feels sweaty. The omega lets himself be embraced as he looks into his eyes.

"We are," he confirms, a playful smile on his lips.

"And I'm hopelessly in love with you." he adds, caressing his left cheek with his knuckles.

"Do you want that to change?" he asks.

"No, I don't want that to ever change," he replies. "Nothing has brought me more joy than this."

He can't stop smiling, but despite that, he leans in to kiss him once more.

Everything that happened between them can be summarized in this moment, lying in his room, their legs intertwined, caresses meant to soothe. The scent of cedarwood and coffee wafts through the air, creating a unique space where it blends with his scent of cherries and wet earth.

The emptiness that was once there now seems like a distant memory, an obstacle that needed to be overcome in order to allow themselves to believe in love and second—*first*—chances. To be willing to fall in order to be held.

To fall in love again and again.

Chapter End Notes

and this is the end of our journey.

my heartfelt thanks go to those who made it this far and waited patiently. you are the ones who make this archive such a great place to continue sharing stories in.

i hope you enjoyed it. if at any point you saw yourselves reflected in the characters or if my writing evoked any emotion in you, for me, it's a job well done.

if you'd like to continue supporting my stories, don't forget to leave kudos and comments.

may we see each other again in my next one.

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