

The Consort of Crown and Blood

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The Consort of Crown and Blood

by [house_of_lantis](#)

Summary

When a human head of state publicly insults the ancient Vampire King, the price of peace is a political union. Shane Hollander, high school teacher and assistant hockey coach, is one of the only humans in the world with a rare bloodline. He's given an impossible choice: become a Tribute Consort to vampire Crown Prince Ilya, or watch the human race burn.

Their union is meant to be a symbolic gesture to prevent war. Shane tells himself he can survive the vampire court's deadly politics, the centuries-old intrigue, and the weight of being a living apology for his species' mistakes.

What he doesn't expect is the way Ilya looks at him when no one else is watching.

When a secret society abducts Shane to drain and auction his rare blood to the highest bidder, the carefully constructed facade shatters. The vampire Crown Prince the world fears isn't cold at all, he's been holding something far more dangerous in check. And what Ilya is willing to destroy to reclaim his Consort will reshape the balance of power between their worlds.

Notes

Author's Note 1: Yep. It's a vampire modern royalty AU.

Author's Note 2: Updates to this story will be sporadic now that my December vacation is over and I'm back to work.

Chapter 1: The Price of Peace

The official proposal arrived on a Saturday morning, delivered not by courier but by three government officials from the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office who stood in Shane Hollander's hallway like harbingers of inevitability. They did not ask if they could come in. They simply waited, patient as stone, until he stepped aside and invited them into his apartment. Shane knew what they wanted before they spoke.

Six Months Earlier

The Global Summit on Resource Allocation was meant to be a formality, a carefully choreographed dance of diplomacy where both human and supernatural representatives would renew the territorial agreements that had been held for nearly a century. The cameras were rolling. Translators stood ready in a dozen languages. The entire world was watching.

Chancellor Heinrich Voss had been drinking.

Not obviously. Not enough that his security detail had intervened. But Shane, watching from his coaching office during his lunch break, could see it in the slight looseness of the man's gestures, the way his smile had grown too wide, too confident. Voss had just won re-election by a landslide, riding a wave of nationalist sentiment and economic anxiety. He'd built his campaign on promises of "human prosperity" and "reclaiming our birthright."

Now, he stood at the podium, with the Vampire King Aurelion seated ten feet away in his delegation chair, and the carefully prepared speech began to drift off script.

"-- and while we appreciate the *historical precedent* of the current territorial arrangements," Voss was saying, his voice carrying that particular tone of false reasonableness. "We must address the elephant in the room. Or perhaps I should say, the *parasite* in the room."

The chamber went silent.

Shane's coffee cup froze halfway to his lips.

King Aurelion didn't move. Didn't even blink. But something in the quality of his stillness changed.

"For nearly a century," Voss continued, warming to his theme now, gesturing broadly at the assembled delegates. "We have allowed the supernatural kingdoms, especially the vampire kingdoms, to maintain control over some of the most resource-rich territories on this planet. Fertile lands. Mineral deposits. Freshwater sources that could sustain millions of human lives." His voice rose. "And for what? So that *parasites* who don't even need to eat can sit on wealth they cannot use while human children go hungry?"

"Chancellor Voss," a human diplomat interrupted urgently, rising from his seat. "Perhaps we should --"

"No, let me finish," Voss snapped, and there was that dangerous brightness in his eyes now, the reckless certainty of someone who'd mistaken his own press releases for truth. He turned directly to face King Aurelion. "You sit there in your ancient palaces, hoarding resources, living in luxury sustained by the blood of humans who have no choice but to comply with your 'voluntary donation' system –"

"The donation system is heavily regulated and compensated," another vampire delegate said coldly.

"Compensated!" Voss laughed, and it was an ugly sound. "You mean you *pay* for the privilege of using humans as livestock. How generous. How enlightened." He leaned on the podium, and Shane could see people around the Chancellor trying to catch his eye, trying to get him to stop. "You're nothing but well-dressed leeches. *Blood-sucking parasites* playing at civilization."

The chamber erupted in gasps and urgent whispers.

Shane set his coffee down with shaking hands. *No. No, this isn't happening.*

"Why doesn't someone cut his microphone?" Coach Simon Dearling said, frowning deeply.

Shane sighed and shook his head. "They're letting it happen so that he destroys himself politically."

Voss was still going, drunk on his own rhetoric now. "You hide behind the Great Truce, behind centuries of careful diplomacy, pretending you're our equals. Our *partners*." His lip curled. "But we all know what you really are, don't we, *Your Majesty*?" He made the title sound like an insult. "You're predators. Monsters in suits. And the only reason you haven't turned us all into your personal feeding stock is because you know, you *know*, that humanity has the numbers. The weapons. The will to –"

"Chancellor Voss." King Aurelion's voice cut through the tirade like a blade through silk. He hadn't raised his voice. He simply stood and the entire chamber fell silent.

The ancient vampire king was beautiful and terrible in his stillness. His amber eyes fixed on Voss with the weight of centuries behind them.

"You have said enough," Aurelion said, quietly. "More than enough."

For a moment, Voss seemed to realize the enormity of what he'd just done. His face paled. His hand gripped the podium. But his pride wouldn't let him back down. Not in front of the cameras. Not in front of the world.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?" Voss said, and tried to smile. "Maybe it's time someone finally said what everyone's been thinking. You're *parasites*. You've kept humanity enslaved for centuries through fear and –"

Aurelion turned and walked out of the chamber. The entire supernatural delegation rose as one and followed him, a silent exodus that somehow felt more threatening than any response

words could have provided.

The human delegates sat frozen, the weight of catastrophe settling over the room like ash.

In his coaching office, Shane watched as the live feed cut to panicked news anchors trying to process what had just happened. His hands were shaking. His mind was already racing through historical parallels, through every lesson he'd ever taught about the Great Truce and the delicate balance that kept their world from tearing itself apart.

This is how wars begin, he thought, as the first emergency bulletins started scrolling across the bottom of the screen. *Not with armies, but with pride.*

He remembered thinking: *Someone was going to have to pay for this.*

He just never imagined it would be him.

"Mr. Hollander," the lead official said, settling into Shane's armchair as if she owned it. "My name is Sara Castellane. I'm the Director of the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office. This is Joseph Thatcher, our Senior Legal Advisor, and this is Dr. Michael Worthy, Head of our Bio-Genome Division. We thank you for your time."

Shane did not sit. He stood near the window, arms crossed loosely, and waited. The apartment was small, teachers' salaries didn't allow for much in this city, but he'd made it home. Books lined a wall of shelves. A Riverside High hockey jersey hung on another wall, signed by the team. His coaching whistle sat on the kitchen counter next to a half-empty coffee mug. Across the street, normal people were living normal lives, buying coffee, arguing about parking spaces, complaining about the weather. He envied them so fiercely it felt like vertigo.

"We'll be direct," Castellane continued, watching him intently. "The situation with the supernatural kingdoms has deteriorated beyond diplomatic repair through conventional means. King Aurelion has demanded a tribute as recompense for the insult delivered by Chancellor Voss."

Shane's stomach dropped, but his expression remained steady. Teachers learned early how to keep their faces blank during parent-teacher conferences and budget meetings. This was simply a different kind of theater.

"A tribute," he repeated, his voice flat.

"A marriage," Thatcher said, a thin man with wire-rimmed glasses who looked like he spent his life in windowless rooms. "To one of the royal bloodline. Specifically, to Prince Ilya, third son of King Aurelion and heir apparent to the Vampire Kingdom."

The room tilted slightly. Shane gripped the windowsill behind him, careful to make it look casual rather than necessary. He'd just turned twenty-six last month. His team had thrown him a surprise party in the locker room, complete with a cake shaped like a hockey puck. His students had given him a mug that said "World's Nicest Teacher." He'd been planning next semester's curriculum, considering whether to add a unit on supernatural diplomacy to his Ethics class.

"And you're here because..."

"Because you possess a rare bloodline trait," Castellane said, and now her voice carried something almost apologetic. "The genetic surveys conducted during the census flagged you as a carrier of what the vampires call *Sanguis Resonans*, the Resonant Heart line. Your blood has unique properties that amplify supernatural energy, stabilize bonds, and—" She paused, choosing her words with the precision of someone defusing a bomb. "-- it makes you extremely valuable in the current political climate."

Shane laughed. It came out sharp and humorless, more bark than sound.

"Valuable," he echoed, hollowly. "Is that what we're calling it?"

"Mr. Hollander —"

"How many others were flagged?" He interrupted, frowning. "In the survey. How many people have this bloodline?"

Dr. Worthy consulted his tablet. "Globally? Seventeen other confirmed carriers. Twelve are minors, legally protected from tribute consideration. Three are elderly or medically unsuitable. One is currently incarcerated. That leaves —"

"Me," Shane finished, nodding slowly. "And one person?"

"The other candidate declined," Castellane said, simply.

"What about my parents? They were in the survey, too. I must've gotten this blood from one of them."

"Your mother carries the *Sanguis Resonans*, but her genome is dormant."

"It skipped a generation and awoke in you."

Shane felt something crack in his chest, not heartbreak, but the structural failure of a worldview. He was grateful and relieved that his mom didn't have the active gene; he couldn't imagine what it would do to either of his parents if she was selected as tribute.

"Well," he said, calmly. "I'm glad it's not her."

He had spent his adult life believing in systems, in rules, in the idea that civilization was more than just predators and prey wearing nicer clothes. He taught his students about ethical frameworks, about duty and responsibility and citizenship in the Commonwealth, about the importance of thinking beyond themselves. Now, three strangers sat in his living room and told him he had been catalogued, assessed, and selected like livestock.

"What happens if I refuse?" He asked, though he already knew.

The officials exchanged glances. Castellane folded her hands in her lap.

"King Aurelion has made it clear that without adequate recompense, the insult stands as grounds for severing the Great Truce. If he declares war, the other supernatural kingdoms would follow him. We wouldn't be facing just the vampires, but the werewolves, the Fae, and the mers, too." She leaned forward slightly. "Mr. Hollander, we're talking about every city in the global Commonwealth. Billions of *human* lives. The vampires don't wage war with armies, they starve populations, destabilize infrastructure, and turn entire regions into hunting grounds. The last conflict lasted twenty years and nearly collapsed human civilization."

Shane thought of his students. Of Tommy Reeves, who'd just gotten his acceptance to college. Of Maria Chen, who'd finally opened up about her anxiety after Shane had spent months building her trust. Of the entire junior varsity team, who were supposed to play regionals next month.

"So my choices are to marry a vampire prince or watch the world burn."

"Those are reductive terms, but...essentially, yes."

Shane turned back to the window. Outside, a woman was helping her daughter tie her shoe. Such a small, ordinary thing. The kind of moment that only existed because people like him made choices they never wanted to make.

"And if I agree?" He asked, his voice shaking. "What happens to me?"

"You would be granted full diplomatic status," Thatcher said, reading from his tablet again. "Housed within the Court of the Kingdom of Rozanov. Provided with education on vampire customs and etiquette. You would retain your human citizenship but be considered Consort to Prince Ilya, with all accompanying legal protections and responsibilities."

Consort. Such an innocuous word for what they were really asking. He would be a living apology, a symbolic gesture wrapped in ceremony and bound by vows. He would belong to the vampire court the way a painting belonged to a gallery, appreciated, perhaps, but fundamentally owned.

"The prince," Shane said, still not turning around. "What do you know about him?"

Castellane's voice changed, became more careful. "Prince Ilya is...formidable. He was sired directly by King Aurelion, which makes him extraordinarily powerful even by vampire standards. He served as diplomat, general, and advisor to His Majesty. His reputation is..." She paused. "Complex."

"Complex?"

"They call him the Ice Prince," she admitted, meeting his eyes. "He's known for being controlled to the point of coldness. Emotionally distant. There are rumors of scandals, court affairs, political manipulations, but nothing officially confirmed. What matters is that he's respected, feared, and considered one of the most stabilizing forces in vampire politics. He will inherit the Vampire Kingdom when King Aurelion decides to walk into the sun."

"You're asking me to marry someone you just described as cold, manipulative, and feared."

"We're asking you to prevent a war," Castellane said, and for the first time, her composure cracked slightly. She looked tired. *Human*. "I know what we're asking is unconscionable. I know you didn't ask for this bloodline, didn't ask to be flagged by our systems, didn't ask to be the one person standing between peace and catastrophe. If there were another way..."

"But there isn't."

"No. There isn't."

The silence stretched between them, heavy as iron. He thought about the random human woman outside, still kneeling beside her daughter, both of them laughing now about something he couldn't hear.

"When?"

Castellane stood, smoothing her jacket with hands that trembled slightly. "Three months. The ceremony will be held at the Rozanov Palace. Your parents and a small retinue of family and friends are invited. We'll provide transportation, documentation, and a cultural liaison to brief you on protocol."

"Three months," Shane repeated, shocked at the short timeline. "I need to talk to my parents. My students. I can't just disappear. I won't be able to finish out the school year. What...what will you tell everyone?"

"We've already prepared the official press release," Thatcher said, opening his leather portfolio and handing Shane a communication strategy packet. "It will be announced tomorrow at 1 PM. We will work with your employer to compensate them for your loss and help them hire a replacement teacher."

"Replaceable. Just like that," Shane murmured, staring at the papers. He read the official press document, his hands trembling slightly as he held the thick paper with the official seals and signatures.

COMMONWEALTH DIPLOMATIC OFFICE & THE VAMPIRE KINGDOM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JOINT ANNOUNCEMENT: SELECTION OF TRIBUTE CONSORT TO RESTORE PEACE ACCORDS

In the aftermath of the regrettable incidents at the Global Summit on Resource Allocation, representatives from the Commonwealth and the Vampire Kingdom have reached a historic agreement to restore diplomatic relations and preserve the Great Truce.

Mr. Shane Hollander, an educator and assistant coach from Riverside High School, has been selected and has voluntarily accepted the position of Tribute Consort to His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Ilya of Rozanov, third son of King Aurelion and heir apparent to the Vampire Kingdom.

Mr. Hollander's selection represents not merely a political arrangement, but a profound act of personal sacrifice in service to global peace. As a teacher and mentor to young people, he embodies the values of duty, responsibility, and selfless service that both human and vampire societies hold in highest regard.

"Mr. Hollander has demonstrated extraordinary courage and character," stated Director Sara Castellane of the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office. "He understood the gravity of our situation and chose to place the welfare of billions above his own comfort and security. His sacrifice will not be forgotten."

The Kingdom of Rozanov has issued the following statement through Crown Prince Ilya's Special Counsel:

"We acknowledge Shane Hollander as Tribute Consort with respect and gratitude. That he comes to us as a Teacher, one who has dedicated his life to guiding and shaping young minds, speaks to his value beyond the rare bloodline he carries. In our culture, those who educate the next generation hold places of honor. Shane Hollander will be received not as mere recompense, but as a worthy addition to our Court."

The formal bonding ceremony will take place at the Rozanov Palace in three months' time. Mr. Hollander will retain his Commonwealth citizenship while assuming diplomatic status as Consort to Prince Ilya. He will be afforded all protections, privileges, and rights established under the Great Truce Accords.

The Commonwealth wishes to express its profound gratitude to Mr. Hollander for his willingness to serve in this unprecedented capacity. His actions have prevented the collapse of peace that has endured for nearly a century and protected countless human and supernatural lives from the devastation of renewed conflict.

Educational institutions and community organizations are encouraged to honor Mr. Hollander's sacrifice and the principles it represents that sometimes the greatest courage lies not in fighting, but in laying down one's own desires for the greater good.

Mr. Hollander's legacy will be one of peace preserved through personal cost, the highest form of heroism.

Questions regarding Mr. Hollander's transition should be directed to the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office. Questions regarding the upcoming ceremony should be directed to Rozanov Palace communications.

Contact:

Commonwealth Diplomatic Office: 2481 (555) 0147

Kingdom of Rozanov Embassy: 2481 (555) 0198

Released jointly by the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office and the Office of King Aurelion, Vampire Kingdom

"Wow," he said, dully, staring at the words. His vision blurred and he fell against the wall by the window.

"I'm sorry," Director Castellane said, and Shane believed her. "For what it's worth, you're saving more lives than you'll ever know."

"Will that matter," he asked, quietly. "When I'm the one apologizing for someone else's mistakes?"

She had no answer for that.

After they left, Shane stood in his apartment for a long time, listening to the sounds of the city beyond his walls. The normal sounds of traffic and cars honking. The distant wail of a siren. All of it so beautifully, unbearably normal.

He needed to visit his parents before the official press release was released. He should start making plans. He should probably eat something, though the thought made his stomach revolt.

Instead, he walked to his bookshelf and pulled down a worn paperback, *The Political History of the Great Truce*. He'd used it for his Ethics class, and had taught countless students about the political marriage alliances between humans and supernatural beings that had shaped the modern world.

Now, he was about to become a footnote in the textbooks.

Shane opened the book to a dog-eared page and found the passage he'd highlighted years ago:

"The Great Truce established that marriage between species would be permitted but never forced, a symbolic gesture that both sides claimed as victory. In practice, political pressure and survival made the distinction meaningless. How do you force someone who believes they have no choice?"

He'd written in the margin: *You don't. You just ask politely and wait for them to volunteer.*

Shane closed the book and laughed, the sound cracking in his empty apartment. He'd been so proud of that observation once, teaching it to bright-eyed sophomores who thought the world made sense. Now, it felt like prophecy.

He picked up his phone and found his mom's number. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the call button, and placed the phone against his ear.

The drive to his parents' lake house should have been peaceful. Shane had made this trip hundreds of times and knew every curve of the two-lane highway, every landmark that marked the transition from city to countryside. The old barn with the faded Coca-Cola sign. The fruit stand that only opened in summer. The turnoff where the pavement gave way to gravel and the trees grew thick enough to create a tunnel of green overhead.

It should have felt like coming home. Instead, it felt like attending his own funeral.

Shane pulled into the familiar driveway and sat for a moment, hands still gripping the steering wheel. Through the trees, he could see the lake glittering in the morning sun. The dock where he'd learned to fish. The tire swing his dad had hung from the old oak when Shane was seven. The screened porch where they'd spent countless Sunday mornings eating his mother's cooking and arguing about everything from hockey to which movie to watch later.

Normal. Everything looked so beautifully, impossibly normal.

He checked his phone one last time. The press release was queued, ready to go out at one o'clock. He had four hours. Four hours to tell his parents that their son was about to become a footnote in a history book. Four hours before the world knew Shane Hollander's name for all the wrong reasons.

The front door opened before he reached it. His mother stood framed in the doorway, already smiling that particular smile that meant she'd been cooking since dawn.

"There's my boy," Yuna said, pulling him into a hug that smelled like jasmine and kitchen spices. She was petite, but she'd always seemed larger than life to Shane. "I made all your favorites. The whole spread. Your father said I was going overboard, but I told him you don't visit enough and when you do, I'm going to feed you properly."

Shane hugged her back, memorizing the feeling. The warmth of her. The way she always smelled like home.

"Hey, Mom," he managed, trying to be cheerful.

She pulled back, studying his face with those dark, perceptive eyes that had always seen too much.

"You look tired. Are you sleeping enough? And you're too thin. I swear, you're going to waste away in that apartment eating nothing but takeout and –" She stopped. Her smile faltered. "Shane? What's wrong?"

"Let him breathe, Yuna," David called from inside. Shane's father appeared behind his mother, tall and handsome with a hint of distinguished gray in his thick brown hair, wearing the flannel shirt he'd owned for at least twenty years. His smile was warm but his bright blue eyes were already cautious. He'd heard something in Shane's voice too. "Come on in, son. Coffee's fresh."

The dining table was exactly as elaborate as Shane had feared. His mother had made chicken katsu with the perfectly crispy panko coating, her miso soup with soft tofu and wakame, the tamago egg rolls Shane had loved since childhood, Japanese potato salad, and somehow also managed to prepare his father's favorite biscuits and gravy. It was a feast that said *I love you* in at least three languages.

Shane sat down and stared at the spread, his throat tight. How was he supposed to eat when his stomach felt like it had been replaced with lead?

"Okay," Yuna said, setting down her own plate with more force than necessary. "You're going to tell us what's wrong right now. I've been your mother for twenty-six years, Shane Hollander, and I know that face. That's your something-terrible-happened face."

David reached over and squeezed her hand. "Let him get there on his own, honey."

"I don't want him to 'get there,'" Yuna said, but her voice cracked slightly. "I want him to tell me everything's fine."

Shane pulled the folded press release from his jacket pocket and set it on the table between the chicken katsu and the biscuits. He looked at his parents trying to memorize every detail. His mother's hands, elegant and strong. His father's patient eyes. The way they sat close enough that their shoulders touched, the unit they'd always been.

"I need to tell you something," he said, quietly. "And I need you to let me get through it before you respond, okay? Because if I stop, I don't know if I'll be able to start again."

His parents exchanged glances. His mother reached for his father's hand.

"During the census three years ago," Shane began, staring at the table. "They did genetic testing. Blood work. They told us it was for public health records, disease prevention, that kind of thing. Turns out they were also testing for something else. Something rare." He swallowed hard. "I have a bloodline trait. It's called *Sanguis Resonans*. The Resonant Heart line. My blood has properties that are valuable to vampires."

"Shane —" His mother gasped, placing her hand over her mouth.

"Please, Mom. Let me finish." He took a shaky breath. "Remember six months ago when Chancellor Voss insulted King Aurelion? He called vampires parasites, bloodsuckers, and accused them of enslaving humanity. The king demanded recompense. A tribute. A marriage to one of the royal line."

The color drained from his mother's face.

"They came to me yesterday," Shane continued, the words coming faster now, like a dam breaking. He pushed the press release toward them. "This goes out at one o'clock. I'm being formally announced as Tribute Consort to Prince Ilya of Rozanov. The ceremony is in three months."

The silence was deafening.

His father picked up the press release with hands that trembled slightly. He read it once, twice, his jaw tightening with each word. His mother just stared at Shane, her eyes filling with tears she refused to let fall.

"No," Yuna said, finally. The word came out hard and sharp. "No. Absolutely not. This is — this is insane. You can't —" She stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "We'll get lawyers. We'll fight this. You have rights, Shane. *Human* rights. They can't just *take* you and —"

"Mom."

"Don't 'Mom' me!" Her voice cracked and the tears spilled over. "You're my *only* son. My *baby*. And you're telling me they're going to marry you off to some vampire prince like you're property? Like you're something they can just *trade*?"

"Yuna," David said softly, but she whirled on him.

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down, David. Our son – our Shane – they're taking him and god knows what they'll do to him!" Her voice broke completely. She pressed her hands to her mouth, shoulders shaking.

Shane stood and wrapped his arms around her. She was so small against him, this woman who'd always seemed invincible.

"I know," he whispered. "I know, Mom. I'm scared too."

"Then don't go," she sobbed against his chest. "Please, baby. Please don't go. We'll figure something out. We'll – we'll leave the country. We'll hide. We'll –"

"Where could I go and hide?" Shane asked, gently. "And what would happen if I did? The supernaturals declare war. Cities burn. How many of my students will die? How many kids like them?" He pulled back enough to look at her tear-streaked face. "I'm a teacher, Mom. I teach ethics. I spend every day trying to help teenagers understand the difference between what's easy and what's right. How could I live with myself if I chose easy and people died because of it?"

"You're not responsible for the whole world," Yuna whispered, fiercely.

"No. But I'm responsible for my choices."

David had been silent through the whole exchange, still holding the press release. Now he set it down carefully and stood. He walked to the window, looking out at the lake. His shoulders were rigid, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

"Dad?" Shane said, quietly.

David didn't turn around. "You've already decided."

"Yes."

"And there's truly no other option? No other candidates?"

"No."

David's shoulders dropped slightly. He stood there for another long moment, then turned to face his son. His eyes were red-rimmed but dry.

"Then I'm proud of you," he said, his voice rough. "God help me, I wish there was another way. I wish I could protect you from this. But I'm proud of you, son, for your sacrifice."

"David —" Yuna said, staring at him in disbelief.

"Yuna, you know the realities." David crossed to Shane, putting both hands on his shoulders. "What they're asking of you is impossible. Unconscionable. No parent should ever have to watch their child sacrifice themselves for the mistakes of others." His grip tightened. "But you're doing it anyway. Because that's who you are. That's the man you are."

Shane's vision blurred. "I'm terrified, Dad."

"I know." David pulled him into a hug, fierce and tight. Yuna joined them, wrapping her arms tightly around them. "But you're also brave. Braver than most people will ever be. And wherever you're going, whatever happens, you remember that. You remember who you are."

They stood there, the three of them, wrapped together in the dining room while the food went cold and the clock ticked down. His mother was still crying, her fingers twisted in Shane's shirt like she could hold him there through sheer force of will. His father's arms were solid around both of them, the anchor Shane had always relied on.

"I don't care what happens to the world," Yuna whispered. "I know that's selfish. I know you have to. But I don't want you to go."

"I know, Mom."

"Will they..." She pulled back, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Will they treat you well? This prince. Will he hurt you?"

"I don't think so," he admitted, exhaling slowly. "They told me he's called the Ice Prince. That he's cold and distant. Controlled."

"That's not the same as kind," Yuna said, sharply.

"No. But it's not cruel either." Shane squeezed her hands. "I'll be okay, Mom. I have to be."

"They'll let you contact us? See us?"

"I think so. They said I'll retain my Commonwealth citizenship, that I'll have diplomatic status. I'll find a way to stay in touch, I promise."

They talked for another hour, circling through fear and anger and grief and practical questions none of them could answer. His mother kept getting up to reheat food that Shane couldn't bring himself to eat, as if the normal ritual of feeding him could somehow fix the unfixable. His father read through the press release three more times, looking for loopholes that didn't exist.

Shane was explaining what he knew about being a Tribute Consort when he saw them through the window.

Black SUVs. Four of them, rolling up the gravel drive in a convoy that screamed federal government. Shane's heart dropped into his stomach.

"No," he whispered, getting to his feet. "Why are they here?"

The vehicles stopped and doors opened. Armed security emerged first, fanning out with the kind of precision that suggested military training. Then Director Castellane stepped out, her expression grim, followed by Thatcher, holding his leather portfolio under his arm.

David was already moving toward the door.

"Stay behind me," he said, his voice hard.

Castellane was halfway up the walk when David opened the door. She stopped, holding up both hands in a gesture of peace.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hollander. Shane." Her eyes found Shane through the doorway. "I'm Director Sara Castellane, Commonwealth Diplomatic Office. I am very sorry to intrude on your privacy, but we have a situation."

"Why are you here?" David said, flatly. "The press release doesn't go out until one."

"There was a leak," Thatcher said, his voice neutral. "I'm Joseph Thatcher, Commonwealth Senior Legal Advisor. Someone in the diplomatic chain talked to the press. Shane's identity has been compromised. It's already spreading on social media."

Shane felt the ground tilt beneath him.

"We've received credible threats against Shane's life," Thatcher continued. "Multiple sources verified by the Commonwealth and the Vampire Kingdom. Some are from human nationalist groups who see him as a blood traitor. Others are from anti-treaty factions who want to sabotage the peace process. He needs to come with us now. We have a secured location prepared."

"Absolutely not," Yuna said, pushing past David. "You're not taking my son anywhere without —"

"Mom, please." Shane stepped forward, his whole body numb. This was happening. It was really happening. "They're right. If people already know who I am..."

"We'll also be leaving a security detail here," Castellane said, gesturing to the armed guards. "For your protection, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander. Until the situation stabilizes."

"Stabilizes," David repeated, bitterly. "You mean until our son is safely locked away in a vampire palace."

Castellane's expression softened almost imperceptibly. "If there was time —"

"There's never time for us, is there?" David's voice cracked. "Just choices we don't get to make."

Shane looked at his parents, at the dining room table still laden with food his parents had made with such love, at the lake house that had always been his sanctuary. He thought about

all the Sunday brunches he'd taken for granted, all the moments he'd assumed would keep happening forever.

"My apartment," he said, his voice sounding strange and distant. "I have things. Books, photos, my coaching equipment –"

"We'll handle it," Castellane said, gently. "Everything will be packed carefully and delivered to your new residence in the Kingdom. I promise you, nothing will be lost. We will be respectful of your belongings."

Everything's already lost, Shane thought, but didn't say.

"I need a minute," he said, instead. "Five minutes. Please."

Thatcher and Castellane exchanged glances.

"Five minutes," she agreed. "But that's all we can afford."

They stepped back from the front door, giving Shane space but not privacy. The armed guards maintained their perimeter. The SUVs idled, ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Shane turned to his parents. His mother's face was a mask of anguish, tears streaming freely now. His father's jaw was clenched so tight Shane could see the muscle jumping beneath the skin. They looked older suddenly, smaller, two people facing a loss they couldn't prevent.

"Come here," Yuna said, her voice breaking. She pulled Shane into a hug, one hand cradling the back of his head like she had when he was small. "My brave boy. My beautiful, brave boy."

"I love you, Mom," Shane whispered, his throat tightening.

"I love you so much." She pulled back, wiping his tears with her thumbs the way she'd done a thousand times before. "Listen to me. You are strong. You are good. You are worth more than any treaty or any kingdom. Don't let them make you forget that. Don't let anyone make you small."

"I won't."

"And you come back to us," she said, fiercely. "You hear me? You find a way to come back, even if it's just to visit. You're still *our* son. You're still Shane. Nothing changes that."

"Nothing changes that," Shane repeated, trying to believe it.

David stepped forward, pulling Shane into another crushing embrace.

"Be smart," he said quietly, his mouth close to Shane's ear. "Be careful. Trust yourself. And if you need us, if you need anything, you find a way to reach us. We'll move heaven and earth to help you."

"I know, Dad. I love you."

"I love you, too. I'm proud of you," David said, his voice thick. "So damn proud. I need you to know that."

Shane couldn't speak. He just nodded against his father's shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of his cologne and coffee. Yuna wrapped her arms around both of them, and for one last moment, they stood together, a family of three, held together by love even as forces beyond their control pulled them apart.

"I'm sorry, Shane, it's time," Thatcher called from outside. Not unkindly, but firmly.

Shane pulled away. His mother's hands lingered on his face, trembling.

"I'll write," he promised, not even knowing he could keep it. "I'll call. Somehow. I'll find a way."

"You better," Yuna said, trying to smile through her tears. "Or I'll march into that vampire palace myself and drag you back home."

"I believe you," Shane said, and almost laughed.

He walked to the door on legs that felt like they belonged to someone else. Castellane was waiting, her expression professionally neutral but her eyes sympathetic.

"Your parents will be safe," she said, quietly. "I give you my word."

Shane nodded. He didn't trust his voice. She gestured toward the lead SUV. Shane walked toward it, each step feeling like moving through deep water. He could feel his parents watching from the doorway, could feel the weight of their love and their fear following him down the path.

The guard opened the door. Shane slid into the back seat, the leather cool and impersonal. Castellane got in beside him. Thatcher got into the front seat. The doors closed with a solid, final thunk.

Through the tinted window, Shane could see his parents on the porch. His father's arm was around his mother's shoulders. She was pressing a hand to her mouth, her whole body shaking with sobs. David stood rigid, holding her up, his face a mask of controlled devastation.

Shane pressed his hand against the window. His father lifted his hand in return, held it there.

The SUVs started moving down the gravel driveway.

Shane watched the lake house disappear behind them, his mother collapsing against his father, the wide porch where they'd shared so many lazy mornings, the tire swing still swaying slightly in the breeze. He watched until the trees swallowed it all, until there was nothing left but the gravel road ahead and the forest pressing in from all sides.

"I'm sorry," Castellane said beside him. She wasn't looking at him, she was giving him the dignity of his grief. "I know that doesn't mean much, but I am."

Shane stared out the window at the landscape blurring past. Somewhere ahead was a life he'd never chosen and couldn't escape. Behind him, growing more distant with every mile, was everything he'd ever loved.

"We didn't even get to eat," Shane said, his voice hollow. "Mom made all that food and we didn't even eat."

Castellane didn't respond. What could she say? There was no comfort for this, no words that would make it hurt less.

Shane closed his eyes and tried to remember the feeling of his mother's hands wiping away his tears and tried to hold onto the sound of his father's voice saying *I'm proud of you*.

He tried to believe that he would survive what came next.

The SUV drove on, hitting the paved roads that carried him away from everything he knew and toward a future written in blood and treaty ink. Behind them, guards surrounded his parents' home, turning their sanctuary into a fortress.

Shane opened his eyes and watched the trees blur past, and tried not to think about how thoroughly his life had just ended, even though his heart was still beating.

Be brave, he told himself, echoing his father's words. *Be smart. Remember who you are.*

He just hoped that would be enough.

Chapter 2: A Royal Encounter

The private jet's engines hummed steadily as Shane pressed his forehead against the cool window, watching the Atlantic Ocean disappear beneath a blanket of clouds. He'd expected to land somewhere in the Commonwealth, maybe in Nova Scotia, or one of the vampire holdings in London. Instead, Castellane had informed him shortly after takeoff that their destination was the Kingdom of Rozanov itself.

"The Crown Prince preferred you be housed closer to the capital," Castellane explained, her tone suggesting this was not a request that had been open for debate for anyone.

Shane had simply nodded, his throat too tight for words. Now, twelve hours later, he stood in the doorway of a small cottage that could have been pulled from a fairy tale, if fairy tales came with armed security perimeters and the weight of ancient vampire politics pressing down on every breath.

"It's really beautiful," he said, quietly, and meant it.

The cottage was a single-story structure of honey-colored stone, with a steep slate roof and flower boxes beneath mullioned windows. Inside, exposed wooden beams crisscrossed the ceiling, and a stone fireplace dominated one wall of the main room. Simple furniture, a worn leather sofa, a sturdy dining table, bookshelves already filled with leather-bound volumes, gave the space a lived-in warmth that seemed at odds with its purpose as a gilded cage.

"Your servants will arrive shortly," Castellane said, gesturing to a young vampire who'd accompanied them from the jet. The security detail had fanned out around the property, a visible reminder that Shane's safety, or captivity, depending on how one chose to view it, was paramount. "Mira handles housekeeping. Sophie is your cook. They're both human, both vetted extensively."

"I don't need servants," Shane protested, but Castellane's expression stopped him cold.

"You are the Tribute Consort to the Crown Prince of Rozanov," she said, each word precise as a scalpel. "What you need is irrelevant. What is *appropriate* is what matters now."

Before Shane could respond, she produced a tablet from her leather briefcase. "This is for you. Your parents have been asking to speak with you. You can connect with them at any time, there are no restrictions."

Shane's hands trembled as he took the device. He sat down at the table and quickly logged into his personal accounts, letting out a deep breath in relief to see that he still had access to them. He ignored his inbox, which had 13,219 unread emails, and he tapped in his mom's number as his foot bounced impatiently, the screen showing a connecting call. And then suddenly his mother's face filled the display, his father crowding in beside her. He could see that they were still at the lake house, in the kitchen, he could see the familiar pine cabinets behind them, and his mother's eyes were red-rimmed.

"Shane! Oh, thank God!"

"I'm fine, Mom. I'm safe." The words came automatically, though Shane wasn't entirely sure they were true. "Are you both okay? Is security still there?"

"Yes, yes, they're here." His father's voice was gruff and controlled. "Four of them. They've been very respectful and professional. We've been in contact with Mr. Thatcher and he's kept us informed."

"Informed." His mother laughed shakily. "As if any of this can be explained in a way that makes sense. Shane, where are you? Can you tell us?"

Shane glanced at Director Castellane, who shook her head minutely. "I can't disclose my location, Mom. I'm sorry. But I'm being treated well. The place is...it's actually very nice."

They talked in circles, his parents asking questions he couldn't answer, Shane reassuring them in ways that felt increasingly hollow. When Castellane finally indicated the call needed to end, Shane's mother grabbed the camera.

"We love you," she said, her dark brown eyes focused on him. "Whatever happens, remember that. You are *not* just some political pawn. You're *our* son."

The screen went dark, and Shane sat in the dining table chair in the cottage's main room, blinking back tears he refused to shed. He wiped at his eyes with his fingers and leaned his head back, breathing deeply.

"I know things have been overwhelming and you haven't had a moment to yourself," Castellane said, kindly. "My duties as Director of the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office are done. I've been told to turn over your security detail to your new guards. You'll be assigned a vampire liaison who will help you with your transition. You have a few days before all of the official events begin."

Shane nodded, swallowing past the rock in his throat. "Thank you, Director Castellane, for all of your support. I'm really grateful that you'll protect my parents. That's what's most important to me."

"Their security is guaranteed for as long as you are the Consort to the Crown Prince." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to bring in Captain Marlow, head of your security in the kingdom. He was personally selected by the Crown Prince and vetted to be part of your entourage."

He looked up at her and nodded, watching as she opened the door, waving for the vampire to enter the cottage. Shane got up on his feet, wiping his sweaty palms on his pants, as he faced the tall, muscled vampire with thick black hair and sharp brown eyes. He wore the typical black uniform of vampire guards, a large white and yellow embroidered crest over his left chest.

"Captain, this is Shane Hollander," Castellane said, pushing back her shoulders and standing straight. "As Director of the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office, I officially transfer the

Tribute Consort's security and personal well-being over to you."

"Thank you, Director Castellane. On behalf of the Kingdom of Rozanov, I humbly accept the transfer and swear by my blood to the Tribute Consort's security and personal well-being as ordered by the Crown Prince."

Shane frowned, he wanted to say *the Tribute Consort has a name and was also right here*, but he kept his silence. He understood what this meant. He was no longer under the protection of the Commonwealth and belonged to the vampires.

She turned and gave him a sad smile. "It has been my honor, Consort Hollander. Thank you for your service."

Shane pressed his lips tight so that they wouldn't wobble. He simply nodded his head to her and then watched her leave the cottage. She didn't look back, not even when she stepped into the black car.

Captain Marlow stared at him for a long moment. Shane was surprised by the friendly smile that curved his lips.

"My name is Captain Cliff Marlow, at your service, Consort Hollander."

"You can call me Shane."

"Thank you. Perhaps in private. In public, it is not permissible to be so familiar."

"I understand," he said, nodding.

"The cottage is secured and I have twelve guards on the property. If they do their job right, you shouldn't be able to spot them. If you do, tell me, because it means that they're slacking off."

Shane didn't know if he should laugh, but he felt the side of his lips twitch. "Okay. Thank you."

"You must be tired from your long trip. Your human servants, Mira and Sophie, will come to attend you later this evening. The cottage is completely stocked with any human items you may need; you can always make your personal requests to your servants and they'll make sure that you're well cared for. Lady Evangeline Thorne will also arrive, after dinnertime. She will be your personal vampire liaison. Do you have any immediate needs that I can help you with?"

Shane looked around the cottage and then back to Marlow, shaking his head. "Thank you, but I think I'm okay for now."

"Good. Get some rest. This may be the last time you'll have this level of privacy."

The Kingdom of Rozanov was breathtaking in a way that made Shane's chest ache. The next morning, as he settled into the strange rhythm of his new life, he discovered that his cottage sat on a hillside overlooking a massive lake that reflected the sky so perfectly it was impossible to tell where water ended and air began. Behind the cottage, mountains rose in layers of blue and purple, their peaks still snow-capped despite the late spring warmth. Ancient forests carpeted the lower slopes, and occasionally Shane would hear the cry of some bird he didn't recognize echoing across the valley.

The Rozanov Palace itself was visible from his front windows, perched on a rocky outcrop perhaps two miles distant. It was everything Shane had imagined when he'd pictured vampire royalty: massive stone walls that looked Medieval in origin, soaring towers with pennants snapping in the wind, Gothic arches and buttresses that spoke of age and power and an empire that had existed for centuries before human kingdoms.

"It's rumored that the palace was built in remembrance of the Crown Prince's human mother," Mira said one morning as she cleaned the windows. She was in her fifties with her curly brown hair pulled into a severe bun and capable hands that moved with practiced efficiency. "His Majesty fell in love with Prince Ilya's mother, but she was killed before she could be Turned. History says that Prince Ilya expanded the palace, fortifying it over the centuries to remind everyone who approached that they understood they were entering the seat of vampire power."

Shane, who'd been studying at the dining table, looked up in surprise. "Do you know him?"

"I worked in the palace kitchens for forty years before I retired." Mira said, smiling. "I've seen it all."

Sophie, who was kneading bread dough at the kitchen counter, made a small noise of agreement. She was younger than Mira, maybe in her thirties, with kind green eyes and flour perpetually dusting her apron.

"His Highness cares about his human subjects. People call him the Ice Prince, and maybe he kind of is, but we live well under his rule."

Shane wanted to ask more, but movement outside caught his attention. The guards were changing shifts, six armed guards in dark tactical gear moving with military precision around the cottage's perimeter.

"Do I have time to go for a quick walk?"

"A quick one," Mira allowed. "Let Captain Marlow know. Lady Thorne was very specific about following the protocols."

Lady Thorne. Shane suppressed a sigh.

He had met Lady Evangeline Thorne the day before when she arrived at the cottage like a blonde storm in a tailored blue dress.

She looked all of seventeen, with porcelain skin, wide blue eyes, and delicate features that would have been at home in a Pre-Raphaelite painting. But when she extended her hand for Shane to shake, her grip was cold as death and strong as steel, and her eyes held the weight of centuries.

"Consort Hollander," she said, her accent crisp and aristocratic. "I am Lady Evangeline Thorne, appointed by His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Ilya, to serve as your liaison and instructor. We have five days until your First Presentation with His Majesty, King Aurelion. That is not enough time to teach you everything you need to know, but it will have to suffice."

She released his hand and surveyed the cottage's main room with the air of a general inspecting troops.

"We'll work here. Clear the dining table."

Shane hastily gathered his laptop and the few personal items he'd spread across the wooden surface.

"I've been reading about Rozanov history, "

"Good. Continue doing so." Lady Thorne turned her head and nodded at one of the guards, who carried in a large leather case and set it down beside the dining room table. Lady Thorne opened it to reveal a neat stack of books and bound manuscripts. "These are required reading: *Protocols of the Royal Court*, *The Lineage of Rozanov*, *Etiquette and Precedence in Vampire Society*, and *The Commonwealth Accords, Annotated Edition*. You'll note I've marked the relevant sections."

Shane stared at the stack, which had to be at least a thousand pages. "All of this? In five days?"

"You're a teacher, are you not? I trust you know how to study efficiently." Lady Thorne's expression didn't change, not cruel, not cold, simply matter-of-fact. "Your ignorance of our customs is understandable, but not excusable once you've been given the means to correct it. His Royal Highness expects competence from his Consort. You're lucky that he's mellowed out in the last century; at least he doesn't expect perfection, and when you fail at that, we'd both lose our heads."

"Umm...lose our heads?"

She smirked, looking like every teenage girl he'd ever met. "His Royal Highness really liked public beheadings."

The way she said "*His Royal Highness*" carried a weight of devotion that made Shane wonder about her relationship to Crown Prince Ilya. It wasn't romantic; Lady Thorne, while she looked like a teenager in the bloom of youthful romance, wore her loyalty like armor, not love. But there was something fierce in her tone, something protective.

Public beheadings. Jesus Christ.

"I'll do my best," Shane said, respectfully. He was not going to mess with her.

"Your best needs to be exceptional." Lady Thorne gestured imperiously. "Now. Show me your bow."

The next three days blurred into an exhausting routine of study, correction, and more study. He was happy to talk to his parents every day, feeling reassured that they were safe. He talked about what he was learning and he practiced bowing.

Lady Thorne was a relentless instructor. She critiqued everything:

"Thirty degrees for His Majesty, twenty degrees for His Highness, fifteen degrees for lesser royalty; and there will be times, when you can't be outright rude to anyone in the court, but you are allowed to show your displeasure with a simple, dismissive nod of your head in lieu of a bow."

"Your posture during a formal address should always be shoulders back, chin level, hands at your sides unless specifically gesturing."

"When you walk into a room, you should always have a polite smile. And when you sit, whether in a chair or a couch, you must not sprawl. You're common and human, so I understand the impulse to sprawl, but vampires interpret relaxed body language as disrespect...or an invitation to take blood and fuck."

The books she'd assigned covered everything from the founding of the Rozanov Dynasty in the 15th century to the complex web of vampire court politics that governed modern supernatural society. Shane learned that King Aurelion was the oldest living vampire; most of the current historical texts claimed he was over 2000 years old; but the ancient vampire texts claimed he was 5000 years old. Shane honestly couldn't wrap his mind around what that actually meant.

Crown Prince Ilya was his third child, though the King had apparently Turned hundreds of others over the centuries.

"The Crown Prince is definitely His Majesty's favorite," Mira confirmed as she folded the clean towels and bedding in the living room.

"He's the third son, but he's next in line to inherit the Vampire Kingdom," Shane said, remembering his history. "Will any of his, *um*, siblings mind?"

"You forget that vampire hierarchy is nothing like human protocols for next in line," she said, giving him a look. "His Highness is beloved by all of his siblings and the vampire kingdoms."

He was surprised to learn that the Kingdom of Rozanov was similar to what humans defined a constitutional monarchy, within the broader Vampire Kingdom, though in practice the King's word was absolute law.

"Why do I need to know about dining etiquette?" Shane asked on the third day, rubbing his tired eyes as Lady Thorne walked him through the proper way to address servants during a formal meal. Mira and Sophie stepped in to roleplay different servant roles in the palace. "Vampires don't eat."

"No, but we attend dinners and royal functions." Lady Thorne's tone suggested he'd asked an incredibly stupid question. "State banquets include human dignitaries and other supernatural guests. You will be expected to navigate multiple courses, understand which wines pair with which blood types, which blood types pair with which foods —"

"Blood types?" Shane interrupted, confused.

Lady Thorne sighed. "Human blood varies in flavor and quality based on the human's blood genome type, diet, emotional state, and overall health. A positive is generally considered robust and full-bodied. AB negative is rare and prized. O negative is universal but often described as bland. You need to understand these distinctions because they will be discussed at the table, and because you may be asked your preference."

Shane's stomach turned. "My preference for which blood type to discuss, or...?"

"Both." Lady Thorne's expression softened infinitesimally. "You're going to hear vampires talk about humans as food, Consort Hollander. It's our nature. Do humans have any consideration for the animals you consume? The sooner you accept that, the easier your adjustment will be."

That night, Shane lay awake in the cottage's small bedroom, staring at the ceiling beams and wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into.

On the fourth day, Lady Thorne declared a day of respite so Shane could *"clear his head and not arrive at the First Presentation looking like the vampires had abused him with sleep deprivation."*

Shane seized the opportunity to request a walk. He was putting on his comfortable hiking boots and chatting with Mira and Sophie, when he felt the temperature in the room drop.

Mira and Sophie, who'd been laughing in the kitchen, suddenly froze. Then, moving in perfect synchronization, they turned toward the cottage's front door and dropped into deep curtsies, heads bowed. Shane's confusion lasted perhaps two seconds before the door opened without anyone knocking.

The man who entered was possibly the most beautiful person Shane had ever seen.

He was tall, well over six feet, and moved with liquid grace that immediately marked him as *other*. His hair was so pale it was nearly white, falling in a sleek curtain to his shoulders, and his eyes were a rich amber that seemed to glow faintly in the cottage's dim interior. His features were aristocratic: high cheekbones, straight nose, a mouth that looked sculpted from marble. He wore casual clothes, a thick cable-knit sweater in cream, dark wool trousers

tucked into weathered leather boots, and incongruously, a tweed newsboy cap perched on his head.

Shane's brain stuttered. This couldn't be –

The man smiled, and Shane felt that smile like a physical touch.

"Please," he said in a voice like aged whiskey. "Don't let me interrupt."

Shane's body moved without conscious thought. He shot to his feet and executed the deepest bow Lady Thorne had drilled into him, holding the position because he had no idea what else to do.

"Your Majesty," he heard himself say. "I – I wasn't expecting –"

"Clearly." There was amusement in the voice now. "You may rise. All of you."

Shane straightened slowly. Mira and Sophie remained in their curtses until King Aurelion made a small gesture with his hand, at which point they practically fled to the kitchen, eyes downcast.

The King was watching Shane with unconcealed curiosity, his amber eyes tracking every detail. "You were expecting someone more...regal, perhaps?"

"I –" Shane swallowed hard. "You're not wearing a crown."

King Aurelion laughed, a sound so warm and human that Shane's fear receded fractionally. "I prefer to save mine for formal State affairs. My neck appreciates the consideration."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown," Shane said automatically, then froze as his brain caught up. "I mean..."

"Indeed." The King's smile widened. "I offered to Turn William Shakespeare, you know. I promised him immortality, unlimited time to write, and access to the greatest libraries and stages in the world. Do you know what he told me?"

Shane shook his head, not trusting his voice.

"He said he would rather feel his mortality. That a writer must understand the weight of time's passage, the urgency of limited days, in order to truly use his gifts." King Aurelion removed his cap and ran a hand through his pale hair. "I thought him a fool then. I'm not entirely certain I was wrong."

The silence stretched. Shane's mind raced, trying to remember every protocol Lady Thorne had taught him, but they all seemed to evaporate under the King's direct gaze.

"I'm sorry," he finally managed. "Your Majesty, I should have, I didn't properly greet –"

"Peace." King Aurelion waved away his stammering. "I came unannounced and broke protocol. The fault is mine, not yours. I simply..." He paused, and something almost

vulnerable crossed his ancient face. "I wanted to meet you. And I thought you might have questions that Lady Thorne, efficient as she is, cannot answer."

Shane's throat felt tight. "Your Majesty is very kind."

"I am very old and very indulged. But I was curious about you and very invested in my son's happiness." The King moved further into the cottage, his gaze sweeping across the books scattered on the table. "Lady Thorne has been thorough, I see. Perhaps too thorough. Would you walk with me, Shane? I find that fresh air often helps settle the mind."

It wasn't really a question. Shane nodded mutely and followed the King outside.

The security detail materialized from the shadows as they stepped onto the cottage's small porch, Captain Marlow and his team fanning out in a loose perimeter, while four Royal Guards in ornate armor appeared from seemingly nowhere to flank the King. Shane noticed that his own guards kept a respectful distance from the royal ones, a physical manifestation of the hierarchy Lady Thorne had spent days explaining.

King Aurelion set a leisurely pace down the hillside trail, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked, Shane thought, more like a country gentleman out for a constitutional than an ancient vampire monarch.

"Tell me about your human life," the King said, after they'd walked in silence for several minutes. "Your parents. Your work at the high school. What you dreamed before all of this interrupted."

Shane chose his words carefully. "My dad works for the Commonwealth's Treasury Board. My mom used to work for the Commonwealth, too, but now works for a non-profit that supports women in professional sports. I guess I dreamed about working in professional hockey, but I went in a different direction. I like teaching and coaching young people."

"You studied ethics at university. I read your undergraduate thesis on vassalage and consent." The King's smile was knowing. "Mr. Joseph Thatcher included it in your file. You argued that true fealty required voluntary submission from a position of informed understanding. Interesting thesis, particularly given your current circumstances."

Heat flooded Shane's cheeks. "I didn't – it wasn't meant as commentary on –"

"Of course not. You wrote it before you knew you'd be living your hypothesis." King Aurelion paused to examine a cluster of wildflowers growing beside the trail. "Why did you accept the proposal? And please, I ask that you be honest with me. I will know if you lie."

Shane took a breath. Truth, then. "Because someone has to be a Tribute Consort, and at least I went into it understanding what I was agreeing to. More or less."

"More or less," the King echoed. "Yes, I imagine the reality is quite different from the theory." He resumed walking, his boots crunching softly on the gravel path. "And what do

you think of us? Of vampires and other supernatural beings? Your thesis suggests you believe in the inherent inequality of power imbalances."

"I think," Shane said, slowly and carefully. "That vampires are stronger, faster, and functionally immortal, which creates an inherent power imbalance with humans. But I also think that power can be exercised with justice or without it. The structure might be unequal, but the treatment doesn't have to be cruel."

King Aurelion chuckled, giving Shane a side glance. "That was a very diplomatic answer, Shane. Do you believe it?"

Shane met those amber eyes. "I'm still deciding, Your Majesty."

To his surprise, King Aurelion laughed, a genuine sound of delight. "Good. You should decide for yourself. Ilya will appreciate that you are not a simpering fool."

The mention of Crown Prince Ilya sent Shane's heart racing. "Your Majesty...may I ask about him? About the Crown Prince?"

The King's expression shifted, becoming something complex, pride mixed with sadness, hope tempered with worry. "What would you like to know?"

"Anything. Everything." Shane felt desperate suddenly. "I've read the official biographies and Lady Thorne's briefings, but they're all so...formal."

They had reached a small overlook where the trail widened into a natural viewing platform. King Aurelion stopped, his gaze distant, fixed on the palace in the distance.

"My son is brilliant and wounded. More powerful than he knows. He was Turned in a time when vampire sons were expected to be warriors and nothing more. Emotions were a weakness. Kindness was a liability. I raised him in that tradition because I knew no other way." The King's voice dropped. "His mortal mother was beautiful and kind. She taught him love and compassion. But she was killed during the uprisings in 1452, and after that..."

"I'm sorry," Shane said, quietly.

"Ilya became exactly what I trained him to be. Effective." King Aurelion turned to face Shane fully. "But I have seen glimpses, over the centuries, of the man he might have been if circumstances were different. He loves music, though he rarely admits it. He has a wicked sense of humor that appears perhaps once a decade. And he is fiercely protective of those under his care, even if he'd never use that word."

"I've heard that he treats all of his subjects fairly."

The King reached out and, with surprising gentleness, placed a hand on Shane's shoulder. "I tell you this not to excuse his behavior or to set your expectations. I tell you this because I am an old vampire who wants, more than anything, for his son to be happy. Isn't that what every father wants?"

Shane thought of his own father, of the gruff affection and steady support that had shaped his life.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it is."

"Then we understand each other." King Aurelion's hand fell away. "I will not tell you that Ilya's happiness is your responsibility, Shane. That would be unfair to both of you. But I will say that I hope, I allow myself to hope, that you might be the person who reminds him he's allowed to want more than duty."

They stood in silence for a moment, the weight of the King's words settling over Shane like a physical thing.

"I'll try my best," Shane said, as honestly as he could. "As Tribute Consort, I'll try to be what the Crown Prince needs."

"That's all anyone can ask." The King's smile was sad and warm simultaneously. "Come. We should return before Lady Thorne discovers I've been interfering with her carefully structured protocols."

"Yeah, she's pretty terrifying, especially since she looks like she could be one of my students."

King Aurelion laughed again. "Yes, she is quite the terror. Never tell her I said that."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Shane said, chuckling softly.

They walked back to the cottage in companionable silence, the security teams ghosting through the trees around them. When they reached the front door, King Aurelion paused.

"The First Presentation," he said, looking over Shane's face. "Is mostly ceremonial. I will ask you formal questions about your acceptance of the Tribute Consort position, you will answer according to the protocols Lady Thorne has taught you, and then we will share blood and tea while I assess whether you're going to cause my son more harm than good." The amber eyes glinted with humor. "I expect you'll do fine."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Shane bowed, and this time the gesture felt natural rather than rehearsed.

"One more thing." The King's expression turned serious. "What I shared with you about Ilya, about his wounds and his losses, that stays between us. He would be furious if he knew I'd shared even that much. When you meet him, let him reveal himself at his own pace. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good." King Aurelion replaced his cap at a jaunty angle. "I look forward to tomorrow's presentation. You're an interesting young man, Consort Hollander. You will create chaos in

my courts and I will be entertained like never before. You'll just have to indulge this old vampire."

He left without further ceremony, his Royal Guards melting back into the shadows as suddenly as they'd appeared. Shane stood on the porch, watching the King's tall figure disappear down the trail, until Captain Marlow coughed politely and gestured toward the cottage door.

Inside, Mira and Sophie were pretending they hadn't been eavesdropping from the kitchen. Shane ignored them and returned to his seat at the dining table, where the books still lay open to pages about royal protocol and proper forms of address.

But Shane didn't read any of them. Instead, he stared out the window to the distant palace, its stone walls turned gold by the afternoon sun, and thought about a vampire prince who loved music but rarely admitted it. Who had a wicked sense of humor that appeared once a decade. Who was brilliant and wounded and lost.

A week ago, he'd been a high school teacher and assistant coach, where the only things he was worried about was updating his teaching curriculum and regionals. Now, he was sitting in a heavily guarded safehouse in a vampire kingdom, preparing to become Consort to a Crown Prince he'd never met, after having, which was probably a shovel-talk, with the Prince's vampire father, who was the oldest and most powerful vampire in existence.

How was this his life?

Chapter 3: A War Undeclared

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Thank you for all the kudos and lovely comments! I'll try to make time to respond to them. For chapter 3, we finally get to know more about the worldbuilding and Crown Prince Ilya and what he thinks and feels about the current political situation; then in chapter 4, we get some insight into Ilya's personal feelings about his Tribute Consort. Hope you're still enjoying this story!

Six Months Earlier

The Eternal Assembly stood on the banks of the Thames like a monument to vampire supremacy, its neo-Gothic spires piercing the London sky with an architectural arrogance that only centuries of uncontested power could produce. The building had once been called the Palace of Westminster, back when humans had ruled this city. Now it was the seat of the Global Council where humans, vampires, werewolves, Fae, and mer gathered to negotiate the careful balance of power that kept the Great Truce intact.

Ilya had always loved vampire-controlled London.

The city was a playground for vampires and supernatural beings, a place where ancient power wore modern suits and centuries-old grudges played out over blood-champagne and carefully worded treaties. The architecture still bore the marks of its human past, but it had been transformed and improved by vampire aesthetics. Gas lamps had been replaced with subtle lighting that flattered immortal complexions. The streets were cleaner, safer, and patrolled by beings who could hear a heartbeat from blocks away. The Thames itself seemed darker, more mysterious, as though the water knew it flowed through territory claimed by predators.

The theaters were sublime. The blood restaurants were exquisite. The night markets that catered to supernatural clientele offered pleasures both mundane and exotic. Blood boutiques stood alongside fashion houses, alchemy shops next to art galleries. It was a city that never truly slept, because its most powerful inhabitants had no need for sleep.

Ilya had spent decades here over the centuries. Had attended operas and negotiated treaties, had fought duels in hidden courtyards and seduced every category of beings in rooms overlooking the river. London had been his playground, his refuge, his second home.

But that was before Heinrich Voss had been re-elected.

The newly minted Chancellor of the European Commonwealth Territories was a blight on an otherwise perfect city. His face appeared on news screens throughout London, that smug, self-satisfied smile, those calculating eyes that promised prosperity while stoking fear. Voss

had won his re-election by a landslide, riding a wave of human sentiment and barely concealed hostility toward the supernatural kingdoms.

And now he was here, in Ilya's London, in the Eternal Assembly itself, about to give a speech at the Global Summit on Resource Allocation.

Ilya *despised* him.

Not in the casual way he disliked most politicians. Not with the mild contempt he reserved for fools who overestimated their own importance. This was deeper, a visceral loathing that made his fangs ache and his fingers twitch toward weapons he wasn't carrying.

Because Voss was dangerous. Not physically, the man would fold like paper in a real fight, but politically. He had power. He had followers. And he had a platform that reached millions of humans who were already afraid, already resentful of the territories and resources controlled by supernatural beings.

The summit chamber itself was magnificent, vaulted ceilings that soared overhead like a cathedral, stained glass windows that filtered the late afternoon light into jewel tones, rows of seats arranged in a semicircle facing the central podium. The room had been designed to impress, to remind everyone who entered that they were participating in something historic, something important.

Ilya sat in the vampire delegation section, surrounded by nobility from kingdoms across the globe. The other supernatural representatives were nearby, werewolf alphas whose tailored suits couldn't quite hide their predatory nature, Fae nobility whose beauty had that sharp, dangerous quality that made humans instinctively uncomfortable, and mer representatives who moved with the fluid grace of beings more comfortable in water than air.

It should have been perfect. A gathering of power and ancient wisdom in the heart of vampire London, discussing the careful balance that kept their world functioning.

But Heinrich Voss spoke and Ilya's fingers had left permanent indentations in the armrests of his chair.

He sat rigid in his seat, watching Voss destroy a century of careful diplomacy with the casual cruelty of a drunk stumbling through a china shop.

"-- parasites who don't even need to eat can sit on wealth they cannot use while human children go hungry --"

The word *parasites* landed like a slap. Ilya felt his fangs extend involuntarily, pressing against the inside of his lips. He kept his face perfectly still, a mask of marble indifference that had taken him six centuries to perfect. Around him, the other vampires had gone utterly still, that particular predatory stillness that humans always mistook for calm.

It was not calm.

It was the stillness of a blade held at the throat. The stillness of a winter storm gathering on the horizon. The stillness that preceded violence so absolute that even contemplating it required a kind of terrible focus.

Outside the windows, London continued its evening rituals. Lights were beginning to come on across the city, that magical hour when day bled into night and the supernatural world truly came alive. The Thames reflected the dying light like molten copper. Somewhere in the distance, Big Ben, renamed the Eternal Clock after the vampire takeover, tolled the hour.

It was still *his* London.

But Voss was poisoning it with every word that fell from his drunken mouth.

Ten feet away, his father sat in his usual position of honor; King Aurelion was the sovereign of the Vampire Kingdom and architect of the Great Truce. The ancient king hadn't moved. Hadn't even blinked. But Ilya knew his father well enough to recognize the dangerous quality that had entered his stillness, like the moment before lightning strikes. The air around Aurelion seemed to shimmer slightly, though whether that was the effect of suppressed power or Ilya's own rage distorting his vision, he couldn't say.

King Aurelion was a study in contradictions with pale white-blond hair that caught the light like spun platinum, amber eyes that held the warmth of ancient fires and the weight of thousands of years of unfathomable wisdom. He was tall and slender, his frame almost delicate in appearance, which made humans consistently underestimate the fearsome strength coiled beneath that aristocratic exterior.

Today, he wore a dark charcoal gray suit tailored to perfection, bespoke craftsmanship that whispered wealth rather than shouted it, paired with proper leather shoes polished to a mirror shine, a light gray shirt, and a blood-red silk necktie with matching pocket square, the only splash of color that hinted at his true nature.

He was elegant and beautiful in that preternatural way that marked the truly ancient vampires, the ones who had lived so long that humanity had become a sort of performance art they'd perfected over centuries. But what struck Ilya most, what he both admired and occasionally resented, was how thoroughly his father had transformed himself into a modern vampire, how he'd taken millennia of casual cruelty, of viewing humans as little more than cattle, of being an apex predator who answered to no one, and *somehow* transmuted all that darkness into something resembling genuine benevolence, or at least its most convincing approximation.

His fingernails, sharp as daggers when he wanted them to be, had pierced through the wooden armrests. He could feel splinters embedding themselves in his palms. The pain was distant and irrelevant. His entire focus had narrowed to a single point: *the Chancellor's throat*. The pulse that would be beating there, rapid with alcohol and adrenaline. How easy it would be to cross that distance. How satisfying it would be to –

Control.

"You sit there in your ancient palaces, hoarding resources, living in luxury sustained by the blood of humans who have no choice but to comply with your 'voluntary donation' system –"

Ilya's jaw clenched so hard he tasted blood where his fangs had pierced his own lip. The donation system was the cornerstone of modern human-vampire relations. Heavily regulated. Generously compensated. Entirely voluntary. It had taken decades to establish, replacing centuries of darker practices that Ilya himself had helped abolish.

He remembered those negotiations, sitting in rooms not far from this very chamber, across tables from human diplomats who flinched every time he moved. He remembered the careful patience required to convince them that vampires could be trusted with restraint, with mercy, with the radical notion that feeding didn't have to mean killing.

And this drunken fool was calling it slavery.

In vampire London, of all places. In the Eternal Assembly, where that system had been drafted and ratified. Where humans and supernaturals had worked together to build something better than the darkest era that had come before.

Ilya kept his expression perfectly neutral, but inside his chest, something ancient and vicious was waking up. The part of him that remembered what vampires had been before the Great Truce. Before civilization and careful diplomacy and pretending to be partners rather than predators.

The secret part of him that whispered: *Let me out. Let me show them what a monster really looks like.*

"Compensated!" Voss laughed, the sound ugly and sharp in the suddenly tense chamber. "You mean you pay for the privilege of using humans as livestock. How generous. How enlightened."

The Chancellor leaned on the podium, his face flushed with alcohol and arrogance. His tie was slightly loosened. His hair, usually so carefully styled, had begun to fall across his forehead. He looked like what he was: an insecure human who had won too much power too easily and mistaken luck for invincibility.

"You're nothing but well-dressed leeches. Blood-sucking parasites playing at civilization."

Playing at civilization.

The words echoed in Ilya's mind. He thought of the universities his kingdom had founded. The hospitals. The research centers that had developed treatments for human blood diseases that had once decimated human populations. He thought of the countless hours he'd spent in council chambers and negotiation rooms, choosing words over violence, choosing patience over the satisfaction of ending arguments with fangs and blood.

London had been a festering, disease-ridden sprawl when vampires had taken control. Now it was a jewel in the Vampire Kingdom. Clean. Safe. Sophisticated. A place where humans and supernatural beings lived side by side in relative peace.

Playing at civilization!

Something hot and vicious coiled in Ilya's chest. His vision tunneled, focusing on Voss's throat, on the pulse that would be beating there beneath that expensive suit collar. He could see the micro-expressions flickering across the Chancellor's face, the false confidence, the underlying fear he was trying to drown in bravado. Could smell the man's sweat, sharp with anxiety beneath the obnoxious cologne.

He could cross the distance in less than a second and silence that poison tongue permanently before anyone could intervene. He could show this fool – and remind the world – exactly what playing at civilization meant by demonstrating the vast gulf between a vampire choosing restraint and a vampire unleashed.

It would be efficient. *Satisfyingly bloody* in a way that political responses never were.

His father's hand moved, just slightly, a minute gesture that no human eye would catch. But Ilya saw it. The barest tilt of fingers that meant: *Stand down*.

Ilya forced himself to wait. His fingernails had left gouges deep enough that they'd need to replace the furniture.

Good. Let the humans see the evidence of his restraint. Let them understand exactly how much control he was exercising by remaining in his seat.

"You hide behind the Great Truce, behind centuries of careful diplomacy, pretending you're our equals. Our partners." Voss's lip curled with contempt, revealing teeth that were small and blunt and utterly inadequate for anything more threatening than chewing vegetables. "But we all know what you really are, don't we, *Your Majesty?*"

Ilya watched as the other delegates felt the insult.

"You're predators. Monsters in suits. And the only reason you haven't turned us all into your personal feeding stock is because you know, you *know*, that humanity has the numbers. The weapons. The will to –"

"Chancellor Voss."

His father's voice cut through the tirade like a blade through silk. King Aurelion rose from his seat with fluid grace and the entire chamber fell silent.

Ilya stood as well, moving to his father's side without conscious thought. It was instinct, the same instinct that had kept him alive through six centuries of war and politics and the endless, exhausting game of pretending to be civilized. When the King rose, the Crown Prince stood at his side.

He was aware of the other supernatural delegates rising as one around them, werewolf alphas whose eyes had begun to glow red with suppressed rage, Fae nobility whose beauty had taken on that knife-edged quality that preceded violence, mer representatives whose fingers had grown webbed and taloned in preparation for a fight that might still come.

A united front of ancient power that suddenly made the human section of the assembly look very small and very fragile. *Easy pickings.*

"You have said enough," Aurelion said quietly, his amber eyes fixed on Voss. "More than enough."

The King's voice was soft. Conversational, almost. But Ilya could hear the power thrumming beneath it, the kind of power that could level buildings, that could make grown men piss themselves with terror, that could remind humanity exactly why vampires were the apex predators of this world.

His father was choosing not to use that power. He was choosing restraint. And civilization.

Ilya wasn't sure *he* could make the same choice.

For a moment, just a moment, Voss seemed to realize what he'd done. His face paled. His hand gripped the podium as though it were the only thing keeping him upright. Ilya watched the man's pupils dilate with fear, watched the way his breathing quickened, watched him understand, perhaps for the first time, exactly how much danger he'd just put himself in.

But his pride wouldn't let him back down. Not in front of the cameras.

"Truth hurts, doesn't it?" Voss said, and tried to smile. The expression was sickly and unconvincing. "Maybe it's time someone finally said what everyone's been thinking. You're parasites. You've kept humanity enslaved for centuries through fear and —"

Aurelion turned and walked out of the chamber.

The gesture was more devastating than any threat could have been. It was the ultimate dismissal. It was a declaration that Voss wasn't worth the effort of a response.

Ilya followed, every muscle in his body singing with the need for violence. His footsteps were silent on the marble floor, he'd learned centuries ago how to move without sound, how to be a ghost when he needed to be; but inside his chest, due to the blood he drank before the meeting, his heart was beating a war drum rhythm that matched the litany running through his mind: *Blood. Death. Vengeance. Blood. Death. Vengeance.*

Behind them, the supernatural delegation moved as one, a silent exodus that felt more threatening than any words could have been. Ilya could hear the rustle of expensive clothing, the near-silent footfalls of beings who had forgotten more about predation than humans had ever learned. He could feel the weight of their collective fury pressing against his shoulders like a physical force.

They were waiting for a signal. Waiting for the King, or the Crown Prince, to give the order that would turn this insult into a bloodbath.

Ilya kept his face perfectly smooth.

As they swept through the corridor toward the waiting motorcade, Ilya could hear the chaos erupting in the chamber behind them, urgent voices, the clatter of chairs, the desperate

attempts at damage control that were already far too late.

Through the windows that lined the hallway, London spread out in all its glory. His city. His playground. His home away from home.

And Voss had poisoned it.

Too late, Ilya thought with savage satisfaction. *You insulted my father. You called us parasites and monsters. You declared yourself our enemy in front of the entire world, in the heart of vampire territory, in the city we built.*

And now you will pay for it in blood.

The fantasy was vivid in his mind: Voss's territory burning. Cities reduced to ash. Streets running red with the blood of everyone who had cheered for the Chancellor's hateful rhetoric. He could plan it all out in his head, which cities to strike first for maximum psychological impact, how to deploy their forces for optimal destruction, which strategic targets would cripple human resistance most effectively.

He'd been planning battles for six hundred years. He was very, very good at it.

Control, whispered a voice that sounded disturbingly like his father's. *You are better than this. You are more than this.*

But the voice was very quiet. And the monster was very, very loud.

The limousine was already waiting, engine running, surrounded by their Royal Guards. Ilya slid into the back seat beside his father, the door closing with a soft, expensive click that sealed them away from the chaos of the Eternal Assembly.

The interior smelled of leather and the faint, pleasant scent of the vervain oil that was rubbed into all the surfaces of his father's vehicles, a traditional ward against hostile magic, though it had long since become more superstition than necessity. The windows were tinted so dark that from outside, the vehicle would appear empty.

As the motorcade pulled away, Ilya caught one last glimpse of the Eternal Assembly through the rear window. The building still stood magnificent against the darkening sky, its spires reaching toward heaven like prayers or threats.

His London. Beautiful and eternal.

But something had changed. Something had been broken.

And Ilya wasn't sure it could ever be fixed.

Gregor, his father's Seneschal, sat across from them, his weathered face impassive. The ancient vampire had served his father for six hundred years, exactly as long as Ilya had been alive, which was not a coincidence. Gregor had been there the night Ilya was Turned, had

been the one to teach him control when all he'd wanted was blood and violence and an end to the terrible hunger that consumed him.

Ilya had never once seen Gregor lose his composure. The Seneschal sat now with his hands folded calmly in his lap, his expression neutral, giving no indication that they'd just walked out of what might become a diplomatic catastrophe that would define the next century.

Ilya lasted approximately thirty seconds before the fury boiling in his chest erupted.

"An insult against the King is a declaration of war," he said, his voice tight and cold. He kept his tone perfectly controlled, perfectly modulated. An outside observer would hear only aristocratic displeasure. They wouldn't hear the violence simmering beneath every word.

"That drunken fool called you a parasite. A monster. Called all of us, vampires, werewolves, Fae, mer, he called us predators playing at civilization." His hands clenched into fists. "He needs to pay for it. They *all* need to pay for it. With their blood."

Aurelion gazed out the window at the city sliding past, his expression distant and unreadable. The amber of his eyes seemed to glow slightly in the dim interior of the vehicle, catching the light like a cat's eyes, a predator's eyes.

"Eye for an eye," Ilya continued, leaning forward, his words coming faster now despite his attempts to maintain that icy control. "You heard him. He threatened us. Implied that humans have the weapons, the numbers, the *will* to destroy us. That's a declaration of intent, Father. That's —"

"That was a scared and drunk human saying stupid things on camera," Aurelion murmured, still watching the city.

"A drunk human speaking his truth!" Ilya's voice rose despite his attempts to control it, heat bleeding through the ice he tried so hard to maintain. "You think he's the only one who believes that poison? He won re-election by a landslide on promises of 'human prosperity' and 'reclaiming our birthright.' He's not an outlier, he's the voice of a movement. And if we let this stand, if we don't seek proper recompense —"

"Recompense." Aurelion turned to look at him, one eyebrow raised in that particular way that meant his father found him both amusing and exasperating in equal measure. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"War." The word came out flat and final. Ilya met his father's gaze without flinching. "Let me lead our armies. We'll start with Voss's territory and make an example of him. Destroy their cities. Starve their citizens. Let their streets run with blood until they remember why they agreed to the Great Truce in the first place and beg for your forgiveness. Until they remember that we are not parasites to be insulted. We are apex predators who have *chosen* civilization. And if they've forgotten the difference —"

He was breathing hard now, his fangs fully extended, his eyes probably glowing that particular shade of ice-blue that gave him his nickname. The Ice Prince. Cold and beautiful and deadly.

Except right now, he didn't feel cold at all. He felt like he was burning from the inside out.

"Ilya." His father's voice was gentle, almost fond. A small smile played at the corners of his mouth, crinkling the skin around his ancient eyes. "Don't be so dramatic."

The words hit like cold water. Ilya sat back, his fury stuttering against his father's calm amusement. The smile on Aurelion's face was the smile of someone who had seen everything, who had lived through empires rising and falling, who found the passions of younger beings both touching and slightly ridiculous.

It was infuriating.

"If I went to war every time a human insulted me," Aurelion continued, that smile widening slightly, "well. There wouldn't be any humans left alive, would there?"

"That," Ilya said through gritted teeth, forcing the words out between his fangs, "would solve the problem permanently."

Gregor made a sound that might have been a cough or a suppressed laugh. The Seneschal's lips twitched slightly, the closest thing to an expression Ilya had seen on his face all day.

Aurelion's smile became a quiet chuckle, rich with thousands of years of dark humor.

Ilya glared at both of them. They were humoring him. Letting him vent his rage like a child throwing a tantrum, waiting for his emotions to cool before they arrived at the airport and returned to the public eye.

The realization should have calmed him. It should have allowed him to step back, to see the situation with the strategic clarity that had made him one of his father's most valuable advisors.

Instead, it made him angrier.

Because they were right. He *was* being dramatic. He was letting his emotions control him instead of maintaining the icy detachment that had always been his greatest strength.

And that made him furious, at himself as much as at Voss, at the situation, at the entire mess.

"This isn't a joke," he said coldly, pulling his ice back around him like armor. His voice dropped to that particular tone, the one that made subordinates flinch and enemies reconsider their life choices. "That was a direct insult to your Crown, to our kingdoms, to every supernatural being in that chamber. If we don't respond with strength —"

"We respond with wisdom," Aurelion said, his voice losing its amusement. The King's expression became serious, the weight of millennia settling over his features like a cloak. "Which means we wait. We watch. We let the humans scramble to contain the damage Voss just did. And we do not give them the war they're afraid we'll start."

Ilya wanted to argue and rage, demand and insist on the blood price that honor demanded. He could feel the words building in his chest, hot and sharp and desperate for release.

But his father was the King. And Ilya, for all his fury, was still only the Crown Prince. He was still young, by vampire standards. Only six hundred years old, barely past adolescence in the eyes of the truly ancient.

He forced himself to lean back in his seat. He let the ice build back around his heart, layer by layer, until the rage was buried so deep that only he could feel it burning.

By the time they reached the airport, he had his mask back in place, cool, controlled, and unreadable. His eyes had returned to their normal blue. His fangs had retracted. His posture was relaxed, aristocratic, bored even.

The perfect image of vampire nobility. The Ice Prince in all his cold, untouchable glory.

Even if on the inside, he was still imagining Heinrich Voss's blood on his hands and licking it off.

Patience, he told himself. *Control. Ice.*

But the ice was cracking. And beneath it, something ancient and terrible was waiting.

The royal jet was a masterpiece of understated luxury, all dark leather and polished wood, with private suites and a conference room that could seat twenty. The interior was designed to be a mobile command center, equipped with communications systems that could connect to any kingdom in the world, secure enough to discuss state secrets, and comfortable enough for the long flights between continents.

Ilya had spent a significant portion of his long life on this aircraft, traveling between kingdoms, attending summits, negotiating treaties. He could navigate the cabin blindfolded, knew every seat and surface, could find the weapons cache hidden beneath the bar if needed.

He'd never boarded it feeling quite this cold.

The usual staff moved efficiently through the cabin, preparing for departure, supernatural beings who had worked for King Aurelion for years, who knew better than to make eye contact or ask questions when the Royal family was in a mood. They were well-compensated, carefully vetted, and smart enough to recognize danger when they saw it.

Right now, they were practically invisible, melting into the background as they performed their duties.

Other vehicles were arriving with advisors, other Royal guards, and the essential personnel who traveled with the King. Through the window, Ilya could see the careful choreography of security, the way his father's retinue moved with practiced precision. Vampires in expensive suits who could move faster than human eyes could follow. Werewolves as bodyguards who could tear a man apart with their bare hands. Fae courtiers whose beauty masked ancient and terrible power.

They were loading onto the other sections of the plane, filing into the conference room and the secondary cabin, settling in for the flight home.

Home to the Kingdom of Rozanov. To safety and certainty and the comfortable weight of tradition.

Except nothing felt safe or certain anymore.

"Ilya." Aurelion stood near the entrance to his private office at the rear of the plane. "Join me, please."

It wasn't a request.

Ilya followed his father into the office, the door closing softly behind them with a final, decisive click. The space was smaller than the main cabin but no less elegant, a desk of dark wood polished to a mirror shine, two chairs upholstered in burgundy leather, walls lined with books that Aurelion actually read during long flights.

The books were an eclectic mix: ancient texts in languages that had been dead for a millennium, modern philosophy, military strategy, new technology, and poetry. His father read voraciously, constantly, as though trying to consume all the knowledge the world had to offer.

It was one of the things Ilya loved most about him. And one of the things that made Aurelion the most dangerous.

His father settled into one of the chairs and gestured for Ilya to take the other. Ilya remained standing for a moment, his mind still churning with rage and strategy and the desperate need to *do something*.

Then he sat, because refusing would be childish. And whatever else he was, Ilya was not a child.

"You're still angry," Aurelion observed. It wasn't a question.

"Of course I'm still angry." Ilya remained perfectly still, his hands folded in his lap, his expression neutral. "Father, he called you a parasite. A blood-sucking leech. He implied we're nothing but monsters playing dress-up, and that the only thing preventing us from enslaving humanity is their weapons and numbers. That's not diplomacy. That's not a negotiating position. That's —"

"Accurate, in some respects."

Ilya's mouth snapped shut. He stared at his father, uncertain whether he'd heard correctly.

Aurelion smiled slightly, that infuriating expression of ancient wisdom that made Ilya want to throw something.

"Oh, not the parasite and blood-sucking leech bits. That was unnecessarily crude. But the rest?" He tilted his head, considering. "We *are* predators, Ilya. We do feed on human blood.

For centuries, we *did* treat humanity as livestock, as a resource to be managed and controlled. The Great Truce, the donation system, the careful diplomacy, these are relatively recent innovations. In the scope of our history, they're barely a blip."

"That doesn't make what Voss said acceptable," Ilya said tightly, each word precise and controlled.

"No," Aurelion agreed. "It was foolish, inflammatory, and dangerous. But it was also the truth as he sees it. And he was drunk." The King's amber eyes held steady on his son, calm and measuring. "I've lived a very long time, Ilya. I've been insulted by emperors and popes, by warlords and revolutionaries. I've been called every variation of monster in a hundred languages. Demon. Devil. Abomination. Cursed. Unholy." He waved his hand dismissively. "If I let every drunken fool with a platform goad me into war —"

"This isn't just some drunken fool. This is a world leader. His words will have consequences."

"Yes," Aurelion said quietly. "They will. Which is precisely why we must be careful about our response." He leaned back in his chair, studying Ilya with those ancient, knowing eyes. "The Great Truce has held for nearly a century, Ilya. Do you know why?"

"Because both sides fear what war would bring."

"Exactly. Mutually assured destruction." Aurelion's voice was soft but serious, weighted with the gravity of someone who had lived through countless wars and knew precisely what they cost. "If we go to war with humanity now, truly go to war, not skirmishes or border disputes, but a full conflict, we will win battles. We are stronger, faster, harder to kill. Our power is formidable. We have warriors who have been perfecting their craft for centuries."

He stood, moving to look out the small window at the tarmac below, at the human city spreading out beyond the airport in a sprawl of lights and life.

"But they outnumber us a thousand to one, Ilya. They have weapons that can level cities, that can poison the air and water, that can make the earth itself uninhabitable for thousands of years. And they are *creative* in their brutality when threatened. They are inventive. Determined. They don't have our strength or our power, but they have something more dangerous: a strong will to live."

He turned back to face his son, and Ilya saw something in his father's face that he rarely saw, genuine concern.

"We would destroy each other, Ilya. Supernatural and human alike. We would tear this world apart, and at the end of it, there would be nothing left worth ruling. Just the bitter knowledge that we chose violence over wisdom."

The words settled heavily in the quiet office. Ilya felt his anger shifting, cooling into something more controlled but no less intense. It was like watching lava solidify into obsidian, still dangerous, but harder, sharper, more focused.

"Then what do we do?" He asked finally, his voice quiet. "We can't let this stand without response. But if war is off the table..."

"What would you do?" Aurelion turned to face him fully, and Ilya recognized the shift in his father's demeanor. This wasn't just conversation anymore. This was a lesson. A test. "If you were King. What options are available that don't lead to war?"

It was a familiar pattern. His father had been giving him these since Ilya was young, presenting problems, asking him to find solutions. Training him to think like a ruler rather than a soldier, to see the chess board rather than just the next move.

Ilya forced himself to think. To push past the rage and the desire for immediate, violent satisfaction, and consider the problem strategically.

"The Great Truce was built on territorial agreements and resource sharing," he said slowly, working through it aloud. "Voss's entire speech was about humans deserving more. About supernatural beings hoarding wealth and land." He met his father's gaze. "A political union. Between humans and vampires. A formal alliance that demonstrates cooperation rather than competition."

"A reasonable first step," Aurelion acknowledged, nodding slightly. "What else?"

"Economic integration. Joint infrastructure projects. Shared governance councils." Ilya was thinking faster now, his strategic mind engaging despite his lingering fury. The rage was still there, but he was channeling it now, using it as fuel for analysis rather than letting it consume him. "Public initiatives that show humans and supernaturals working together for mutual benefit. Media campaigns to counter Voss's narrative. Educational programs that —"

"All good ideas," his father said. "All things that will take time. Years, perhaps decades." He smiled slightly, and there was something knowing in that expression, something that made Ilya's instincts prickle. "The humans will demand lengthy political diplomacy. Committees and negotiations and careful bureaucratic processes. They'll want studies and reports and endless debates. And they will find it frustratingly ineffective."

"Because real change requires more than bureaucracy," Ilya said, understanding dawning like cold light through ice. "It requires commitment. Trust."

"It requires blood."

The word hung in the air between them, heavy with implication.

Aurelion returned to his chair, settling into it with the grace of someone who had held power for many millennia, who had watched civilizations rise and fall and learned to play games that lasted centuries. "There is an old tradition, Ilya. Older even than the Great Truce. When two kingdoms wished to forge an unbreakable alliance, they would bind themselves through blood. A union that was both political and personal."

"A Tribute Consort," Ilya said, the words tasting strange in his mouth. The practice was ancient, rarely invoked in modern times. A political marriage sealed with blood and magic,

binding two families, two species, together in ways that went beyond mere treaty. "You want a political marriage."

"Not just any marriage. Not just any bloodline." His father's amber eyes gleamed with something Ilya couldn't quite read, satisfaction, perhaps, or anticipation. "I will let the humans and vampires suffer through their long political diplomacy so that they can give me a formal apology. I suspect that the humans will get rid of Voss themselves. We will let them try every other option, every committee and council and carefully worded treaty. Let them exhaust themselves with bureaucracy and posturing and the illusion of progress. And when they finally realize that only a true union of blood will provide the solution they need..."

He paused, and his smile was the smile of someone who had been playing chess for two thousand years. The smile of someone who had already finished the game while everyone else was still studying the board.

"I will ask for a Resonant Heart."

Sanguis Resonans. The Resonant Heart bloodline. A genetic quirk so rare that most vampires went their entire existence without tasting one. Humans whose blood sang to vampire senses, whose life force resonated with supernatural magic in ways that created bonds deeper and more powerful than any normal feeding relationship.

A Resonant Heart's blood didn't just sustain a vampire. It *enhanced* them. Strengthened their magic, sharpened their senses, created a connection that went beyond the physical into something almost mystical. Some said it was the closest thing to true symbiosis that existed between their species.

"You would take a human Consort," Ilya said, his voice flat, carefully neutral. "A Tribute Consort with Resonant Heart blood."

"Not just any Consort." Aurelion's smile widened, taking on an edge of satisfaction that Ilya recognized from every successful negotiation his father had ever conducted. "I would ask for the best they have to offer. A bloodline so pure, so powerful, that even the most skeptical human would have to acknowledge the value of the gift. A Consort who would stand as living proof that humans and vampires can coexist not just peacefully, but symbiotically."

Despite himself, despite his lingering anger, Ilya felt a smile tugging at his own mouth. The fury that had been burning in his chest cooled into something sharper, more controlled. Admiration, perhaps. Or recognition.

This was why his father was King. This was why Aurelion had ruled for so long while other vampire lords rose and fell like mayflies.

He didn't just play the game. He *rewrote the rules*.

Voss thought he'd insulted them. Thought he'd damaged their reputation, weakened their position. But Aurelion was already three moves ahead, turning the insult into opportunity, transforming a potential war into a chance for something far more valuable than violence.

A true alliance. A bridge between species. A symbol that could reshape the world.

"I salute you, Your Majesty," Ilya said, but there was affection in his voice now, warmth bleeding through the ice. "I can understand the...desire...for a Resonant Heart Tribute Consort. But why would you allow a human to have the power that comes with being Consort to a King?"

The question was rhetorical, he knew the answer. A Consort didn't just warm a King's bed. They had political power, social influence, the ability to shape policy and sway opinion. They attended councils, advised on matters of State, and served as a bridge between factions that might otherwise never communicate.

It was brilliant. Manipulative and calculating and absolutely brilliant.

His father gazed at him for a long moment, something unreadable in his amber eyes. Something that made Ilya's instincts prickle with warning, though he couldn't quite say why.

Ilya made a disgruntled noise. "I know that look. That look means you intend to be a busybody meddler in other people's affairs."

"I don't deny it." Aurelion's smile was soft now, touched with something that looked almost like nostalgia. "I've lived too long, Ilya. I've tasted every sin and every pleasure this world has to offer. I've conquered kingdoms and built empires. I've created art that has moved millions and destroyed enemies that threatened entire civilizations. I've had lovers by the hundred thousands, allies by the millions. I've experienced more in my existence than most beings could imagine in their wildest dreams."

He paused, and something in his expression shifted, becoming distant, almost melancholy.

"After such an existence, do you know what's the *only* thing that still tastes different? The only experience that remains unique no matter how many times you encounter it?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, though whether that was real or just his imagination, he couldn't say.

"Love," Aurelion said simply. "Real love. Not possession or obsession or the shallow infatuation of the young. But the kind of bond that changes you. That makes you better than you were. That gives your existence meaning beyond mere survival." He tilted his head, still smiling, and his eyes held a warmth that Ilya rarely saw directed at him. "That's what I want for you, Ilya."

The words took a moment to register. When they did, Ilya felt his entire body go still, the kind of stillness that had nothing to do with vampire control and everything to do with shock so complete that even his ancient instincts forgot how to function.

"What are you saying?"

"The Tribute Consort," his father said gently, as though he were discussing the weather or tomorrow's schedule rather than upending Ilya's entire existence. "The Resonant Heart. The

human who will bridge our worlds and heal the rift that Voss created." He paused, his smile widening. "They're not for me, my son. They're for you."

For several long seconds, Ilya could do nothing but stare.

His father wasn't joking. This wasn't some elaborate test or philosophical discussion. Aurelion was sitting there, calm and serene, proposing that Ilya, Crown Prince of Rozanov, heir to the Vampire Kingdom, a warrior who had spent centuries perfecting the art of solitude, should take a human Consort.

A Resonant Heart human Consort.

Bonded by blood. Tied together by magic. A political symbol and personal companion for potentially centuries to come.

"You," Ilya said slowly, his voice very quiet and very controlled. "Have lost your mind."

"I assure you, I'm quite sane."

"Fuck."

The profanity felt good. Felt real in a way that nothing else had since they'd walked out of that chamber. Ilya stood, the chair scraping back with enough force that it would have toppled if it weren't bolted to the floor. He paced the small office like a caged predator, all pretense of icy calm shattered.

"Absolutely not. No. That's, no."

"Ilya –"

"I'm a soldier, Father. I'm not –" He waved his hand, gesturing at nothing and everything, at the absurdity of the suggestion. "I'm not *made* for that. For politics and symbolism and playing house with some human whose blood happens to taste good –"

"You need to better understand humans in order to rule over them," Aurelion said calmly, as though Ilya wasn't currently having what might generously be called a complete breakdown. "When I'm gone –"

"You're not going anywhere –"

"One day I will walk into the sun and when I'm gone," his father repeated, gentle but firm, inexorable as a glacier. "You will be King. And you will rule over both supernatural and human domains. You will need to understand them, Ilya. Not as subjects or as food or as strategic resources, but as *living beings*. With all their complexity and contradiction and potential."

He stood, crossing to where Ilya had frozen mid-pace, and his hand settled on Ilya's shoulder with the weight of two thousand years of wisdom.

"A Resonant Heart bond is not slavery, despite whatever is going through your mind. It's a partnership. A connection that goes both ways." Aurelion's voice was soft, almost gentle. "You won't just be taking from them, Ilya. They'll be taking from you, too. Your strength, your protection, your loyalty. Your heart, if you let them."

"I don't have a heart," Ilya said, and hated how hollow the words sounded. How uncertain.

"Then perhaps," his father said softly. "It's time you found one."

Ilya pulled away, his mind spinning. This was insane. Impossible. He was six hundred years old. He'd spent *centuries* learning to be alone, to rely on no one, to need nothing beyond blood and sex, duty and the cold satisfaction of strategy well-executed.

The Ice Prince. That's what they called him. Cold and perfect and untouchable, like winter itself given form.

The idea of binding himself to a human, of letting someone that fragile, that temporary, that *mortal* into his life in such a fundamental way –

It terrified him in a way that six hundred years of war and violence and political intrigue never had.

"No," he said again, but even to his own ears, the word sounded less certain. "That's not, I can't..."

"Think about it," Aurelion said, and Ilya recognized that tone. It was the tone his father used when he'd already won the argument and was simply giving his opponent time to realize it. "We have time. The humans will need months of failed diplomacy before they're desperate enough to consider this option. You have time to prepare yourself."

"I don't need time to prepare myself!" Ilya snapped, grasping for his anger like a lifeline, wrapping it around him like armor. "I need you to admit this is a terrible idea and pick literally *anyone* else for this insane plan."

His father just smiled. That knowing, ancient, insufferably serene smile that meant he'd already won the argument and was just waiting for Ilya to realize it.

"Fuck!" Ilya said again, with feeling.

Aurelion's smile widened. "Such eloquence, my son. Truly, you'll make a magnificent King."

Despite everything, the rage and confusion and the dawning horror of what his father was proposing, Ilya felt a laugh catch in his chest. He crushed it down ruthlessly.

"This conversation is over," he said, scowling.

"No," his father, firmly. "But it's over for now." He moved toward the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. "We'll let the humans try their political solutions first. Let them exhaust every *other* option. And in the meantime, you can think about what kind of future you want, Ilya. Not just for yourself, but for all the kingdoms you'll inherit."

He left, closing the door softly behind him.

Ilya stood alone in the office, his hands clenched into fists, his mind a chaotic whirl of anger and disbelief and something that felt disturbingly like inevitability.

His father was a meddling, manipulative, impossibly calculating bastard.

And Ilya had the sinking suspicion that, as usual, Aurelion was absolutely right.

"Fuck," he said one more time, to the empty room.

Outside the window, the sun was setting over the airport, painting the sky in shades of amber and gold, the color of his father's eyes, the color of ancient power, the color of a future Ilya wasn't sure he was ready to face.

But ready or not, it was coming.

And somewhere in the human world, a person existed whose blood would sing to his vampire senses. Whose heart would resonate with his magic. Whose life would become intertwined with his in ways that terrified him more than any battlefield ever had.

Someone who would see beneath the ice. Who would demand more from him than cold calculation and strategic brilliance. Who would ask for his heart when he wasn't sure he had one to give.

Fuck.

Ilya pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window, letting the last light of sunset wash over his face. In six hundred years, he'd never felt quite this lost. Quite this uncertain.

He was the Ice Prince. Cold and untouchable and perfectly controlled.

But somewhere out there, someone was waiting who could make him feel *warm*.

And that, more than any war or insult or political catastrophe, was the most terrifying thing he could imagine.

Chapter 4: The Weight of His Crown

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Crown Prince Ilya's inner world and the workings of his normal day. I'm so glad to have finally gotten through the worldbuilding and set up, so that chapter 5 will finally be about Shane and Ilya meeting. Yay! Remember, I don't know when new chapters will be updated and posted, but I definitely am motivated to write! Thanks for reading! Thanks for all of your wonderful kudos and comments!

The afternoon light filtered through the tall windows of Ilya's private study, catching dust motes in shafts of pale gold. The room was a study in contrasts, ancient and modern existing in careful balance. Dark wood paneling carved with traditional Slavic motifs covered the walls, the intricate patterns depicting wolves, ravens, and the phases of the moon. A massive desk of black walnut dominated the space, its surface inlaid with silver in designs that predated the Commonwealth by centuries. Yet atop it sat three sleek monitors, their screens glowing with reports and surveillance feeds.

Ilya caught his reflection in the window glass, a habit born of vanity he'd never quite shed in six centuries. The face that looked back at him was frozen at twenty-seven summers, his Turning captured at what others called the peak of masculine beauty, though he'd long since stopped thinking of himself in those terms.

His light brown hair fell in unruly curls that he'd given up trying to tame ages ago, the kind of artful disorder that looked deliberate but was simply his hair's natural rebellion. Sharp blue eyes gazed back at him, the color of winter skies, cold and assessing, eyes that had watched the world transform beyond recognition. A small mole marked his left cheek, a detail that somehow made the rest of his features more striking rather than less. He tilted his head and examined the sharp cut of his jawline, the full lips with their pronounced Cupid's bow that gave him a faintly sensual air even in repose.

It was a face built for courts and seduction, for commanding attention and inspiring either devotion or fear. Sometimes both. He'd been beautiful as a mortal, and death had perfected what nature had begun, preserving him in this form for eternity while the world aged around him.

Six hundred years old, and still he found himself caught off guard by human stupidity.

He hadn't wanted any of this.

His father had played the situation like the master politician he was, millennia of accumulated wisdom wielded with surgical precision. When Chancellor Voss had delivered that calculated insult six months ago, Aurelion had said nothing publicly. Not a word of protest, not a flicker

of visible anger. He'd simply gone silent, retreating to the palace while the world buzzed with speculation and dread. Ilya knew that Aurelion's silence had been more terrifying than any declaration of war. Both human and supernatural delegates had scrambled desperately to contain the damage, working themselves to exhaustion crafting an appeasement grand enough to satisfy an ancient vampire king whose displeasure could destabilize the entire Truce.

Ilya had watched the negotiations unfold with a mixture of admiration and frustration. His father had let them sweat for months, let the rumors of his fury grow until they took on legendary proportions, let the fear build until the delegates were willing to offer anything – *anything* – to restore the peace. And then Aurelion had made his demand: a human Consort bearing the *Sanguis Resonans* bloodline. A living apology that demonstrated human commitment to the alliance, wrapped in ancient tradition and binding ceremony.

Six months. That was all it had taken for his father to extract this concession. Ilya shouldn't have been surprised, Aurelion had been manipulating people and kingdoms since before the rise of the Egyptian dynasties, but the speed of it still caught him off guard. The humans had been so eager to mollify his father's anger that they'd agreed to resurrect a custom that hadn't been practiced in over two hundred years.

And now Ilya was left holding the consequences.

He walked to his desk and opened the file again, studying the photographs of Shane Hollander with cold assessment. He was only twenty-six years old. A boy, really, though Ilya had to remind himself that they were all children compared to him. Six hundred years made everyone seem young, their mortal lives flickering past like mayflies in summer. But even accounting for that perspective, Shane Hollander seemed particularly...unformed. Soft around the edges in a way that suggested he'd never faced real hardship, never had to develop the armor that survival in dangerous circles required.

The photographs showed a very pretty face, Ilya could acknowledge that objectively. Dark hair, expressive brown eyes, and a gentle quality to his features that probably served him well with schoolchildren but would make him easy prey in Rozanov Palace. The background reports painted a picture of a thoroughly ordinary life: upper middle-class upbringing, a close knit family, a decent student who chose teaching over more lucrative careers. Gentle, the reports said. Kind. Patient with children. Respected by his peers. Soft-hearted.

Soft. That word kept appearing in the assessments, and each time Ilya read it, his jaw tightened with fresh irritation.

The only exceptional thing about Shane Hollander was his bloodline, that rare genetic quirk that made him compatible with vampire physiology in ways most humans weren't. The *Sanguis Resonans* was so uncommon that the Commonwealth maintained a classified registry of confirmed carriers, updated annually with genetic testing data. Hollander probably hadn't even known he carried it until the Commonwealth came calling with their offer, or was it a demand? The file wasn't clear on how willing Shane's participation had been, though it hardly mattered now.

Ilya closed the file with more force than necessary. This was what his father's political maneuvering had bought them: a soft, unremarkable schoolteacher with no experience of court life, no understanding of the deadly currents that flowed through Rozanov Palace, no armor against the schemes and manipulations that were as natural as breathing to the aristocrats who lived here. Shane Hollander would be like a lamb thrown into a pit of starving wolves, and Ilya would be *expected* to keep him alive.

The thought filled him with caustic disdain. How much of his time would *that* consume? How much energy would he have to devote to protecting this soft human from the predators who would see him as either a useful pawn or an entertaining victim? Then, there were the extremists on both sides, humans who saw Hollander as a blood traitor to his species and supernatural beings who viewed the entire arrangement as a capitulation to human weakness.

Ilya would have to be constantly vigilant, constantly intervening, *constantly* managing a situation he never wanted in the first place. All while maintaining the fiction that this was a partnership, an alliance, a symbol of the Great Truce's strength rather than what it actually was: a political bandage over a wound his father had deliberately kept open until he could extract maximum advantage from its healing.

And the worst part, the truly galling part, was that Ilya *understood* exactly why Aurelion had done it. The gesture was brilliant in its symbolism. The vampire Crown Prince accepting a human Consort demonstrated trust, intimacy, and vulnerability. It would shore up support for the Truce among moderate factions on both sides. It would give the extremists something concrete to focus their fury on, making them easier to identify and contain. It would bind the Commonwealth more tightly to the Vampire Kingdom through the very personal nature of the arrangement.

Aurelion had sacrificed Ilya's autonomy on the altar of political stability, and he'd done it with such elegant precision that no one could even protest the move without seeming to oppose the Truce itself.

Ilya moved back to the window, looking out over the palace grounds bathed in the light. In his cottage, Shane Hollander was preparing for a role he couldn't possibly understand. Learning protocols he'd never be able to fully master. Trying to transform himself from a common human into someone who could survive in one of the most dangerous courts in the supernatural world.

It was *impossible*. The boy would break, probably within weeks. He'd crack under the pressure, or make some fatal mistake, or simply give up and beg to be released from the arrangement. And Ilya would have to manage the fallout, would have to find a way to end this spectacle without completely undermining the political gains his father had achieved.

Three days until the First Presentation. Three days until he had to stand before the entire world and formally accept this human as his Consort, binding himself to Hollander's protection and care, yoking his six-hundred-year legacy to a twenty-six-year-old who'd probably never even been in a real fight.

He'd survived wars, plagues, and the rise and fall of empires. He had helped Aurelion negotiate the Great Truce itself, spending decades in painstaking diplomacy to build

something that might actually last.

And now, he was *already* having to deal with the safety and security of his Tribute Consort in the human world. The intelligence report detailed exactly how Shane Hollander's identity had been leaked to the press hours before the official announcement. One mid-level bureaucrat in the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office, trying to curry favor with a journalist friend. The ripple effects had been immediate and damaging.

A soft chime indicated an incoming video call. Ilya moved to his desk, settling into the high-backed chair with its worn leather and embedded silver threads.

The center monitor flickered to life, revealing Director Sara Castellane sitting at a long table in a large conference room. With her were three other Commonwealth officials. They stood from their chairs and bowed to him.

"Director Castellane," Ilya said, his accent still carrying traces of his Slavic origins in the Grand Principality of Moscow despite centuries of his vampiric existence.

"Your Highness." Castellane's expression was tight with controlled fear. "We've identified the source of the leak. Jonathan Merrick, forty-two, twelve years with the Diplomatic Office. He's been suspended without pay pending formal charges."

"Suspended." Ilya let the word hang in the air like a blade. "The damage is done, Director. Every extremist group with access to the internet knows precisely who the Tribute Consort is before the transition period."

One of the other officials, a man with thinning hair, cleared his throat. "We're coordinating with local authorities in the Commonwealth to provide protection for Mr. Hollander's parents _"

"My people are already in place," Ilya interrupted smoothly with a dismissive wave of his hand. "As of four hours ago. A tactical werewolf team, disguised as private security. The local authorities need only maintain their regular patrols. You understand that I cannot trust you to do your job."

Castellane frowned. "We understand that the speed of the transition was not ideal, Your Highness."

"Not ideal?" Ilya leaned forward slightly, his eyes flaring with the light from the monitors. "This is not merely about one human's safety, Director. This is about the Great Truce itself. There are factions on both sides who would love nothing more than to see this arrangement fail spectacularly and publicly."

"We understand the stakes, Your Highness."

"Do you?" Ilya's voice remained cold. "Because from where I sit, your office's security protocols failed catastrophically. Shane Hollander should have been the best-kept secret in the Commonwealth until the moment *we* chose to reveal him with the requisite protections and protocols in place."

The silence that followed was heavy. Finally, Castellane nodded. "You're right. We failed. I take full responsibility. Merrick will face charges under the Commonwealth Security Act. And we're implementing new protocols immediately."

"See that you do." Ilya's tone suggested that there would be consequences if they failed him again. "We will speak again after the First Presentation."

The screen went dark when he disconnected the call, not giving the humans a chance to bow. Ilya sat back in his chair, fingers steepled beneath his chin. The real question wasn't how the leak had happened, but rather *who* would try to exploit it first.

A knock at the door. Three precise raps.

"Enter."

His Seneschal glided into the room with the peculiar stillness that marked the eldest vampires. Vasily had served in his role in the Kingdom of Rozanov for three centuries, his loyalty absolute and his discretion impeccable. He carried a leather portfolio embossed with the Royal seal.

"The security reports, Your Highness."

Ilya gestured, and Vasily approached, laying the portfolio on the desk before stepping back to a respectful distance. Ilya stared at the portfolio and continued to sit back in his chair, examining Vasily. The Seneschal was perhaps the most important position in Ilya's household, and Vasily had filled it with quiet excellence. Where Ilya was the public face of the Kingdom of Rozanov, attending court functions, conducting diplomacy, managing the endless theater of supernatural politics, Vasily was the silent machinery that kept everything running.

He managed the palace staff, coordinated security protocols, filtered the constant stream of petitioners and supplicants, and maintained the delicate balance between tradition and necessity that allowed an immortal institution to function in the modern world. Vasily knew every secret corridor in Rozanov Palace, every whispered rumor in the servant's quarters, every shift in allegiance among the lesser nobles. He was Ilya's eyes and ears in places where he could not reach, and more than that, he was one of the few people Ilya trusted absolutely. In a world of shifting loyalties and calculated betrayals, Vasily's devotion to him was as immutable as stone, and Ilya valued that loyalty more than he could ever adequately express.

"Your Highness?" Vasily said, raising his eyebrow.

Ilya opened the portfolio and began reading. The first report detailed increased chatter among the Purity Coalition, a human extremist group that viewed any compromise with supernatural beings as species betrayal. They'd been planning protests outside Rozanov Palace for weeks. The leak of a human Tribute Consort had energized them.

The second report was more concerning. The Ashen Cross, a vampire faction that rejected the Great Truce entirely and advocated for segregation of the species and the return to the darkest era, had been unusually quiet. That quietness worried Ilya more than any amount of noise.

"Double the perimeter patrols around the cottage," Ilya said, without looking up. "And have our people inside the Coalition report any shift in their planning. If they move from protests to action –"

"They'll be contained," Vasily assured him. "I have already sent the orders to our intelligence agents to infiltrate and monitor the humans."

"Not just contained. Intercepted." Ilya closed the portfolio. "I want to know about threats before they materialize. I want them prevented and the instigators punished. Quietly."

"Of course, Your Highness."

After Vasily departed, Ilya allowed himself a moment of stillness. In the quiet of his study, surrounded by the symbols of his heritage and the technology of the modern age, he felt the weight of six centuries pressing down.

And now the success or failure of that Truce might rest on the shoulders of a twenty-four year old human who'd been teaching children just a week ago.

The door opened again, no knock this time. Only four people in Rozanov Palace could enter his study unannounced. Evangeline was one of them.

"They're here and we're ready," she said, simply.

Ilya checked his watch. Precisely on time. He rose, straightening his jacket, a midnight navy cut in the modern style but with subtle embroidery at the cuffs that echoed the carvings on the walls.

The meeting took place in a smaller conference room off the main study, intimate enough for frank conversation but formal enough to maintain proper hierarchy. Captain Marlow arrived first, his military bearing evident in every movement. Evangeline followed, then Mira and Sophie together, the two attendants moving in perfect synchronization.

They arranged themselves around the table, old wood again, but simpler than the desk in the study. Ilya remained standing by the window, a deliberate choice. He'd learned long ago that the person who controlled the space controlled the conversation.

"Captain Marlow, you may begin with your assessment."

The captain was a vampire of perhaps two hundred years, young by vampire standards but seasoned in both military operations and diplomatic protection. His record was exemplary and had a reputation of empathy to the humans, which was why Ilya had chosen him for this particular assignment.

"Consort Hollander is adapting well to the security protocols, Your Highness. He asks intelligent questions, follows instructions, and hasn't attempted to evade his protection detail. He stays close to the cottage and spends his time speaking to his parents and studying the texts provided to him. He is friendly, polite, but reserved."

"He has made no request to visit the towns or to visit the palace?"

"Not at this time, Your Highness."

Ilya nodded slowly. "Mira, Sophie. Tell me about his daily routine."

The two attendants exchanged a glance. They were both human, both trained in the exacting protocols of Rozanov Palace, both utterly professional. Mira spoke first, her voice carefully modulated.

"Consort Hollander rises at seven, Your Highness. He maintains his physical fitness routines, hiking the trails around the cottage and basic exercises. He insists on helping with household chores, no matter how many times we've asked him to let us do the work."

He turned his attention to Evangeline and raised his eyebrow. She stared at him and raised her eyebrow in return.

"He asks for very little," Sophie added with a small smile. "Basic meals and books from the library. He enjoys cooking and I've taught him how to bake bread from scratch."

All very proper, very formal. Exactly as they'd been trained to report on their guests. Ilya turned his attention to Evangeline, who'd been watching him with those shrewd blue eyes.

"And your assessment, Lady Thorne?"

Evangeline sat properly in her chair, a small smile playing at her lips. "Consort Hollander is utterly common. He struggles with the more arcane aspects of court protocol, the various forms of address, the hierarchy of bows, the unwritten rules that govern everything we do here." She said, her voice sharp with criticism. She rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sound. "But he's trying. He takes notes. He asks questions when he doesn't understand something, which shows more intelligence than aristocrats twice his age."

"His attitude?"

"Overwhelmed, but not broken. Uncertain, but not paralyzed. He has a good mind and a stronger will than I expected." Evangeline tilted her head. "He also has a thick skin which will serve him well. This court will find him a challenge."

Coming from Evangeline, that was high praise indeed. Ilya filed the information away, adding it to the growing portrait of Shane Hollander in his mind.

"The First Presentation is in three days," Ilya said, looking at her. "Will he be ready?"

"Ready enough." Evangeline's smile widened slightly. "Though, you know, Your Highness, you could simply go and meet him yourself. Form your own impression rather than relying on our reports."

The room went very still. Captain Marlow's expression didn't change, but Mira and Sophie both looked faintly scandalized at Evangeline's presumption.

Ilya allowed the silence to stretch for a moment before responding. "The First Presentation exists for a reason, My Lady. Tradition has weight in our world. To disregard it would send

the wrong message."

"Tradition," Evangeline repeated, her tone suggesting she found the word amusing. "Of course, Your Highness."

She held his gaze for a heartbeat longer than strictly proper, then inclined her head in acknowledgment of his authority. It was a dance they'd performed many times over the years, Evangeline pushing boundaries, Ilya maintaining them, both understanding that the friction between them kept the court sharper.

Ilya had known Evangeline Thorne for nearly a century, and she still managed to surprise him on occasion, a rare quality in someone he'd watched navigate the treacherous waters of court politics for decades. She looked seventeen, perpetually caught in that liminal space between girlhood and womanhood, with pale skin that seemed to glow against her thick blonde hair and blue eyes that could shift from innocent to predatory in a heartbeat.

It was a deceptive package, deliberately so. More than one fool had mistaken that youthful face for weakness, had thought her easy to manipulate or dismiss, and most of those fools were now dust. Evangeline had a propensity for violence that had been truly breathtaking in her early decades: swift, brutal, and entirely unapologetic. She'd killed a minor lord for calling her "child" in a dismissive tone, had dismembered a visiting dignitary who'd tried to take liberties on her person, and had once torn out the throat of a vampire twice her age who'd suggested she was too pretty to speak and that her mouth was better used in other ways.

The bloodthirstiness had mellowed somewhat over the years, tempered by time and perhaps a growing appreciation for subtler forms of warfare, but it hadn't disappeared. It had simply gone underground, become more refined, more surgical in its application. Ilya valued that about her, the intelligence behind those deceptively innocent eyes, the sharp wit that could flay someone alive without drawing a single drop of blood, and the absolute refusal to let anyone take advantage of her.

She was fearsome in the truest sense, and he'd learned to appreciate her straightforward manner in a court where everyone else spoke in layers of subtext and implication. When Evangeline told him something, he could trust it was exactly what she meant, no more and no less. It made her invaluable, and if he was honest with himself, he genuinely enjoyed her company, one of the few people in his court he could say that about without reservation.

"Unless there's anything else," Ilya said, nodding his head to them. "You're all dismissed. Thank you for your reports."

They filed out one by one but Evangeline lingered at the door, glancing back.

"He's not what I expected," she said, quietly. "But then again, none of us are quite what we expect, when tested."

Then she was gone, leaving Ilya alone with his thoughts and the lengthening shadows of afternoon.

The evening transformed Rozanov Palace from the seat of the government to the stage of social theater. As the sun set behind the mountains, lights bloomed throughout the vast complex, warm and golden in the supernatural quarters, cooler and more subtle in the vampire wings. The Great Hall, unused during daylight hours, came alive with movement and conversation.

Ilya made his way through the corridors with the easy confidence of someone who'd walked these halls all of his immortal existence. The palace had been his primary residence since his Turning, a deliberate choice to root himself in the original home that Aurelion built for his human mother. Ilya had expanded the palace over the long years, enshrining it as his seat of power. Other vampires and supernatural nobles maintained multiple residences, moving with the seasons and their whims.

The Grand Gallery stretched before him, its walls lined with portraits of past leaders and historic moments. Here, a painting of the First Conclave of supernaturals. There, a large oil painting of the first signing of the Great Truce.

Two human representatives to his court stood before one of the paintings, deep in discussion. They turned as Ilya approached, their conversation cutting off mid-sentence.

"Your Highness," the woman said, executing a neat bow. He remembered her as Ambassador Tsang, and interacted with her during the mer ocean and fishing negotiations with the Pacific Commonwealth Territory.

"Ambassador. Minister Okafor." Ilya nodded to them both. "Productive discussions, I hope?"

"Always, Your Highness," Minister Okafor replied with diplomatic smoothness. "We were just admiring the craftsmanship. It's remarkable, having so much history preserved in one place."

"History is what we learn from or fail to learn from, as the case may be."

He exchanged pleasantries for the required amount of time, then moved on. This was the rhythm of palace life, constant small interactions, each one weighted with meaning, each conversation a potential negotiation or alliance. It was exhausting in a way that physical combat never had been.

In the East Wing, he encountered Lord Petrov holding court among a cluster of younger vampires. Vladimir Petrov was exactly one hundred years old, which made him practically an adolescent by vampire standards, but he'd parlayed his family connections and natural charisma into considerable influence. He was also a shameless social climber.

"Your Highness!" Petrov swept into an elaborate bow, his companions following suit with varying degrees of grace. "We were just discussing the upcoming First Presentation of the Tribute Consort. The whole court is buzzing with anticipation."

"I'm sure they are," Ilya said, dryly.

"Will the Tribute Consort be joining us for the season's festivities after the First Presentation? The Winter Masquerade, the Solstice Hunt?"

The Winter Masquerade. Of course. Ilya kept his expression neutral but he wanted to roll his eyes. Did these beings only think of parties? "Consort Hollander's schedule will depend on his adjustment to court life. We won't rush things."

"Of course, of course. Though I must say, Your Highness, the entire arrangement is quite inspired. A human Tribute Consort! It sends such a powerful message about the Truce."

The obsequiousness was laid on thick enough to choke on. Ilya had little patience for it, but Petrov had his uses; he was well-connected among the younger vampire set and could be a valuable source of information about shifting allegiances.

"Lord Petrov," Ilya said, his tone cooling by several degrees. "If you hear any concerning rumors about Consort Hollander or threats to his safety, I trust you'll report them immediately."

Petrov's smile faltered slightly. "Of course, Your Highness. My loyalty to House Rozanov is absolute."

"I'm pleased to hear it."

He moved on, leaving Petrov to salvage his social performance before his audience. The corridors opened into the Atrium, a soaring space of glass and stone where moonlight filtered down through skylights three stories above. A handful of people gathered in small groups, their conversations creating a gentle hum of sound.

One figure stood alone by the large water fountain in the center, silver and black wings folded against his back, catching the moonlight like captured starlight.

Hayden Pike turned as Ilya approached, a smile spreading across his face. His features had the peculiar ageless quality of the Fae, simultaneously youthful and ancient, beautiful in a way that was almost alien. The silver and black of his wings marked him as Twilight Court, though he'd been exiled from that Realm decades ago for reasons the Fae had never fully explained.

"Ilya," he said, dropping all formal titles. Only Hayden could get away with such familiarity. "I was wondering when you'd emerge from your tower. Brooding, were we?"

"Strategizing," Ilya corrected, but his expression softened slightly. They'd known each other for hundreds of years, had fought together, negotiated together, survived several attempts on both their lives together. If Ilya could be said to have a friend, the Fae was it.

"Is there a difference? Walk with me. I'm tired of being stared at."

It was true that several people were casting surreptitious glances their way. Hayden was beautiful in the way that Fae often were, unsettling, magnetic, and impossible to ignore. His

presence in Rozanov Palace was itself a statement, a Fae lord choosing to align with a vampire court.

They walked through the Atrium and out into one of the private gardens, where manicured paths wound between ancient trees and carefully tended flower beds. Here, at least, they could speak freely.

"So," Hayden said without preamble. "The Tribute Consort..."

"Consort Hollander. His name is Shane," Ilya said, keeping his voice discreet.

"Shane. I've heard that he's managing well."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "And how do you know that, Hayden?"

"Whoa! Put away the fangs!" He said, laughing. "I heard it from Lady Jacki, whose maid heard it from someone in the kitchen, who heard it from the cook who is serving the cottage."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, watching the play of moonlight through the branches overhead. "I need someone to befriend him. Someone outside the official court structure. Someone he might actually trust."

Hayden stopped walking. "You want me to *spy* on him."

"No. I want you to get to know him. There's a difference."

"Is there?" But Hayden was smiling slightly. "You could just meet him yourself, you know. You're going to have to eventually."

"At the First Presentation, yes. But before then –" Ilya shook his head. "He needs time and space to find his footing in the court. If I descend on him now, it becomes about managing *my* expectations rather than discovering his own capabilities."

"That's remarkably thoughtful for a six hundred year old vampire Crown Prince."

"I contain multitudes."

Hayden laughed, the sound bright and genuine. "Fine. I'll make the acquaintance of your Consort Hollander. Though I warn you, if he's as interesting as the rumors suggest, I may actually like him. Then where will your political machinations be?"

"In exactly the right place."

They parted at the garden gate. Hayden headed toward the upper halls of the guest suites, his wings catching the light as he moved. Ilya watched him go, then turned his steps toward his private apartment.

The palace at night was a different creature than during the day. The formal masks slipped slightly. Vampires and other supernatural beings who followed the moonlight moved more

freely, their true natures less constrained by daylight protocols. Humans who served the court retired to their quarters or gathered in common rooms designed for their comfort and safety. The nocturnal rhythm of vampire life asserted itself.

Ilya's private apartment occupied the top floor of the North Tower. Three rooms plus a luxurious modern bathroom, Ilya's one excess. Modern plumbing and unlimited hot water was truly one of the best inventions by humans. The master bedroom held a massive four-post bed, carved with the trees of the Fae Real. He rarely used the bed for sleeping when there were more pleasant ways to utilize it. A sitting area with comfortable chairs and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the palace grounds and the mountains beyond completed his suite.

Two humans waited for him there, as arranged. Thomas and Elise, both in their thirties, both blood donors who'd chosen this work freely and were compensated handsomely for it. They stood as he entered, relaxed but respectful.

"Your Highness," Elise said with a welcoming smile. She wore a dark green dress, her auburn hair loose around her shoulders. Thomas, beside her in casual clothes, nodded his greeting.

Ilya felt the familiar stirring of hunger, not desperate, not overwhelming, but present. He fed regularly, carefully, never taking too much. The relationship between vampire and blood donor was intimate by necessity, and he treated it with the gravity it deserved.

"Thank you for coming," he said, gesturing toward the sitting area. "Please."

They settled onto the couch and Ilya sat down in his favorite armchair, regarding them with curiosity. This was the ritual, first conversation and then feeding. It maintained a sense of humanity on both sides and kept the act from becoming purely transactional.

He was always interested in their topics for conversation. Both were carefully vetted and their blood monitored for any diseases and flaws; and Ilya had selected them for their lack of pretentiousness. They talked for perhaps twenty minutes. Elise told him about her sister's new baby, Abigail. Ilya would have his office send her a special care package. Thomas discussed the book he was reading, a thriller that had vampire characters he found hilariously inaccurate. Ilya listened, asked questions, and laughed at Thomas's descriptions of the plot holes.

Then, naturally, the conversation shifted.

Elise offered her wrist first, extending it with the practiced ease of someone who'd done this many times. Ilya moved to sit on the couch and took her hand gently, bringing her wrist to his mouth. His fangs extended with a familiar ache, and he bit down carefully, precisely. Her blood flowed into him, warm and rich, carrying the taste of her, hints of the wine she'd drunk with dinner, the lingering sweetness of chocolate, her own unique essence beneath it all.

He drank for perhaps thirty seconds, then withdrew, sealing the small wounds with a touch of his tongue. The punctures would heal within hours, leaving no trace.

Thomas offered his neck, tilting his head to expose the pulse point. Ilya moved behind him on the couch, one hand steadying Thomas's shoulder, and bit down with the same careful precision. His blood tasted different, darker somehow, with notes of coffee and earthy and grounding.

The warmth spread through Ilya's body, pushing back the coolness of his flesh that was his natural state as a vampire. Colors seemed brighter, sounds clearer. His senses sharpened, the hunger satisfied for the moment, replaced by a different kind of need.

He lifted his head from Thomas's neck and met Elise's eyes. She smiled, understanding implicitly. Thomas turned towards Ilya, his own expression open and willing.

"It seems you're hungry for something else, Your Highness," she said, cheekily.

"We're here for you if you need more from us," Thomas murmured, his cheeks flushed.

How could Ilya resist? Sex was not a requirement of the blood donation, but he found the two of them alluring, the familiar taste of their blood enjoyable for his particular palate.

They moved to the bedroom together. He undressed them slowly, attended to their pleasure with centuries of experience. Their human bodies and warmth surrounded him, their heartbeat a counterpoint to his own stillness. He drank from them again, moaning at the way that pleasure changed the flavor of their blood, the tone deepening. For a few hours, he could pretend at mortality, at genuine physical connection, at something beyond the weight of crown and responsibility.

Afterward, they slept curled against him, their breathing deep and even. Ilya lay awake between them, staring up at the ceiling of his bed's high canopy, feeling their warmth slowly seeping into his skin.

In three days, he would meet Shane Hollander at the First Presentation. The entire world would be watching, judging every interaction, every word, every gesture. The success of the Tribute Consort arrangement, and by extension, the stability of the Great Truce itself, would hinge on those first moments.

Evangeline's words echoed in his mind. *He's not what I expected.*

Perhaps that was for the best. Expectations, Ilya had learned, were just another form of cage. And Shane Hollander was walking into the most elaborate cage ever constructed, a cage of protocol and politics, tradition and expectation, decorated in blood and ancient promises.

The least Ilya could do was *try* not to make it worse.

Outside, the moon traced its arc across the sky. The palace settled into its deepest quiet, that hour before dawn when even vampires slowed their frenetic pace.

In three days, his fate would be formally intertwined with Shane Hollander. Ilya closed his eyes and tried not to think about all the ways it could go catastrophically wrong.

Chapter 5: The First Presentation

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I'm really happy that so many people are enjoying this story! I know everyone was surprised to get so many chapter updates all at once, but these first five are the ones that I've been working on and finished. You'll definitely have to wait a little bit for the next update, but I promise I'll keep writing! Thanks!

The suit fit like nothing Shane had ever worn before. Lady Thorne had brought it to him that morning, hanging in a garment bag with the reverence usually reserved for religious artifacts. Black wool so fine it felt like water under his fingers, cut and tailored to measurements he didn't remember giving. When he'd put it on, with Mira and Sophie's help, because apparently even getting dressed required protocol, he'd barely recognized himself in the mirror.

"You look proper," Lady Thorne had said, her sharp blue eyes assessing every detail. "Remember everything we've practiced. The bow, the responses, the eye contact. And for heaven's sake, try not to faint."

"I won't faint," Shane had replied, hoping it was true. *Probably.*

Now, standing in the antechamber outside the Great Hall, listening to the murmur of hundreds of voices beyond the massive doors, Shane was less certain. His hands trembled slightly, and he clasped them behind his back to hide it. Captain Marlow stood nearby, his presence somehow both reassuring and terrifying, a reminder that Shane needed armed protection just to walk into a room.

Lady Thorne appeared beside him, elegant in a gown of deep emerald that made her look even more sophisticated than usual.

"It's time," she said, simply. "Remember, you'll walk just a step behind me. After you bond with the Crown Prince, you'll *never* walk behind anyone again except for His Majesty and His Highness. Got it?"

"Yes," he whispered, swallowing down the tightness forming in his throat.

The doors opened.

The Great Hall of Rozanov Palace was vast enough to hold several hundred people comfortably, and from what Shane could see, every available floor space was occupied. Vampires in formal dress lined both sides of the long central aisle, their faces pale and beautiful and utterly inhuman in their perfection. Interspersed among them were other beings, Fae with their large wings folded against their backs, werewolves whose eyes gleamed red

even in human form, the mer with their scales and shimmery translucent robes, and human representatives in their respective Commonwealth's diplomatic regalia. All of them turned to look at him as he entered.

Shane forced himself to breathe. To walk. To follow Lady Thorne down that endless aisle while thousands of eyes tracked his every movement.

The whispers started immediately:

"-- so young --"

"-- ordinary looking human, isn't he --"

"-- can't believe they chose --"

"-- look at his nice ass, though, Prince Ilya is going to ruin it --"

Shane's face burned. He kept his eyes forward, focused on the raised dais at the far end of the hall where the throne sat in a position of unmistakable authority. It was large, ornate with carved wolves and ancient symbols, where King Aurelion sat in a regal pose. The Crown Prince Ilya stood tall and straight, hands clasped behind his back, just one step lower than the King on the wide steps at the front of the room.

He held his gaze to the far distance, just beyond King Aurelion's shoulder.

Shane had seen pictures of both of them in his briefing materials, but photographs hadn't prepared him for the reality. He had even met King Aurelion the day before; he had been too shocked by the impromptu visit to properly look at the oldest vampire in existence.

His Majesty looked perhaps forty in mortal years, his long pale blond hair brushed smoothly down, and amber eyes that seemed to see through flesh and bone to whatever lay beneath. He wore formal robes of deep crimson and black, and atop his head sat a crown of gold worked into intricate patterns.

Shane's eyes caught on that crown, and something warm bloomed in his chest. His lips broke out into a smile, remembering his conversation with the King the day before.

"I prefer to save mine for formal State affairs. My neck appreciates the consideration."

Aurelion's lips twitched, just slightly. His eyes met Shane's, a shared amusement, and for half a second, Shane knew that the King was also remembering.

Shane bit the inside of his cheek hard, forcing down the laugh that wanted to escape. He couldn't laugh. Not here, not now, not in front of hundreds of beings who would interpret it as disrespect or hysteria or proof that he wasn't suited for this role.

But the smile had already started, and he had to wrestle it back into submission, leaving his expression somewhere between solemnly respectful and barely controlled panic.

The murmur in the hall intensified. Shane felt Lady Thorne's sharp and questioning gaze on him, knowing he'd have to explain that little exchange later. She was probably already composing the lecture in her head.

They reached the base of the dais. Lady Thorne sank into a graceful curtsy, how did she make it look so effortless? Shane executed the bow they'd practiced for hours. *Thirty degrees for His Majesty*. Deep enough to show respect, not so deep he looked subservient. Hold for a three-count, rise smoothly, hands at his sides.

He managed it without falling over. Small victories.

"Your Majesty," Lady Thorne said, her voice carrying in the sudden silence. "I present Shane Hollander, chosen Consort to Crown Prince Ilya of House Rozanov, offered as Tribute by the Commonwealth in recognition of the bonds between our peoples."

The formal words hung in the air. Shane kept his breathing steady, his posture straight. He could feel sweat gathering at the small of his back.

King Aurelion leaned forward slightly, studying Shane with those penetrating eyes. When he spoke, his voice was rich and measured, layered with authority.

"Shane Hollander. Do you come before this court of your own free will?"

This was the part he practiced with Lady Thorne. Shane had to be clear and confident. "Yes, Your Majesty. I come freely."

"And do you understand the significance of the role you have accepted? To serve as Consort to the Crown Prince is to bind yourself to House Rozanov, to live among our people, to represent the alliance between human and supernatural?"

"I understand, Your Majesty." Shane's voice came out steadier than he'd expected. "I accept this responsibility and I will do my best to honor it."

A pause. Aurelion's gaze seemed to weigh Shane's soul. Then, finally, a small nod. "We are pleased to welcome you, Consort Shane Hollander. May you find your place among us."

Aurelion gestured toward the throne beside him, and Shane's attention shifted to Crown Prince Ilya for the first time.

Oh.

The photographs *really* hadn't done him justice at all. Where King Aurelion projected ancient authority, Prince Ilya was...Shane's brain stuttered, temporarily offline. The Crown Prince was gorgeous in a way that seemed almost unfair, with pretty messy curls, sharp blue eyes that could cut glass, and features that managed to be both elegant and masculine. He wore black like Shane, but his suit was clearly bespoke, and he wore a crimson sash across his chest that matched the color of the King's robes; and while he exuded an aura of power, there was definitely *something else* that Shane noticed. Like he was keeping himself in check. And a small mole marked his cheek, and his lips –

Shane realized he was staring with his lips parted, and felt his face flush hot. He jerked his gaze away, but not before he caught the whispers rippling through the crowd.

"-- look at him blush --"

"-- at least he appreciates what he's getting --"

"-- give it a week before His Highness gets bored --"

Shane forced himself to focus. This was the important part. He had to bow to the Crown Prince, address him properly, and **not** make a complete fool of himself.

He bowed again. *Twenty degrees*. "Your Highness. I am honored to be presented to you."

Prince Ilya descended the steps of the dais with fluid grace, coming to stand just an arm's length from Shane. Up close, he was even more intimidating, just a touch taller than Shane, with a presence that seemed to command the space around him. His blue eyes were cold and assessing, and his face was completely unreadable.

"Shane Hollander," Ilya said, his voice deep and touched with an Old World accent. "I accept you as my Consort, under the terms agreed upon by the Commonwealth and the Vampire Kingdom. May this union strengthen the bonds between our peoples."

The words were formal, rehearsed, and utterly devoid of warmth. Ilya stared at him with all the emotion of someone examining a piece of furniture, vaguely interested in whether it would prove useful or merely decorative.

Shane swallowed hard and managed to keep his voice level. "Thank you, Your Highness. I will endeavor to fulfill my duties to the best of my ability."

A flicker of something crossed Ilya's face, too quick for Shane to identify. Then the Crown Prince inclined his head slightly, the gesture somehow managing to be both acknowledgment and dismissal. He turned to face King Aurelion, giving a nod of his head.

Aurelion rose from his throne, and everyone bowed or curtsied, including Prince Ilya, Lady Thorne, and Shane. "The presentation is complete. Let the court welcome Shane Hollander, Consort to the Crown Prince."

Applause rippled through the hall, polite and measured. Shane stood frozen, unsure what to do next, until Lady Thorne appeared at his elbow.

"Come on," she murmured quietly to him. "Time for the private audience."

She guided him away from the dais, through a side door that led into a corridor mercifully free of spectators. Shane's legs felt shaky, adrenaline draining away now that the public ordeal was over.

"That went well," Lady Thorne said, though her tone suggested she had notes. "Except for the part where you nearly laughed at the King. We'll discuss that later."

"I didn't –"

"You absolutely did. And he found it amusing, thank the gods, but we'll be working on your poker face." She stopped before an ornate wooden door. "This is the Amber Room. You'll have a brief private conversation with the King and Crown Prince before the reception. Be yourself, but be respectful. Do **not** embarrass me."

"You're not coming in with me?"

She gave him an annoyed look. "Of course not. This is a *family* meeting. Do you remember what you should do?"

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

Lady Thorne opened the door and gestured to him to go inside.

The Amber Room was smaller than he'd expected. The walls were paneled in honey-colored wood inlaid with what looked like actual amber, glowing panels that caught the light from crystal sconces. Comfortable chairs were arranged around a low table where a silver tray held three crystal glasses and a glass decanter filled with dark red liquid. *Blood*. A warming mat underneath kept it gently heated.

Shane's stomach did a complicated flip.

He walked to the center of the room and turned just as King Aurelion and Crown Prince Ilya entered. Shane immediately dropped into another bow, his muscles protesting the repetition.

"Enough," Aurelion said, but his tone was gentle. "We're private now. You may relax, Shane. We needn't maintain the theater here."

Shane straightened, trying to interpret "relax" in a context that included a two thousand year old vampire king. Aurelion moved to one of the chairs and settled into it with casual grace. Ilya remained standing near the door, arms crossed, still radiating that cold assessment.

Shane made a decision. If he was supposed to relax, he'd try to be himself, or at least, a version of himself that wouldn't cause an international incident.

He walked directly to Prince Ilya and held out his hand. "Your Highness, I wanted to thank you personally. The security you arranged for my parents, the werewolves have been incredibly professional and kind. My mom said they even helped her with groceries yesterday. I can't tell you how much it means to me, knowing they're safe."

For a moment, Ilya just stared at him, those blue eyes widening almost imperceptibly. Shane realized with a jolt that he'd surprised the Crown Prince, had done something unexpected. Maybe humans weren't supposed to approach first? Maybe he'd violated some protocol Lady Thorne had mentioned?

But then Prince Ilya's hand came up, taking Shane's in a firm handshake. His palm was cool, his grip controlled.

"Yes," Ilya said, his voice carefully neutral. "Your parents' safety is part of ensuring this arrangement succeeds."

"Still," Shane said, holding the handshake perhaps a moment too long before releasing it. "Thank you."

He stepped back, suddenly hyperaware that he'd just touched a vampire prince, that Ilya's skin had been cool but not cold, that there had been something almost electric about the contact.

Aurelion's amused voice cut through Shane's spiral. "Please, both of you, sit. We have only a short time before the reception, and I'd like to speak with you, Shane."

Shane took the chair Aurelion indicated, and after a moment, Ilya settled into the one opposite. His posture was perfect, one leg crossed over his knee, hands relaxed on the armrests. He looked like he was posing for a portrait of princely elegance.

Shane tried to mirror some of that composure and probably failed miserably.

"That was very well executed," Aurelion said, pleased. "Lady Thorne reports that you are a diligent student."

"I know I still have a lot to learn."

Shane watched, transfixed, as the King lifted the glass decanter and poured the deep red liquid into two of the crystal glasses. That was definitely blood. Still warm, judging by the slight steam rising from it.

The King then poured something else into the third glass, amber liquid that fizzed gently. Ginger ale, Shane realized. For him.

"Let us toast to our new beginning," he said, handing Shane and Ilya their glasses.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Shane said, taking the glass into his hands.

Aurelion lifted his glass, and Ilya did the same. Shane raised his, too. They drank with the same casual ease that Shane might drink water, the blood disappearing in smooth swallows. Shane couldn't stop staring. He'd known, intellectually, that vampires drank blood. He had prepared himself for this reality. But knowing and *seeing* were very different things.

Aurelion noticed his stare and smiled, showing just a hint of fang. "You'll need to get used to this, Shane. We don't hide our nature from those who live among us."

"I'm not, I mean, I'm trying," Shane stumbled over his words, feeling his face heat again. "Sorry. I've just never seen..."

"It's something you should get used to seeing," Ilya said, his tone matter-of-fact. He took another sip, deliberately casual, staring into Shane's eyes. There was a glint of challenge and amusement. "If you're going to be part of this court, you'll witness far more than simple feeding."

The words weren't unkind, exactly, but they weren't warm either. Shane got the distinct impression that Prince Ilya didn't think Shane would last very long.

"I understand," Shane said, quietly. He took a small sip of the ginger ale, cold and ordinary in his hand. "I know I have a lot to learn."

Prince Ilya set down his glass and sat back, studying Shane with that same penetrating gaze from the throne room. "Tell me, Shane, what did you find so amusing about my father?"

Shane choked on his ginger ale. He coughed, eyes watering, while Ilya watched with what might have been faint concern or possibly just annoyance at the display.

"I, Your Highness, I apologize –"

"You would laugh at him? Mock him in front of the entire court?"

Shane set down his glass carefully, buying time.

"Shane and I shared a joke, just between us," Aurelion finally said, saving him from Ilya's stern gaze.

Ilya turned to his father. "You shared a joke with my Consort?"

Aurelion laughed, tilting his head as he gazed at his son. "I admit that I broke protocol and went to meet him at the cottage. We shared a brief walk through the woods – you know how much I love the wildflowers that grow around your cottage – and Shane and I had a discussion about the weight of crowns."

Shane blinked, his mouth parting. *Wait. The cottage belonged to Prince Ilya? The one that was Shane's safehouse? And those were Ilya's books? He slept in Ilya's bed?*

"*You* broke protocol," Ilya said, astonished. His head turned and he stared at Shane, his blue eyes looking even icier as he narrowed his gaze.

Aurelion laughed, deep and throaty. "Do not be upset at me, my son. There was nothing improper about my visit."

Shane frowned, wondering what Prince Ilya thought had happened between them?

"Now," Aurelion said, clapping his hands together. "Let's discuss what comes next, Shane. You made it through the First Presentation admirably. The reception will be more challenging. You'll be expected to circulate, to accept congratulations, to begin building relationships with the court. Lady Thorne is your official companion and will guide you, but you'll need to rely on your own judgment as well."

"What should I expect?" Shane asked, nodding slowly.

"Scrutiny," Ilya said, staring at him. "Everyone will be watching you, judging you, trying to determine if you're an asset or a liability. Some will try to befriend you to gain access to me. Others will test your boundaries to see if you can be manipulated. A few may simply dislike

you on principle, either because you're human, or because they resent the political circumstances that brought you here."

Shane swallowed hard. "That's...direct."

"Would you prefer I sugarcoat it?" Ilya's blue eyes were cold again. "You're walking into one of the most dangerous courts in the supernatural world. Kindness is in short supply. Political maneuvering is constant. If you can't handle that reality, it's better you know now."

"Ilya," Aurelion said, a note of censure in his voice.

"It's fine," Shane interrupted, surprising himself. He met Ilya's gaze directly. "Your Highness is right. I asked what to expect and you're telling me the truth. I appreciate that. I'd rather know what I'm facing than walk in blind."

Something flickered in Ilya's expression, too quick to identify before it vanished behind that controlled mask. He inclined his head slightly, acknowledging without approval.

Aurelion stood, and both Shane and Ilya rose immediately.

"The reception awaits," the King said, smiling fondly at them. "Shane, remember, you are under the protection of the Crown Prince and House Rozanov now. Anyone who harms you will ultimately answer to me. That should provide some comfort, at least."

"It does, Your Majesty. Thank you."

"I shall depart first," Aurelion said, a coy smile on his lips. "You may determine how long to stay here. But just know that the longer you are here together, the innuendo and gossip will grow exponentially. The Crown Prince has a *reputation*."

"Father!" Prince Ilya protested, making a face.

Then King Aurelion was gone, sweeping out into the corridor with kingly grace.

Shane was left alone with Crown Prince Ilya for a moment. The silence stretched awkward and heavy between them.

Reputation...

"Try not to embarrass yourself too badly at the reception," Ilya said, finally. Not cruel, exactly, but not kind either. Simply stating a fact.

"I'll do my best."

Ilya studied him for another long moment, those sharp blue eyes seeing far too much. Then he too left, leaving Shane to wonder whether or not he had any chance at all of surviving it.

Outside, he could hear the sounds of the reception beginning, music, laughter, the murmur of hundreds of voices. Lady Thorne appeared in the doorway, elegant and composed.

"Ready?" She asked, giving him a *somewhat* warm smile.

Shane thought about lying, but Aurelion had appreciated his honesty. "Not even a little bit."

Lady Thorne's smile was approving. "Good. That means you're paying attention. Come along, Consort Hollander. Time to greet your new world."

Shane offered his arm and she took it, and he let her guide him toward whatever came next.

The reception hall was overwhelming in every possible way. Crystal chandeliers cast prismatic light across what had to be several hundred people, all dressed in their finest, all seeming to know exactly where they belonged in this elaborate social ecosystem. Shane, by contrast, felt like he'd been dropped into the middle of a play where everyone knew their lines except him.

Lady Thorne's hand on his elbow was the only thing keeping him grounded.

"Lord Petrov," she murmured as a handsome vampire with dark hair approached. "One hundred years old and thinks he's far more important than he is. Smile, accept his congratulations, and do not agree to any private meetings."

Shane barely had time to process this before Lord Petrov was upon them, bowing with theatrical flourish.

"Lady Thorne, how radiant you look. And this must be the *famous* Shane Hollander." Petrov's smile showed just a hint of fang. "What a delight to finally meet you. You must tell me all about yourself, perhaps over drinks later this week?"

"Consort Hollander's schedule is quite full," Lady Thorne said tersely before Shane could respond. "But we appreciate your warm welcome."

She steered Shane away before Petrov could protest, leaving the vampire lord looking faintly affronted.

"Ambassador Martinez." Lady Thorne continued, guiding Shane toward a dignified woman in her fifties. "Human representative from the Southern Commonwealth. Genuinely kind, no ulterior motives. You can relax with her. Ambassador, it's so lovely to see you again. May I introduce Consort Hollander?"

And so it went. Lady Thorne moved him through the room with ruthless efficiency, a living encyclopedia of court politics. She whispered names and titles, warned him about hidden agendas, pointed out alliances and rivalries with the precision of a master strategist.

"Countess Volkov, avoid at all costs, she collects secrets like weapons."

"Minister Patel, trade negotiations, boring but necessary."

"Lord and Lady Ashford, they're both fucking the Marquis de Fontaine. Don't stare."

Shane felt his face heat. "I'm not –"

"You absolutely were about to." Lady Thorne's lips quirked. "Court gossip is currency here, Shane. Best you learn it now."

Despite his embarrassment, Shane found himself grateful for her guidance. She seemed to know everything about everyone: who could be trusted, who was dangerous, and who was simply tedious. Her sharp eyes missed nothing, and she positioned him strategically, always within sight of exits, always with clear lines of sight to Captain Marlow and the other security personnel scattered throughout the room.

Shane's eyes kept drifting across the crowd, searching for one particular figure. He found Prince Ilya near the far windows, surrounded by a cluster of aristocrats. The Crown Prince's posture was perfect, his expression serious as he listened to whatever the vampire was explaining. Even from across the room, Ilya commanded attention, his presence drawing eyes like a magnet.

Someone said something, and Ilya's expression shifted minutely. Not quite a smile, but close. Shane felt something flutter in his chest and immediately looked away, embarrassed by his own reaction.

"He's making his own rounds," Lady Thorne said quietly, having noticed Shane's attention. "Accepting congratulations, reinforcing alliances, and managing expectations. It's exhausting work, political performance."

"He looks so serious," Shane observed, keeping his voice discreet.

"He's six hundred years old and carrying the weight of an entire kingdom. Of course he's serious." Lady Thorne squeezed his elbow gently. "But that's not your concern right now. Come. There's someone you should meet."

She guided him toward a figure standing slightly apart from the main crowd, a man who made Shane do a double-take. He was beautiful in a way that seemed almost otherworldly, with brown hair and pale skin that practically glowed. But it was the wings that really caught Shane's attention, massive things folded against his back, silver and black, with feathers rustling slightly as he moved.

"Fae Lord Hayden Pike, formerly of the Twilight Court," Lady Thorne said as they approached. "Hayden, this is Consort Shane Hollander."

Hayden turned, and Shane found himself looking into eyes that were an impossible shade of dark blue. The Fae lord's face was youthful but carried an ageless quality that made it impossible to guess his true age. When he smiled, it was warm and genuine, the first truly friendly expression Shane had encountered all evening.

"Shane! Finally." Hayden extended his hand, and Shane shook it, surprised by the warmth of his grip. "I've been dying to meet the man brave enough, or possibly insane enough, to accept this position. Lady Thorne, you've been hiding him."

"I've been protecting him," Lady Thorne corrected, giving Hayden a stern look. "From people like you."

"Me? I'm delightful." Hayden's grin widened. "Mostly harmless. Occasionally helpful."

"Hayden is part of Prince Ilya's inner circle," Lady Thorne told Shane. "They've known each other for two hundred years, which means Hayden knows where all the bodies are buried, metaphorically and probably literally."

"Only the metaphorical ones," Hayden protested with a soft laugh. "I'm not *that* old. The literal bodies are Ilya's department."

Shane couldn't help but laugh, a small sound that escaped before he could catch it. Hayden's irreverent manner was such a stark contrast to the formal stuffiness of the rest of the evening that it felt like breathing fresh air.

Lady Thorne's expression softened slightly. "I need to speak with Minister Kowalski about the security briefings. Hayden, I'm entrusting Consort Hollander to you for exactly fifteen minutes. Do not get into any trouble, do not let him eat or drink anything you haven't personally verified, and do not lose him."

"My Lady, you wound me with your lack of faith."

"Your reputation wounds you. I merely acknowledge it." Lady Thorne turned to Shane. "If he does anything questionable, find Captain Marlow immediately."

"I'll be fine," Shane assured her, though he appreciated her protectiveness.

She swept away into the crowd, leaving Shane alone with the Fae lord.

Hayden watched her go, then turned to Shane with a theatrical shudder. "She's terrifying, you know. Absolutely terrifying."

"She's been incredibly helpful," Shane said, diplomatically.

"Oh, she's brilliant. Sharp as a knife and twice as dangerous. She looks like a mean girl in a seventeen-year-old's body." Hayden leaned in conspiratorially. "I'm pretty sure she invented half the social hierarchies in this court just so she could position herself at the top of them."

Shane glanced at where Lady Thorne had disappeared into the crowd, then back at Hayden. "'Looks like' a mean girl?"

Hayden blinked. "Sorry?"

"You said she *looks like* a mean girl. I was questioning the 'looks like' part."

For a moment, Hayden just stared at him. Then he burst out laughing, bright and delighted. "Oh, I like you. Ilya has no idea what he's gotten himself into, does he?"

Shane felt himself grinning despite his nervousness. "I don't think any of us do."

"Fair point. Come on, let me introduce you around. I promise to be slightly more responsible than Lady Thorne fears." Hayden offered his arm with exaggerated courtesy, and Shane took it, letting the Fae lord guide him into the crowd.

Where Lady Thorne had been efficient and strategic, Hayden was entertaining and irreverent. He introduced Shane to a steady stream of aristocrats, each time providing some piece of information that was probably supposed to be confidential.

"Lord Blackwood, excellent chess player, terrible at keeping his affairs quiet. Currently sleeping with his wife's sister, who is pretending not to notice."

"Duchess Moreau, three hundred years old, collects antique weapons, and once challenged someone to a duel over a perceived slight about her hat. Always tell her that you think her hat looks enchanting."

"Ambassador Park, human, very earnest, genuinely believes in the Great Truce. His enthusiasm is endearing if occasionally exhausting."

Shane shook hands, accepted congratulations, and tried to remember even a fraction of the names and faces. Hayden made it easier by keeping up a running commentary that was equal parts helpful and scandalous.

They were making their way toward the refreshment tables when a beautiful vampire couple approached, elegantly dressed, and moving with the synchronized grace of people who'd been together for decades. Hayden subtly changed direction, steering Shane away.

"What –" Shane started to ask.

"Lady Thorne's No-Go List," Hayden murmured under his breath. "Those two are notorious gossips with questionable loyalties. Best avoided until you know the landscape better."

Over the next hour, Hayden proved to be an expert navigator of court politics. He introduced Shane to people who seemed genuinely friendly: a werewolf diplomat named Nicodemis who talked enthusiastically about Texas barbecue, a human scholar named Ben studying vampire history who promised to lend Shane books, a young vampire named Belinda who admitted she was just as overwhelmed by court life as Shane was.

He also skillfully steered Shane away from at least a dozen people, each time with a whispered explanation:

"That's Lord Dante, beautiful but vicious, would eat you alive socially."

"Count Simon Sullivan, he fucks for sport and can't keep his mouth shut."

"Countess Volkov, Lady Thorne probably already warned you about her."

"Don't be alone with the mer, they like luring humans into water and drowning them for fun."

"That werewolf there in the black suit and eyepatch, he has the biggest dick I've ever seen."

"Those three are from the Children of the Old Night, culty vampires, definitely avoid."

Shane was beginning to understand just how treacherous the social landscape of Rozanov Palace really was. Every conversation was a potential minefield, every introduction a calculated risk. Without guides like Lady Thorne and Hayden, he'd have been devoured within the first twenty minutes.

"Is it always like this?" Shane asked during a brief lull.

"Like what?"

"So...calculated. Everyone positioning themselves, measuring every word, trying to figure out angles."

Hayden's expression grew thoughtful. "Yes and no. Court life has its rhythms. Tonight is especially intense because you're new, you're important, and everyone wants to figure out where you fit in the hierarchy. Give it a few weeks, and things will settle into a more manageable level of constant political maneuvering. A lot of them probably think that you won't last; and when you and Ilya officially bond in a few months, everything will ramp up again and probably never stop."

"That's not actually comforting."

"Wasn't meant to be. But hey –" Hayden bumped Shane's shoulder gently. "You've got allies. Lady Thorne, obviously. It's a good thing she likes you."

"How can you tell?" Shane said, helplessly.

"You're still alive. And you have Captain Marlow and your security team. Me, if you want me. Even Ilya, though he's not exactly the warm and fuzzy type."

Shane glanced across the room again, finding Prince Ilya immediately. He was with a different group now, listening to some animated discussion with that same serious expression. As Shane watched, Ilya's eyes flickered briefly in his direction, held for a moment, then moved away. Shane couldn't read anything in that look: assessment, curiosity, indifference?

"He doesn't seem thrilled about this arrangement," Shane said, quietly.

Hayden was silent for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Ilya takes his responsibilities seriously. *Very* seriously. This whole situation, you being here, wasn't his choice. It was a political necessity, orchestrated by his father. But that doesn't mean he'll treat you badly...but it does mean you'll have to prove yourself."

"Prove what?"

"That you're worth his effort. That you can survive his world. That you're not just another burden he has to protect." Hayden's dark blue eyes were kind but honest. "I know that sounds harsh, but Ilya's been managing impossible situations for six centuries. He's learned not to invest too heavily in things that might not stick around."

Shane absorbed this, turning it over in his mind. "So I'm just temporary?"

"In his view? Probably." Hayden squeezed his shoulder. "But here's the thing about Ilya, he's almost *always* wrong about people. He expects the worst and is constantly surprised when they exceed his expectations. It's kind of endearing, actually."

Before Shane could respond, a familiar voice cut through the crowd.

"Lord Pike, I trust you've been keeping Consort Hollander safe?"

Lady Thorne materialized beside them with the silent efficiency of a hunting cat. Her blue eyes swept over both of them, sharp and assessing, looking for any sign of trouble or impropriety.

"Safe as houses," Hayden assured her. "Fed him, watered him, kept him away from all the people on your list. He's intact and unscandalized."

"Mostly unscandalized," Shane amended, thinking of some of Hayden's more colorful commentary.

Lady Thorne's lips twitched, not quite a smile, but close. "I appreciate your restraint, Lord Pike. It's uncharacteristic."

"I'm *full* of surprises."

"Yes, and most of them are terrible." But her tone was almost affectionate. She turned to Shane, and her expression softened slightly. "You've done well tonight. Better than many in your position would have. We'll stay for another thirty minutes, then I'll have Captain Marlow escort you back to the cottage. The first appearance should be measured, not exhausting."

Shane nodded, grateful for the structure. The evening had been draining in ways he hadn't expected, not physically demanding, but emotionally and mentally exhausting. Every conversation had required careful navigation, every smile a calculated performance.

As if sensing his fatigue, Hayden leaned in with a grin. "First court reception? You did great. Only minor scandals, no major incidents, and you made me laugh. That's a solid B-plus, at least."

"I was aiming for a C," Shane admitted, shrugging. "Just survive without totally embarrassing myself."

"Then you've overachieved. Celebrate the small victories, buddy." Hayden's wings rustled slightly as he straightened. "I should probably go rescue Ilya from Lord Montague before he dies of boredom. But Shane? I meant what I said earlier. If you need anything, a friendly face, information, someone to complain to about how ridiculous all this is, ask Captain Marlow to find me."

"Thank you, Hayden," Shane said, meaning it. "I appreciate that."

Hayden sketched a bow that was probably ironic, given his grin, then disappeared into the crowd.

Lady Thorne watched him go, then turned her critical gaze on Shane. She studied him for a long moment, and Shane tried not to fidget under that sharp scrutiny.

Finally, she spoke. "You laughed."

Shane blinked. "I...yes?"

"It's the first time I've heard you laugh since you arrived. That's good." Her expression was unreadable. "Humor will help you survive here. Don't lose it."

Before Shane could respond, she was already moving, guiding him toward another cluster of people who needed to be acknowledged, more hands to shake, more congratulations to accept.

But as the evening wore on, Shane found his thoughts returning to that moment with Hayden, the easy laughter, the genuine friendliness, and the sense of having made an actual friend rather than just a political acquaintance. It was a small thing, maybe, but in a world that felt increasingly surreal and overwhelming, small things mattered.

Across the room, Prince Ilya remained a constant presence in Shane's peripheral vision. Serious, controlled, and untouchable. Whatever this arrangement between them was supposed to become, Shane had no illusions that it would be easy.

But maybe he could find a way to navigate this impossible situation. One small victory at a time.

Chapter 6: Territorial

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: An early gift for readers of this story. Thank you for all the kudos and comments! I'll try to respond to them as soon as I can.

Author's Note 2: Oh Ilya, you silly vampire. May I introduce you to a river called Denial? Heh.

Two Weeks After the First Presentation

The conference room in the palace's eastern wing had been designed for gravitas. Twelve-foot ceilings, dark mahogany panels, and windows that overlooked the formal gardens created an atmosphere that demanded respect.

Ilya sat to his father's right, his posture perfect, his expression carefully neutral as he watched the senior intelligence director, Jacob Cassimir, advance through his presentation. The screen displayed a cascade of social media posts, each one more inflammatory than the last. Hashtags trended in real-time: #EndTheGreatTruce, #BloodForAll, #RevelationNow.

"The Ashen Cross has moved from ideological posturing to active recruitment," Cassimir said, his voice clipped and professional. His silver hair was pulled back severely, and his pale eyes swept the room with methodical precision. The vampire missed nothing; his experience in intel gathering and assassination work was legendary amongst their kind. "They waited, as we anticipated, to see the outcome of the First Presentation. Now that Consort Hollander has been publicly accepted in the vampire court, they've accelerated their timeline."

Ilya's jaw tightened. He'd suspected as much. The Ashen Cross had gone too quiet in the days leading up to Shane's presentation; it was a predator's stillness before the strike.

"Their demands are threefold," Cassimir continued, clicking to the next slide. "First, the complete dissolution of the Great Truce and all associated treaties. Second, the forced revelation of all *Sanguis Resonans* carriers, dormant and active, with their identities made public and their locations disclosed. Third, the seizure of all active carriers into what they're calling 'protective custody' for the purpose of blood harvesting."

King Aurelion's amber eyes glowed, the only outward sign of his fury. Across the table, Captain Marlow's hand curled into a tight fist. Many of the representatives sitting at the table shared similar reactions: disgust, fear, anger. Ilya narrowed his eyes, remembering the names of those who didn't react outwardly or reacted in an inappropriate manner. He would give those names to Captain Marlow for further investigation. Ilya knew that there were Ashen Cross sympathizers in his court and he wanted them routed out.

"How many followers do they claim?" Seneschal Gregor asked, his fingers steepled before him.

"Public membership has tripled in the last two weeks," Cassimir replied, advancing the presentation to the membership data slide. "From approximately two thousand to just over six thousand confirmed. However, our intelligence suggests their actual sympathizers number closer to fifteen thousand, with significant concentrations in the European Commonwealth Territories."

"Voss," Ilya hissed, furrowing his brow. *That motherfucker needed to be dealt with once and for all.*

He felt something cold settle in his chest. Fifteen thousand out of a global vampire population of roughly two hundred thousand, that was nearly eight percent. The other supernatural beings were even smaller in number. While eight percent was not a majority, it was enough to be dangerous. And more than enough to spark violence.

"What do you know of their leadership?" Seneschal Vasily said, sitting forward with his usual intensity.

"They still operate in independent cells," Cassimir said, nodding his head respectfully to Vasily. "We've identified three of the seven primary coordinators, but they're using sophisticated encryption and moving frequently. The Commonwealth's intelligence counterparts are assisting, but the Ashen Cross has proven adept at evading their surveillance. The carriers remain our primary concern. We do not have accurate estimates of confirmed *Sanguis Resonans* individuals worldwide. The Commonwealth has taken their databases offline and are manually moving both dormant and active registries to a standalone server with the highest level of security."

King Aurelion rose from his seat and everyone in the room stood reflexively. The King's presence filled the space, ancient and terrible and uncompromising.

"All *Sanguis Resonans* carriers, dormant and active, must be carefully protected," Aurelion said, his voice carrying the weight of absolute authority. "Every single one. The children, the elderly, all of them. But I want it understood—" His gaze swept the room, landing on each face in turn. His amber colored eyes met Ilya's. "Consort Shane Hollander must be protected *at all costs*. He is bound to this court, to my son, and to the future of our kind. *His* safety is paramount. Any breach, any threat, any failure in his security will be considered an act of war against the Crown itself. Let it be known that I will take it *very* personally. It has been centuries since I stepped onto a battlefield, but my fangs are sharper than ever."

"Yes, Your Majesty," came the unified response.

The King sat down again and everyone followed, returning their attention to the presentation. The briefing continued for another forty minutes, covering new security protocols, travel restrictions, and communication blackouts. By the time they adjourned, Ilya felt the familiar weight of responsibility settling more heavily on his shoulders.

Consort Shane Hollander must be protected at all costs.

As the room cleared, he turned in his chair to look out the window at the gardens beyond. The roses were in bloom, their red petals vivid against the green.

He thought, unbidden, of two weeks ago. The reception after the First Presentation. Shane, flushed and nervous, making his way through the crowd with surprising grace. And then –

The memory crystallized with perfect clarity. In the Amber Room, Shane approached him directly, his hand extended, breaking seven different protocols in the span of three seconds.

“Your Highness, I wanted to thank you personally.”

Any *other* being would have lost their head for such presumption! Approaching the Crown Prince first, initiating physical contact, offering a handshake as if they were equals at some bland human function rather than subject and sovereign.

But Ilya had surprised himself and taken Shane’s hand; he had felt the warmth of Shane’s palm against his own cool skin, the slight tremor that betrayed the human’s nerves despite his steady voice. The contact had lasted perhaps five seconds, but Ilya had catalogued every detail with predatory focus.

The scent of Shane had been overwhelming up close. Not just the obvious notes – the cedar and citrus of his aftershave, the clean soap smell of recent showering – but the more subtle, primal scents underneath. The salt-sweet tang of nervous sweat. The spike of adrenaline-laced fear. The warm, living complexity of human biology. And beneath it all, threaded through everything else like gold through quartz, the unmistakable signature of his *Sanguis Resonans* blood.

Ilya had wanted to pull Shane closer and press his face to the elegant line of his throat and just inhale all of his scents to memorize him. He wanted to press his tongue and fangs to Shane’s hot skin and feel his pulse point fluttering rabbit-quick under his lips.

He’d released Shane’s hand instead and offered some bland pleasantries he couldn’t even remember now.

But he remembered the earnestness in Shane’s eyes. Ilya noted that they were a dark brown, almost black in the low light. The pretty freckles were scattered across his upper cheeks and nose, usually subtle in his pictures but more visible when he blushed, and Shane had blushed frequently during the presentation, a rose-gold flush that made him look impossibly young and vulnerable. Ilya found that he liked the soft-spoken way he addressed people. He had observed Shane during the reception, his careful courtesy extended even to those who looked at him like he was a prize to be won or a meal to be consumed.

Ilya could eat him alive, he’d thought then, and the thought returned now with renewed intensity. He could press him against a wall and bite into that pretty throat and drink until –

A sharp, precise pain lanced through his ankle.

"Ow! What the fuck was that!" Ilya jerked his leg back, glaring up at Evangeline, who had somehow materialized beside him and delivered a vicious kick to his ankle.

"Stop fantasizing about your Consort and pay attention," Evangeline hissed, her blue eyes glittering with amusement and annoyance in equal measure. "Cassimir just asked you a direct question."

Ilya's head snapped up. The room wasn't empty after all as Cassimir, Captain Marlow, and both Seneschals remained, all of them looking at him with varying degrees of expectation.

"My apologies," Ilya said smoothly, getting to his feet. "Could you repeat the question?"

Cassimir's expression remained professionally neutral, but there was a flicker of satisfaction and knowing in his pale eyes.

"I asked if you had any additional security requirements for Consort Hollander's daily movements, Your Highness. He has requested permission to visit the university library and several historical sites in the capital."

"Double the standard detail," Ilya said without hesitation. "And I want Lady Thorne to personally supervise any excursions off the cottage grounds."

Evangeline's eyebrows rose. "I'm not his babysitter, Your Highness."

"No, you're the only one I trust with critical assets." Ilya said, smirking at her. "Consider it a compliment."

"I consider it a petty *punishment* for kicking you."

The sitting room in Ilya's North Tower apartments bore little resemblance to the formal conference room from earlier. Where that space demanded respect, this one invited comfort. Deep leather couches and a cozy loveseat, worn Persian rugs, shelves crammed with books and curiosities collected over centuries, and a large fireplace that crackled with genuine wood rather than gas flames.

Ilya sprawled in his favorite chair, one leg thrown over the arm, a glass of blood wine in his hand. Around him, his closest friends had arranged themselves in various states of relaxation: Evangeline perched on the arm of the loveseat, speaking in her most friendly voice with Kip; Hayden lounged with Fae-like grace on the cushioned window seat, his wings folded neatly against his back; Scott and his mate Kip occupied the loveseat with Scott's arm draped protectively over Kip's shoulders; Lady Svetlana had claimed the chaise with her usual dramatic flair; and Sasha leaned against the bookshelf, his posture deliberately casual. With the exception of Kip, they had all grown up together in the vampire court and each knew their roles well; but in his private rooms, they were able to set aside their responsibilities and just exist as they were.

"So," Svetlana said, swirling her own glass of blood wine. "The Ashen Cross wants to turn us all into blood farmers. How very provincial of them."

"Provincial is one word for it," Hayden said, dryly. "Fucking stupid is another. Do they honestly think forcing human carriers into custody won't immediately shatter the Great Truce and spark a war no one will win?"

"Some vampires have remarkably short memories," Scott said, his voice carrying the low rumble typical of werewolf vocal cords, even in human form. "They've forgotten what the world was like before the Truce. The hunts. The purges. The fact that humans outnumber us and have weapons that can turn us to ash from miles away."

"Fear can make anyone stupid," Kip added, quietly. He was the only human in the room and he spoke with the careful consideration of someone who'd learned to navigate supernatural politics the hard way. "The Ashen Cross is exploiting vampire desperation. Blood scarcity is real."

"Which is precisely why the Commonwealth's secrecy is so vital," Evangeline said, tersely. "The moment those carrier identities go public, every desperate vampire and human-hating extremist will have a target list."

"But that's just it, isn't it?" Sasha spoke up from his position by the bookshelf, and something in his tone made Ilya's attention sharpen. "The *Commonwealth* keeps those identities secret. None of us actually know who the carriers are until we need to know. Look at Hollander, Ilya had no choice but to accept him. What if there was someone *better*? The humans have too much control over this entire process."

The room went quiet. Even the fire seemed to dim slightly.

Ilya set his glass down with deliberate care. "Someone better?"

"I just mean—" Sasha shifted uncomfortably, some of his casual facade cracking. "You're the Crown Prince. You should have options. You should be able to choose your own Consort, not have one assigned to you like some sort of arranged marriage."

"It is an arranged marriage," Hayden pointed out, laughing. "That's literally what this is, Sash."

"You know what I mean." Sasha's voice had taken on an edge. "The humans hold all the cards. They decide who gets matched with whom, they control the information, they dictate the terms. How is that equitable? How is that the great partnership the Truce is supposed to represent?"

Ilya studied Sasha with new eyes. They'd been lovers once, years ago. A casual arrangement that had drifted into friendship when the physical attraction faded, or so Ilya had thought. He'd tried to handle the transition kindly, to preserve the friendship. But now...

"*Sashka*," Ilya said, keeping his tone neutral. "Are you suggesting the Commonwealth is using the *Sanguis Resonans* as a form of control?"

"I'm suggesting," Sasha replied, meeting Ilya's gaze with a hopeful smile. "That we should question why we've ceded so much power to human institutions. Why are we allowing them

to keep secrets from us? Why is the matching process so opaque?"

"Because transparency would get people killed," Evangeline snapped, focusing her gaze at Sasha. "Ilya and I just sat through a two hour-long briefing about how a terrorist organization wants to harvest human carriers like livestock, and you're worried about equitable information distribution?"

"I'm worried about vampire sovereignty," Sasha shot back. "I'm worried that we're so desperate for *Sanguis Resonans* that we'll accept any terms, any conditions, any loss of autonomy –"

"That's enough, Aleksandr." Ilya said, not raising his voice but the words had command in them.

Sasha fell silent, but his jaw was set, and his eyes glittering with something that looked uncomfortably like resentment.

Ilya recognized jealousy when he saw it. He'd seen it in courtiers jockeying for position, in nobles competing for favor, in lovers replaced by newer attractions. But this felt different. Uglier. As if Sasha's bitterness had fermented into something more toxic than simple wounded pride.

"The Commonwealth's secrecy protects the humans," Ilya said, keeping his voice level as he stood slowly, moving towards Sasha. "It protects humans like Shane. If you can't understand that, if you're so caught up in vampire pride that you'd rather score political points than acknowledge reality, then perhaps you need to reconsider whether *our* friendship is something you still want."

Sasha's face went pale. "Ilya –"

"*Sashka*." Ilya set his wine glass on the side table. "I've tried to be kind about us, about the way things ended. But if you're going to let jealousy poison your judgment and echo Ashen Cross rhetoric in my own sitting room, then I have a problem."

The silence that followed was thick and uncomfortable. Sasha looked stricken, his earlier defiance crumbling into something that might have been shame. After a long moment, he pushed off from the bookshelf.

"I should go," he said, his voice showing his hurt. "I...I'm sorry. I'm not – I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

He left without waiting for a response, the door clicking shut behind him with damning finality.

Ilya exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair. "Fuck. I shouldn't have said that."

"It was necessary." Evangeline corrected. "He's been making snide comments about Shane for weeks. Better to address it now than let it fester."

Ilya nodded, then turned his attention to the remaining members of his circle. "I need you all to do something for me. I need you to get to know Shane. To befriend him and protect him. He's going to be living in the palace full-time soon, and he'll need people he can trust. People who aren't motivated by politics or blood rights and whatever games the vampire court will try to pull him into."

"Already on it," Hayden said, cheerfully. "Shane's great. We've been hanging out."

Ilya's attention sharpened. "Hanging out?"

"Yeah, you know, spending time together. I took him into town last week and we explored Rozanov Township, hit up some of the local historical sites he wanted to see. He's fascinated by architecture, by the way. Kept stopping to take pictures and talk to the locals, asking questions about building techniques from different eras."

Something uncomfortable twisted in Ilya's chest. "You took him into town?"

"Relax, I had security with us. Three guards in plain clothes, plus me. Nothing happened. Everybody liked him and he was sweet and shy." Hayden's smile widened. "Then yesterday I took him flying. He fucking loved it."

Kip giggled and then placed his fingers over his lips when Ilya turned and glared at him. Scott gave him a soft warning growl, his hand stroking over Kip's head. Ilya made a face at the werewolf and waved him off. *Of course he wasn't angry at Kip, who would get angry at Kip, Ilya wasn't a monster.*

He turned back to glare at Hayden, who was still smiling unapologetically at Ilya. "Flying?"

"Yeah, I held him and flew him around." Hayden said it so casually, as if discussing the weather rather than admitting that he held Ilya's Consort in his arms and soared through the air.

"You *held* him," Ilya repeated, his voice very calm. "You. Held. *My Consort*. In your arms. And flew him through the air."

Svetlana made a sound suspiciously like a suppressed laugh.

"Ilya," Hayden said, his dark blue eyes dancing with amusement. "Are you asking me about my intentions toward your Consort?"

"I am asking," Ilya said with great precision. "Why you thought it was appropriate to – to –"

"To give him a unique experience he's never known before?" Hayden's grin was unrepentant. "To show him that not all supernatural abilities are frightening? To help him feel more comfortable in this new world he's been thrust into? Pick one, they're all true."

"You could have dropped him!"

"I'm a Fae with three centuries of flight experience. He was safer with me than he was walking down the stairs."

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is the point?" Hayden leaned forward, his expression still amused but with an undercurrent of genuine curiosity. "Because it's starting to sound like you're jealous, and I can't figure out why you'd be *jealous* of your friends spending time with your Consort. Isn't that what you just asked us to do?"

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it. He had no idea what to say. Because Hayden was right. He had just asked them to befriend Shane. And he had no reasonable objection to Hayden taking Shane flying, it was exactly the kind of gesture that would help Shane feel welcomed.

But the image of Hayden holding Shane, of Shane's body pressed against Hayden's, of Shane's face tipped up in wonder as they soared through the sky together, it made Ilya want to break things.

"Ilya." Svetlana's voice was gentler than usual. "Shane is your Consort. He's going to be your husband. Of course we're going to befriend him. We would do it anyway, even if you hadn't asked, because he's important to you and because, well, because he's actually quite likable on his own merits."

"He is," Kip agreed with a cheerful smile. "We met him at the reception. He was kind and thoughtful, and he treated me like a person instead of Scott's human pet. Scott and I are going to take him out to lunch tomorrow. Sushi! Shane's mom is originally from the Pacific Commonwealth."

Svetlana hummed affectionately at him. "You are *not* a pet, you are a credit to your species."

Kip blushed and glanced at Scott, who nodded in agreement with Svetlana.

"She's telling the truth," Scott said, leaning close to Kip to rub his bearded cheek against Kip's neck, marking him and making Kip giggle softly. They brushed noses and it was so fucking adorable; Ilya rolled his eyes at their overly sweet antics.

"Evangeline and I are taking Shane clothes shopping," Svetlana said, raising her eyebrow at Ilya. "All he has are hoodies and jeans and hiking boots. And his presentation suit."

"I'm putting everything on your accounts," Evangeline said, smirking.

Ilya nodded in agreement, he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Plus, Shane is funny," Hayden said randomly, eyes bright with mischief. "He has a dry sense of humor. You wouldn't expect it from how soft-spoken he is, but he made me laugh at least a dozen times during our outings."

The uncomfortable feeling intensified. They all *liked* Shane. They had sought him out and spent time with him, learned things about him, and discovered his humor and his interests and his personality. Meanwhile, Ilya had barely exchanged a handful of sentences with his Consort since the First Presentation.

"You're being an asshole," Evangeline said, bluntly. "In case that wasn't clear from context."

"Thank you, Evangeline. Very helpful as usual," he said, dryly.

"You asked us to befriend Shane because you're worried about his safety and his happiness. We've done exactly that. The fact that you're now spiraling into territorial jealousy suggests this situation is significantly more complicated than you've been admitting to yourself."

"I'm not –" Ilya caught the knowing looks being exchanged around the room and exhaled sharply. "Fine. Perhaps I'm being slightly territorial."

"Slightly," Hayden echoed, grinning.

"But I am not jealous. I am simply...adjusting to the situation. I'm allowed to be complicated about it."

"Of course you are," Svetlana said, soothingly. "You're allowed to feel however you feel. But maybe don't take it out on your friends who are trying to help?"

Ilya rubbed his temples. "You're right. I'm sorry everyone. I apologize, Hayden. I shouldn't have questioned your intentions."

"No offense taken. But Ilya, seriously, you should actually spend time with Shane. Get to know him. *We* think you'll like him if you give him a chance. Don't be such an asshole."

They laughed and Ilya huffed out a sound of amusement, raising his eyebrow at his friends.

Hayden stood and stretched out his wings, shaking them open, and then folding them down again.

"Ilya, Shane is smart, observant, surprisingly resilient, and has absolutely no idea how to navigate supernatural politics because he's actually a kind person. He needs guidance. He *needs* friends. And whether you want to admit it or not, he needs *you* to actually acknowledge him as more than a political burden."

The words hit harder than they should have. Because Hayden was right. Ilya had been avoiding Shane, maintaining distance because distance felt safer than confronting the complicated tangle of duty and resentment that Shane represented.

"He's hot," Svetlana said, grinning coyly at Ilya.

"God, he really is," Kip said, leaning his head against Scott's shoulder. "He's so cute and nice."

"Fucking hell," Ilya muttered under his breath.

"Ilya, your bonding ceremony is in just over two months," Scott said, solemnly. "That's not a lot of time to build a foundation for what's supposed to be a lifelong partnership. But you could start by trying to be his friend."

"I know." Ilya reclaimed his wine glass and drained it in one long swallow. "I know. I'll...I'll do better."

Evangeline regarded him with her sharp, assessing gaze. The one that always made Ilya feel like she could see straight through his carefully constructed defenses.

"Leave it," he told her, scowling.

Her mouth curved in something too knowing to be called a smile. "I didn't say anything."

"Your *face* is saying plenty."

"My face is an innocent canvas of neutrality." She said, as the others laughed.

"Your face is mocking me."

"Well," Evangeline allowed and gave him a warm look. "Perhaps just a little."

Ilya's study was his sanctuary, the one place in the palace where he could truly be alone with his thoughts. His desk was an organized chaos of paperwork and leather-bound books and the walls were lined with artifacts from his travels over the centuries.

He sat at his desk, scrolling through the social media feeds that Cassimir had flagged as high-priority. The Ashen Cross posts were worse up close, more detailed and more vicious. Images of Shane from his personal social media platforms, before they were shut down, had been screenshotted and shared thousands of times, each post adding new layers of threatening commentary.

He'll be dead within the year.

Pretty little blood bag. Wonder if the Crown Prince will share?

They're hiding hundreds more just like him. Make them tell us where.

Ilya's hands clenched on the desk edge, wood creaking under his grip. The urge to hunt down every single person behind these accounts and rip their throats out was overwhelming and entirely impractical.

A knock at the door interrupted his dark thoughts.

"Enter," he called, not looking up.

"Your Highness." Seneschal Vasily's voice was warm with barely suppressed amusement.

"Consort Hollander's belongings from his apartment have arrived. Where would you like us to place them?"

Ilya's attention snapped away from the screen. Shane's belongings. Of course. He'd authorized the move shortly after the First Presentation, but had somehow completely forgotten to specify where Shane should actually be housed within the palace.

The palace was vast, a sprawling complex that had grown organically over the centuries. It was as labyrinthine as the politics of its inhabitants. Location mattered, not just for convenience, but for the symbolism of proximity to power. Where he placed Shane would send a clear message to the court about how much he valued his Consort.

The guest wing would be safest and the most distant. Shane would have privacy and space, and Ilya wouldn't have to navigate the complicated feelings that arose every time he so much as thought about his Consort.

But the guest wing was also where minor visiting dignitaries stayed. Putting Shane there would be an insult, a declaration that Ilya considered him temporary and unimportant.

The Royal family's wing was traditional for Consorts. But that felt wrong, too. It would be too public and too exposed. Shane would be under constant observation from courtiers and servants, every movement scrutinized and judged.

Ilya's rooms were in the North Tower, a semi-private section that included his bedchamber, his study, several sitting rooms, and a long hallway of suites that remained empty. His friends had their own suites in the lower levels of the tower and had access to him there, but the general court didn't venture into the North Tower without explicit invitation.

It was his private residence. And if he put Shane in the North Tower, just a few doors down from his own rooms, that would send an unmistakable message: Shane was not just protected, he was kept close and watched over by Ilya himself.

It would also mean Ilya would have to see Shane regularly. He would pass him in the hallways, run into him in the shared spaces, and Ilya would be constantly aware of his presence mere steps away. The thought should have been uncomfortable. Instead, it sent a strange thrill of anticipation through him.

"Put him in the North Tower," Ilya heard himself say. "The blue suite, three doors from my chambers."

Vasily's smile widened into something deeply satisfied. "An excellent choice, Your Highness. I'll see to the arrangements personally."

"Vasily –"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

Ilya hesitated, then shook his head. "Nothing. Thank you."

Vasily's knowing expression suggested he understood everything Ilya wasn't saying. "Of course, Your Highness. I live to serve."

After Vasily left, Ilya returned his attention to his monitors, but the social media feeds held no interest anymore.

Ilya found his father in his personal office. King Aurelion kept late hours, preferring to work when the palace was quiet and the demands of court had temporarily subsided. The King's office was significantly more austere than Ilya's own with dark woods, minimal decoration, and walls lined with books that were actually read rather than displayed for show.

Aurelion looked up when Ilya entered, his ancient eyes sharp despite the late hour. "Ilya. What brings you here at this time of night?"

"I wanted to discuss the security briefing," Ilya said, which was partially true. "And Shane's relocation to the palace."

"*Ahhh.*" Aurelion set down the document he'd been reading and leaned back in his chair. "I have heard that you've decided to place Consort Hollander in the North Tower. An interesting choice."

Of course the King had already heard; the speed of gossip in the palace was faster than light.

"It's secure and private. He'll be safer there."

"*Mhmm.*" His father's expression was maddeningly neutral. "And it has nothing to do with the fact that he'll be three doors from your own chambers?"

"Proximity makes protection easier," Ilya replied, aware he sounded defensive and annoyed by it.

"Of course it does." Aurelion's lips twitched.

"Have you spoken with him recently?"

"Why yes. I've visited him at the cottage a few times since he was presented. We've had several conversations. He's remarkably thoughtful for someone so young." Aurelion's expression softened slightly. "I enjoy our talks."

"You enjoy your talks."

He wondered if Shane understood that the King rarely gave his attention so easily. He wondered if Shane would use his newfound favor to his advantage over the vampire court. He wondered if Shane even knew that he could.

"Very much." Aurelion's eyes gleamed with amusement. "We have a number of inside jokes now."

Ilya stared at his father. Inside jokes. His father and his Consort had inside jokes, and Ilya had barely managed to exchange a few sentences with Shane.

"What jokes?" Ilya heard himself ask.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly share it. That would ruin the entire point of an inside joke, wouldn't it?" Aurelion picked up his document again, clearly enjoying himself. "The humor lies in the shared understanding between the parties involved."

"Father –"

"Yes, Ilya?"

"What is the joke."

It wasn't a question. It was very nearly a demand, which was inadvisable when speaking to a vampire king, even if that king happened to be one's Sire and father.

Aurelion set the document down again, his expression now openly amused. "Are you actually jealous that Shane and I share a few moments of levity?"

"I'm not jealous," Ilya said, too quickly. "I simply think, as his future husband, I should be aware of – of the rapport that's being built between my Consort and other members of the court."

"Rapport." Aurelion repeated the word as if tasting it. "Is that what concerns you?"

"I'm concerned about appropriate boundaries and hierarchies of relationship –"

"Ilya." His father's voice was gentle now, but there was steel beneath it. "You are being ridiculous."

Ilya opened his mouth to object, then closed it again. Because his father was right. He was being ridiculous. Jealous that Aurelion had spent time talking with Shane. Jealous that Hayden had taken Shane flying. Jealous that his friends had already befriended his Consort. Jealous of inside jokes and shared laughter and every small intimacy that he himself hadn't bothered to build.

"He's going to be your partner," Aurelion continued, his tone softening further. "Your husband in all but the most technical sense. But that partnership will be built on what you choose to create with him, not on proximity or protocol or royal prerogative. If you want to know Shane, you have to *actually* spend time with him."

"I know that," Ilya muttered, feeling very foolish and petty.

"Do you? Because from where I'm sitting, you've spent the past three weeks avoiding him while simultaneously growing increasingly territorial about anyone else who doesn't avoid him." Aurelion leaned forward, his expression serious now. "Shane is a good man, Ilya. Kind, intelligent, and braver than he has any right to be given the circumstances he's been thrust into. He deserves better than a prince who treats him like a political obligation to be managed from a distance."

The words struck deeper than they should have. Because they were true. All of them.

"I don't know how to do this," Ilya admitted, quietly. "I don't know how to be what he needs when I didn't choose this, when *he* didn't choose this, when the entire situation feels like we're both trapped in roles dictated by someone else."

By Aurelion, Ilya did not say.

"Then you figure it out together." Aurelion's voice was firm but not unkind. "You talk to him honestly. You build something real, even if it starts from duty. Some of the strongest partnerships in our history began as arranged marriages. Your mother and I –" He paused, a flicker of old grief crossing his face. "We didn't have enough time to truly discover each other; but I believe that if she was still alive, our partnership would have changed the world for the better."

Ilya nodded slowly, his throat tight.

"Now," Aurelion said, his tone lightening. "Was there anything else you needed to discuss, or were you simply here to demand I reveal my private conversations with your Consort?"

"The joke," Ilya said, stubbornly. "I still want to know what the joke is."

Aurelion laughed, a rare sound that transformed his usually stern features. "Absolutely not. If you want to know, you'll have to ask Shane yourself. Consider it an opportunity to have a conversation with him."

"You're enjoying this far too much."

"Watching you spiral into jealous confusion over a young human you're *clearly* attracted to but refuse to acknowledge is one of my few remaining pleasures." Aurelion's smile was genuine and warm. "Spend time with your Consort. Build something worth having. And for the love of all that's sacred, stop interrogating everyone else about their interactions with him."

"Thank you, Father."

"You're welcome. And Ilya?"

"Yes?"

"You'll like him, once you give yourself permission to actually get to know him."

Ilya left his father's study with his mind churning, the image of Shane's face, flushed and startled and brave, pulling at him like a tide. He should go see him and get to know him. He *would* go see him.

Ilya took out the Lamborghini. It was an indulgence, one of several high-performance vehicles he kept in the palace garage for those rare moments when he wanted to drive himself rather than being chauffeured. The Fenomeno was his favorite, only 29 were produced and Ilya owned two, his favorite was the silver-blue. It was absurdly fast and completely impractical for most situations.

Perfect for tonight, when he felt restless and confined and desperately in need of speed and space.

The drive from the palace to the cottage took less than thirty minutes on winding country roads that carved through mountain and forest beyond the palace and the township. Ilya pushed the car harder than he should have, taking curves at speeds that would have terrified a human driver, feeling the responsive purr of the engine as the vehicle hugged the road.

He'd placed Shane in his cottage three weeks ago, on the day that Shane's identity had been leaked by that incompetent human bureaucrat. It had been the safest location Ilya could think of: remote, secure, and unknown to most of the court. It was his private retreat, a place where he went when the demands of the kingdoms became too much. Giving his sanctuary to Shane had been instinctive. He hadn't examined the impulse too closely.

Now, as the cottage came into view, a cozy stone and timber structure that looked rustic from the outside but held every modern convenience within, Ilya felt that strange anticipation return. He parked the Lamborghini in the circular drive and cut the engine. The night was quiet except for forest sounds: wind in the trees, the distant call of an owl, the whisper of small creatures moving through underbrush.

Ilya climbed out of the car and approached the front door. He should knock. This was Shane's space now, temporarily. Basic courtesy demanded he announce himself.

Instead, he let himself in.

The cottage's interior was warm and lived-in. Lights glowed softly in the main living area, and Ilya could smell evidence of Shane's occupation: coffee, something that might have been marinara sauce, the lingering scent of woodsmoke from the fireplace, and underneath it all, Shane's own scent.

Ilya stood in the middle of the living room, looking around with new attention. Was Shane comfortable here? Did he appreciate Ilya's own collection of books? Did the view of the mountains from the bedroom give him a sense of calm and security? Was he comfortable in Ilya's sumptuous bed?

The door to the bathroom opened and then Shane walked out. Naked.

Well, not entirely naked. A dark blue towel was wrapped around his hips, knotted at one side, the deep jewel hue complemented his skin. But otherwise bare. Water still beaded on his shoulders and chest, his hair was damp and tousled, and his skin was flushed pink from heat and steam.

Shane stopped dead when he saw Ilya, his eyes going wide with shock.

Ilya took his time looking. He was a prince, a predator, and Shane was *his* Consort.

Shane didn't look soft, Ilya noted with approval. Not hard like a warrior, but sturdy. Healthy. His shoulders were broader than the formal clothes suggested, his chest and arms showing the kind of strength that came from regular activity, good genetics, and healthy eating rather than vanity workouts. He was smooth across his chest and belly with the usual hair on his arms and legs. His brown nipples were small and pointed and Ilya stared at the muscles that shaped his chest and stomach.

His throat was bare, the line of it lovely and vulnerable. Ilya could hear his pulse jumping in the hollow at the base, rabbit-quick with startled adrenaline.

Shane was beautiful. Ilya had known this intellectually, had catalogued Shane's features in his photographs with clinical precision, and had scented him after the First Presentation; but seeing him like this, unguarded and exposed, drove the knowledge home with visceral intensity.

The blood Ilya drank before leaving the palace was still flowing through him, animated by his will, pumping through vessels that usually lay dormant. It made him more alive, more *physical*. It made his heart beat in a mimicry of human life.

And it made him *feel* desire in ways that were usually buried under centuries of control.

He *wanted* Shane. He wanted to cross the space between them and press that solid, sturdy body against the wall. He wanted to lick the water still beading on Shane's skin. He wanted to bite into the vulnerable line of that throat and hear Shane's moan and feel his body tremble as he drank from him.

He wanted to taste Shane's *Sanguis Resonan* blood.

Shane stared at him silently, one hand gripping the towel knot at his hip as if afraid it might fall. A dozen emotions flickered across his face: shock, uncertainty, fear, and sexual desire... or simply the response of prey recognizing a predator.

Ilya met Shane's pretty brown eyes and felt his fangs descend, sliding down with the familiar ache of arousal and hunger. He tilted his chin just a bit and parted his lips slightly, letting Shane see the tips of his fangs in his mouth.

Shane's breath caught audibly.

"Your Highness," Shane said, his voice rough. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I should have called ahead," Ilya said, his voice gone low and dark, vibrating with barely controlled want.

"That would have been...nice."

"I've never been particularly *nice*."

"Right." He cleared his throat. "What do you want, Your Highness?"

They stared at each other across the living room. The space between them felt charged, electric, as if reality itself had gone thin and dangerous. Ilya knew he should leave. He shouldn't be here like this; he should leave Shane in peace before he did something irreversible, something Shane might not be ready for.

But the blood was coursing through him, and Shane was *right there*, damp and beautiful and *his*, and Ilya found he didn't want to leave at all.

"We should talk," Ilya managed, forcing his fangs to recede. "About your move to the palace. About security protocols. About –"

"You haven't wanted to talk to me for the past two weeks," Shane said, his voice steadier now, though his hand still gripped that damned towel. "And you want to talk now, at eleven o'clock at night."

"I'm a vampire, I'm a creature of the night."

Shane made a face, like he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of Ilya's words, but was forcing himself to remain still.

"Your things have arrived at the palace and I've assigned you new rooms in my tower. You may begin unpacking and settling in. If you require assistance, you may ask my Seneschal, Vasily, for whatever you need –"

"Seneschal? Is that like a butler or a title?"

Ilya considered how to explain centuries of tradition in terms that a twenty-six year old human could grasp. "A Seneschal is far more than a butler, though that's not an unreasonable starting point. In vampire courts, the Seneschal is the engine that keeps everything running while the lord handles public duties."

"So...like a chief of staff?"

"Closer, yes. The Seneschal manages the household, but also coordinates security, filters petitioners, maintains intelligence networks, and serves as my proxy when direct involvement would be inappropriate. My father's Seneschal is Gregor. Vasily is my Seneschal. He's held the position for three centuries."

Shane's eyes widened. "Three hundred years of...managing your household?"

"Among other things. Vasily knows every secret corridor in the palace, every whispered rumor among the staff, every shift in loyalty among the nobles. When I need information, he provides it. When I need something handled discreetly, he handles it. When the palace requires discipline or organization, he maintains it. He is one of perhaps three people in this world I trust absolutely."

"That sounds like an important position." Shane said, nodding his head slowly, taking in the information.

"It is. The relationship between a vampire lord and their Seneschal is built on complete trust. Vasily has access to information that could destroy me, if he were inclined to use it. He manages my private affairs, my vulnerabilities, and my weaknesses. Without him, House Rozanov would collapse into chaos within days."

Shane was quiet for a moment, thoughtful. "So when I see him in the halls, I should..."

"You don't bow to him as you outrank him as my Consort. But I expect that you'll treat him with the same respect you'd show any high-ranking official. He speaks with my authority in

household matters. If Vasily tells you something, it's as if I told you myself. And Shane?" He held the human's gaze. "If you ever need something and cannot reach me, go to Vasily. He will help you, because protecting you is now part of protecting House Rozanov."

"I understand," Shane said, holding his gaze to Ilya's eyes. "Thank you for explaining."

Ilya nodded his head in acknowledgement, wondering what Shane thought about how he outranked *everyone* in the kingdoms except for Aurelion and Ilya. That would be entertaining to discover.

"You may move into the palace at any time before the official bonding ceremony. But you will need to be in place after we've bonded."

"Okay. I'll do it this week."

"You should also be aware of the new security protocols about you. There is a faction of vampires called the Ashen Cross who demand that all *Sanguis Resonans* like you are publicly revealed and that your blood is harvested. Be safe in the knowledge that the King and the entirety of the supernatural kingdoms will not let anything like that happen. You are safe within the palace walls and you will have double the security whenever you need to leave it. Do not try to evade your security detail."

Shane's hand shook holding the towel. "My mother is a *Sanguis Resonans*, but her genome is dormant. Please don't let anything happen to her."

"Your parents are under my protection. I will not let anything happen to them."

"Okay. Okay, okay, okay," Shane said, breathing erratically. He moved to the couch and gripped the back with his free hand, bending over to put his forehead against the couch.

Ilya licked his lips and moved closer to him, putting his hand on Shane's bare back. He could feel Shane trembling, his back rising and falling with his quickened breath. And Ilya felt his fangs itch from the tempting heat of Shane's body, bent over in such an enticing position. He glanced at the shape of Shane's ass, generously round under the towel.

Illya cursed himself and forced himself to *actually* help Shane and not just let his imagination run wild at such an inappropriate time.

"Shane. You are having a panic attack. Your parents are safe. You are safe. Just breathe."

"Ohmygod, this is so fucked up," Shane mumbled, rubbing his face against the back of his hand. He sniffled and then stood up slowly, turning to look at Ilya.

His face was flushed and his eyes were wet with unshed tears. Ilya didn't know what he was thinking when he reached up and rubbed the knuckle of his finger gently under Shane's eye and down his smooth cheek.

"Yes. It is fucked up. But this is what we must do to keep the peace between our peoples," Ilya said, kindly. "We will both be okay, Shane."

He cupped his hand around Shane's neck and then slid his palm down to his shoulder, his thumb caressing the bones underneath, and then down his long back. Up and down, slow and gentle, and in soothing circles. Ilya was glad that the panic attack seemed to have passed and he gave a small smile that he hoped looked comforting.

Shane stared at him, his lips parting with a soft sound, and Ilya stared at his mouth for a long moment. His skin was so smooth, his muscles firm, and the *heat* of his body was driving Ilya a little mad. But that *look* on Shane's face, the way his eyes moved over Ilya's face and lingered at his lips; the sheer openness of his expressions...

Ilya forced himself to take his hand off of Shane and step away, giving them both space to cool down.

"Yes. Well. Please let Captain Marlow know when you're ready to move into the palace and he will make sure that Vasily is available to you. You may ask for anything you want for your comfort."

He walked towards the front door, his hand *burning* from touching Shane. Ilya hadn't blushed since he was a mortal, over six centuries ago, but he felt the blood throbbing in his ears and heating up the back of his neck.

"Your Highness?"

He turned, looking at Shane. "Yes."

"Thank you," Shane said, giving him a small nod.

"It is my pleasure."

Shane's face flushed that rose-gold color Ilya remembered from the presentation, the freckles across his nose and cheeks standing out in vivid detail.

Ilya opened the door and left before he could change his mind, before he could cross that magnetic space and find out exactly what Shane would do if Ilya kissed him.

The Lamborghini's engine roared to life, and Ilya drove back to the palace faster than he'd come, his fangs descended and the blood inside him was still singing through his body with the image of Shane, damp and brave and beautiful, burned into his mind like a brand.

He needed a fucking drink!

Chapter 7: On Thin Ice

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: OMG I've been writing for like the past 14 hours and I haven't really slept. I don't know about you, but I've gotten a bit obsessed writing this story. Thank god I didn't have anything to do outside of my house today (cold and rainy, time to just stay in and write fic weather!). Thanks for all of your amazing comments and I'm glad to know that I'm not the only one that's obsessed. HAHA! Here is a new chapter and there's another one that I'm editing and will post soon, too. And then I'm gonna go pass out for like 10 hours. Seriously, this isn't sustainable so we will just enjoy it for as long as I can keep it up. LOL!

Author's Note 2: I'm calling Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 the "boys start figuring things out" chapters. But if you read the summary, then you know some bad shit is going to go down soon.

Shane surveyed the organized chaos of his new apartment, boxes stacked against walls paneled in deep navy and cream, his possessions looking somehow smaller and shabbier in rooms that could've swallowed his old Commonwealth apartment whole. Three times bigger, maybe more. The bedroom alone was ridiculous, with a massive four-poster bed that belonged in a museum and windows that offered views of snow-peaked mountains in the distance.

"Where do you want the books?" Marlow hefted a large box, biceps straining against the sleeve of his tight black t-shirt.

"Study," Shane said, pointing toward the smallest of his three rooms, though "smallest" was relative when it still managed to fit two leather armchairs, a proper writing desk, and an entire wall of built-in bookshelves. One entire section was already occupied by leather-bound historical texts, their spines embossed in Old World and English.

"A welcome gift from His Majesty," Vasily said, when he gave Shane a tour of the rooms.

Scott appeared in the doorway, a box balanced on each shoulder. "You know this place has heated floors, right? *Heated floors*. My apartment doesn't have heated floors."

"That's because you're not the Consort of the Crown Prince," Hayden said, arranging Shane's meager collection of throw pillows on the leather couches.

Shane bit back a smile, watching Kip navigate through the doorway with a box labeled KITCHEN STUFF in someone's chicken-scratch handwriting.

"You don't have a kitchen," Kip observed, setting the box on the coffee table.

"I have a kitchenette." Shane gestured vaguely toward the alcove off the sitting room that held a compact refrigerator, a sink, and barely enough counter space for a coffee maker. At least he could fill the fridge with Ginger Ale. "It's...minimalist."

"It's for blood bags," Svetlana announced, sweeping into the sitting room. She claimed one of the leather couches as her throne, long legs crossed, and somehow making ripped jeans and a pink cashmere sweater look like formal wear. "He doesn't need a kitchen in his apartment. There are four kitchens in the palace. Someone is always available to make Shane human meals."

"Five kitchens," Evangeline corrected, drifting past with a wine glass she'd manifested from somewhere. She hadn't helped carry a single box, but she *had* provided running commentary on Shane's possessions with the kind of gleeful judgment that would've been insulting from anyone else. "Though two are currently being renovated."

"There. See? Kitchen unnecessary." Svetlana rummaged through the box Kip had delivered and pulled out a coffee mug with WORLD'S NICEST TEACHER printed on the side. "Oh my God. Shane. *Shane*. Is this ironic?"

"It was a student gift," Shane said, feeling his ears heat.

"It's perfect." She held it up like Exhibit A. "This belongs in a museum. The Museum of Shane's Humble Origins."

"I'm literally *still* humble."

"You're *literally* the Consort of the Crown Prince of the Vampire Kingdom," Evangeline said, examining her nails. "Humble is...aspirational at best."

Shane opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. It was a little disingenuous to claim humility when unpacking in an apartment that contained artwork that cost tens of millions of dollars. He recognized a few of the more famous ones. They were originals, not reproductions. Not to mention the massive fireplace in his bedroom that had actual marble cherubs carved into the mantle.

"Oh, *wow*." Marlow's deep voice carried from the study, followed by the sound of tape ripping. "Guys, you need to see this."

They converged like sharks scenting chum in the water, even Svetlana abandoned her couch. Shane followed, wondering what embarrassing artifact from his previous life had been unearthed. His money was on the collection of academic journals he'd stress-highlighted into oblivion.

But Marlow was holding up his high school team's hockey jersey. Red and white, number 24, the back covered in Sharpie signatures that overlapped and sprawled across the shoulders and down the sleeves. COACH HOLLANDER across the top in iron-on letters that were peeling at the edges.

"Your team signed this?" Marlow's expression had gone soft.

"Last year's seniors. Before graduation." Shane took it, running his thumb over the chaos of names and messages and inside jokes he needed a decoder ring to understand. *Thanks for making ethics not suck. You got skillzzzz! Hat trick king! Good luck with the newbs, Coach. You're the best teacher I've ever had.*

Shane carefully folded the jersey, not quite meeting anyone's eyes.

"Do you miss teaching?" Evangeline said, taking the folded jersey into her hands and setting it carefully on top of his desk. "We should get a large display case and hang it up in your study."

He smiled at her, nodding his agreement. "I liked teaching ethics, it was kind of fun to get my students to think beyond what was trending on the algorithm. But honestly, I took the teaching job so that I could be their hockey coach – well, assistant coach." He glanced up at them. "What winter sports do you have here?"

"Skiing and snowboarding are the most popular sports. But everyone in the kingdom skates." Svetlana said, looking through Shane's collection of books.

"Oh yeah, everyone skates," Hayden confirmed, nodding. "It's huge here. Humans, vampires, werewolves, Fae, everyone. Well, maybe not the mers, they tend to go to warmer waters during the winter months. But the winter markets have skate races, there are leagues, tournaments..."

"There's an indoor ice rink in the town," Scott said, leaning against the doorframe. "Not a professional rink, it's kind of small, actually, but it's maintained year-round. We should take you down there. Get you on skates."

Shane nodded, excitedly. "I would love that! I'm pretty sure one of the boxes has my hockey skates and my equipment. Hey, maybe I can start a hockey camp for kids or something?"

"That would actually be amazing," Kip said, his expression lighting up. "There are skating programs for kids in the territory, but nothing hockey-specific. We could coordinate with the youth athletics department with the local schools."

"Kip gets invited to teach art classes at the schools, he could introduce you to the administrators," Scott added, his voice gravely with pride in his mate.

"Cool. I figure, nothing too intense, just fundamentals. Getting them comfortable on skates, basic stick handling –"

"Next you'll be designing team jerseys," Hayden teased, smiling widely.

"Team jerseys are important," Shane protested. "Team identity matters. It builds –"

"Ohmygod, he's going to give us a lecture on sports psychology," Evangeline said, though her tone was fond. "Shane. We believe you. You can start your hockey empire, the first in the kingdom."

"I'll bring the blood," Svetlana said, chuckling.

"You can't drink blood at a hockey rink," Shane protested, laughing.

Six pairs of eyes stared at him.

"Right. Vampires. Different rules."

"*Very* different rules," Evangeline murmured, and something in her tone made Shane look up sharply.

She was watching him with an expression he couldn't quite parse – amused, maybe, but also appraising. The others had gone quiet too, and Shane was suddenly, acutely aware that they were all looking at him the same way. Marlow hid a smile behind his hand. Scott's thick and dark eyebrows climbing toward his hairline. Even Kip had developed a sudden fascination with his shoes.

"What?" Shane said, feeling a little confused and hurt. He wasn't as oblivious as he seemed to appear, it was just easier to let things roll off his back.

"Nothing," Svetlana said, too quickly.

"Absolutely nothing," Hayden agreed.

"You're all terrible liars." Shane crossed his arms. "You keep doing that. The looks, the smiles, the weird pregnant pauses. Are you...making fun of me? Because if there's some inside joke about the clueless human Consort, I'd actually rather just know."

"We're *not* making fun of you," Svetlana said, and she sounded genuine enough that some of Shane's defensiveness eased. "It's just..."

She looked at Scott, who looked at Evangeline, who examined her wine glass with sudden intense focus.

"Oh, for God's sake," Hayden said, exasperated. "I'll tell him. Shane, do you understand where this apartment is? Like, *where* it is?"

Shane frowned, glancing around. "The North Tower. Vasily said all the rooms up here follow a color theme, and that's why he called my apartment the blue room. It's nice. Really nice. Possibly *too* nice for –"

"The top floor of the North Tower is Ilya's private residence," Evangeline interrupted, setting her glass down with a decisive click. "His personal space. No one comes up here without his explicit invitation. He doesn't conduct court business up here, unless it's something urgent."

"Right, okay. And I'm next door. Which makes sense because I'm the Consort, so we're –"

"Shane." Hayden's voice was patient, like he was explaining something to a particularly bright student who'd somehow missed the obvious conclusion. "In the vampire court, proximity means everything. Who sits where at dinner, who stands where during ceremonies,

whose rooms are located near whose. Everyone is jockeying for position and they all want to be *closer* to the Crown. It's a very specific message, you know?"

Shane blinked. "Okay?"

"Ilya doesn't let *anyone* into his private residence," Scott said, giving Shane a small smile. "We're all in the North Tower, sure, but we're floors down. Five, six levels below you. There's a reason for that."

"He's creating distance," Svetlana added, gently. "Between his public life and his private one. For the people he trusts and the person he..."

She trailed off, and Shane's brain, his very good, very well-educated brain, finally connected the dots.

"Oh," he said, in a voice that came out smaller than intended.

"Not just in the hallway," Kip said, grinning now. "*Right* next door. Share-a-wall next door. Can-hear-if-he's-playing-music-too-loud next door."

"It's just the two of you up here," Evangeline said, smirking. "*Very* private."

Shane's face was doing something unfortunate with heat distribution. He could feel it creeping up his neck, burning across his cheekbones.

"That's just...it's practical. I'm his Consort, we'll have duties together, it's efficient to —"

"Oh Shane." Svetlana's voice was affectionate, almost pitying. "He gave you the apartment *next to his bedroom*."

"We don't know if it's next to his bedroom specifically."

"It's next to his bedroom," Hayden confirmed. "I've been here long enough to know the layout."

"It's next to his bedroom," Svetlana agreed.

"*Definitely* next to his bedroom," Evangeline said, raising her eyebrow.

Shane sat down on one of the leather armchairs. His brain was doing complex gymnastics, replaying every interaction with Ilya through this new lens.

"Ohmygod," Shane whispered, sitting back.

"What?" Six voices said, simultaneously.

"He came to the cottage a couple of nights ago. I'd just gotten out of the shower." Shane covered his face with his free hand, words muffled. "I was wearing a towel. And he was just *there*, in the living room, and then he told me about the Ashen Cross and I had a panic attack."

He dropped his hand, looking up at his friends, who were regarding him with expressions ranging from delighted (Svetlana) to sympathetic (Kip) to thoroughly entertained (everyone else).

"Oh? He didn't tell us that he visited you," Evangeline said, her blue eyes bright with mischief and curiosity.

"He was...nice to me," Shane finished quietly. "He didn't make it weird. And he didn't make me feel stupid."

"Of course he didn't," Svetlana said, smiling at him. "Ilya's many things, but he's never cruel to someone he cares for."

"Also he probably enjoyed the view while he was comforting you," Evangeline added, snorting.

"Lady Thorne!"

"What? I'm just saying what everyone's thinking. Shane's in good shape. The Prince has eyes."

"Very shapely," Scott said, cupping his hands and making semi-circles in the air.

Kip chuckled. "You should let me paint your portrait."

"Oh yes, one of those boudoir ones where he's naked and blushing. Ilya would love it," Svetlana said, putting her elbow on Kip's shoulder, ducking their heads and discussing the best pose for Shane.

"Can we not – " Shane gestured helplessly, waving his hands in the air. "Can we just not dissect my body in relation to the Crown Prince that I'll be contractually bound to?"

"Contractually bound *and* already living next door to," Hayden said, cheerfully. "In the private residence. Next to his bedroom."

"I hate all of you," Shane muttered, fighting the grin as he looked away.

"You don't," Marlow said, squeezing his shoulder as he passed. "You're just flustered."

"I'm not flustered."

"You're *very* flustered," Kip said, looking at him fondly. "It's kind of endearing."

Scott picked up another box, heading back toward the bedroom. "So, ice skating tomorrow?"

"Yes!" Shane said, grateful for the subject change. He picked up another box and followed Scott to the other room. "Please! Skating. Normal, regular, not-emotionally-complicated skating."

"Nothing's normal here," Svetlana called after him. "So you fit right in!"

A couple of hours later, most of the boxes were unpacked and Shane was standing in his bathroom, trying to process the sheer *opulence* of it. Marble floors, heated, because of course they were. A glass enclosed shower that could fit four people comfortably. And the bathtub.

God, the bathtub was sexy.

It was carved from a single piece of marble, long and deep enough to actually stretch out in, positioned beneath a window that overlooked the gardens. Steam would rise, water would stay hot for a long time, and it was the kind of decadent luxury Shane had only ever seen in magazines he'd leafed through in dentist waiting rooms.

"Ilya had all the bathrooms in the palace renovated and modernized, it's a pet project of his," Evangeline said from the doorway, making Shane jump. "But the North Tower ones are all like this. He loves soaking in a hot bath."

Shane tried very hard not to picture it. Ilya relaxing in a bathtub. Would he read a book while in the bath? Would he light candles? Did vampires use bath bombs? Was that a thing they did?

His brain supplied the image anyway: Ilya's pale skin against dark marble, water steaming, curly hair damp and the wet ringlets sticking to his forehead, those sharp features softened by heat and privacy and –

"You're doing it again," Evangeline observed.

"Doing what?"

"The face. The 'trying not to think about something which means you're definitely thinking about it' face." She smiled, feline and knowing. "It's sweet that you daydream about him."

"There's nothing sweet about –" Shane gestured vaguely at the bathroom, the apartment, the entire situation. "This is all just...practical arrangements. Royal protocol and security. He's keeping me safe from the Ashen Cross."

"Safe," Evangeline said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "That's definitely all it is."

She drifted away, leaving Shane alone with his thoughts and his unfortunately vivid imagination and a bathtub that suddenly seemed much more significant than mere plumbing had any right to be.

From the sitting room, he could hear his friends laughing, bottles clinking, Svetlana talking about his truly tragic collection of boring t-shirts and how she and Evangeline were going to take Shane shopping.

Shane looked at his reflection in the mirror, flushed, rumpled, wearing jeans with paint stains and an old college sweatshirt, standing in a bathroom that belonged in architectural magazines.

Next door to Ilya's bedroom.

In the private residence.

Where proximity meant *everything*.

"Okay," he said to his reflection. "Okay. You're fine. This is totally fine."

His reflection looked unconvinced, but at least it wasn't arguing.

The video call connected with a soft chime, and the tablet screen filled with his parents' faces, his dad leaning too close to the camera, his mom adjusting the angle with practiced patience.

"There he is," David said, grinning. "Hey Shane, how are you, son?"

"I'm doing okay, Dad. I just moved into my apartment in the palace."

"Show us everything. We want the full tour," Yuna said, pressed close to David.

Shane obliged, flipping the tablet around and narrating as he moved through the apartment. The sitting room with its leather couches and fireplace. The study with its wall of bookshelves, he lingered there, showing them the historical texts that had been waiting for him. His mother made an appreciative sound when she saw the writing desk.

"That's a gorgeous desk. Maybe 18th century?"

"Probably older," Shane admitted. "Everything here is older. I'm starting to think the newest thing in this palace is me."

His father laughed at that, the sound crackling slightly through the connection. Shane showed them the bedroom last, panning across the absurd four-poster bed, the windows with their view of the mountains, and the closet that was large enough to be a smaller bedroom. He had hung up all of his clothes and it only filled one small area of the closet space.

"This room alone could be an apartment," David said, impressed.

"It's bigger than *my* entire old apartment," Shane said, amused. "By about three times. Maybe more. I can fit my old Commonwealth place in just the bedroom."

He sat on the bed and leaned against the pillows, bending his knees up to prop up the tablet, looking at his parents on the small screen.

"Are you happy?" Yuna asked, her voice going soft in that way that meant she was asking the real question beneath the question.

"Yeah, Mom. I guess I am. It's overwhelming sometimes, and I'm definitely still figuring things out, but...yeah. I'm good. I have a few new friends, they helped me with unpacking

today. I think King Aurelion likes me, he's been really nice. And Prince Ilya and I have met a couple of times now. So...it could be worse."

"It could be worse," David said, softly. His blue eyes were kind, though a little sad.

"You look good," she said, a bit of relief showing on her face. "But you still look a little worried."

"Yeah, well, okay, there's one thing that's a little worrying. There's a vampire faction called Ashen Cross, they're opposed to the Great Truce. They've made some threats online."

His mother's expression sharpened immediately. "What kind of threats?"

"The kind that means *you* need to be careful. They've targeted humans with the *Sanguis Resonans* bloodline, even people with the dormant genome." Shane kept his voice level, calm. He didn't want to freak out his parents. "Security's been increased across the board, but Mom...I need you to listen to your security team. I know you guys hate the lack of privacy and I know you think it's excessive, but please. Just for a while. Let them do their job."

Yuna's jaw set in a way Shane recognized, the stubborn line that meant she was about to argue. But David's hand appeared in the frame, resting on her shoulder, and she exhaled slowly.

"Alright," she said, nodding. "I'll behave. But only because you asked."

"That's all I want. Just be safe. Both of you."

They talked for another twenty minutes, his father's latest project at the Treasury Board, his mother's upcoming lecture series at the university, small details of home that felt both distant and comforting. When they finally said goodbye, Shane felt the familiar ache of missing them settle in his chest, warm and bittersweet.

He was setting the tablet on the nightstand when the knock came. He walked out of the bedroom to the main sitting room, and towards the large double doors that led to the hallway.

"Hey, did you forget something – ohh!" Shane was expecting to see Hayden or Kip returning for a forgotten sweater.

It was Ilya...and he had actually knocked this time.

"Your Highness," Shane said, offering him a shy smile. "Come in."

Shane's brain stuttered slightly, the way it always did when confronted with the Crown Prince. Ilya wore dark slacks and a charcoal sweater, curly hair brushed back in a way that emphasized the sharp angles of his face. He looked elegant and dangerous and entirely too attractive for Shane's cardiovascular health.

"I wanted to see how you were settling in," Ilya said, stepping inside with that preternatural grace that made movement look like art. His gaze swept the room, taking in the organized

chaos of Shane's possessions scattered among the room's formal furnishings. "The unpacking progresses well, yes?"

"Yes. Your friends were here," Shane said, then felt heat creep up his neck. "I mean, they helped a lot and made it fun, actually. There was a lot of teasing about my stuff, but good-natured."

Something shifted in Ilya's expression, a softening Shane was learning to recognize. "They're your friends, too, Shane."

The words landed with unexpected weight. Shane felt his face do something stupid and obvious, a smile spreading before he could control it, warmth blooming in his chest.

"Yeah?"

"Yes." Ilya moved further into the room, looking at the various items laying about. "You are not simply my Consort. You are part of this household, this family. They've claimed you as one of their own."

Shane's throat felt tight. "That's really good to hear."

Another knock interrupted whatever Ilya might have said next. Shane opened the door to find Vasily in the hallway.

"Apologies for the intrusion, Your Highness, Consort Hollander," Vasily said with a slight bow. "But I thought it best to introduce his household staff this evening."

Mira and Sophie stepped forward first, and Shane's smile widened automatically. Mira, small and fierce with her curly brown hair in her usual tight bun, practically vibrated with excitement. Sophie with warm brown skin and kind green eyes, allowed herself a happy smile.

"We were asked if we wished to continue in your service," Mira said, the words tumbling out quickly. "And we said yes immediately. If that's alright with you, of course."

"More than alright," Shane said, relieved. "I'm really glad you wanted to stay. You've both been incredibly helpful."

"We like you," Sophie added, more composed than her partner but no less sincere. "You're considerate and you don't make unreasonable demands."

"The bar seems low," Shane observed, dryly.

"You'd be surprised," Mira said, and then remembered that she was in the presence of the Crown Prince. "I mean no offense, Your Highness."

Ilya laughed agreeably. "You've both served in the palace, the bar is pretty low."

The third person stepped forward, and Shane found himself facing someone new. A man slightly shorter than Shane but built like he could uproot trees for entertainment. He was

stocky, broad-shouldered, with the kind of rugged handsomeness that belonged in outdoorsy catalogues. His dark blond hair was combed neatly, he wore a trimmed beard, and his mossy green eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

"Harris Drover," he said, offering a polite bow. "I'm your new social secretary. It's a pleasure to meet you, Consort Hollander."

"Social secretary," Shane repeated, raising his eyebrow. "That sounds official."

"It is," Vasily confirmed. "Harris will assist you in preparing for official events, understanding your role as Consort, and managing your public presence. He will be in charge of your social media."

Shane blinked. "I can have social media?"

"You *had* personal social media," Harris said, his voice carrying a friendly warmth that immediately put Shane at ease. "Which has been archived. You now have official Consort social media, which is a different beast entirely. Don't worry, I'll handle most of it."

"Wow, okay, thank you. I was never good at social media, so this should be...fun?"

Harris's laugh was loud and genuine, filling the room with uncomplicated good humor. "We'll work on it together. That'll be my part of the job. I'm here to help you start building your public brand, Consort Hollander, and to make sure you don't accidentally insult a foreign dignitary by using the wrong fork."

"There are wrong forks?"

"So many wrong forks."

Shane felt himself relaxing, warming to Harris immediately. There was something refreshingly straightforward about him, no courtly pretense, no careful distance. Just friendly competence wrapped in a package that looked about Shane's age, though Shane had learned not to ask direct questions about how old anyone actually was. He'd made that mistake only once with Evangeline, asking her her age and that she must've been so young when she was Turned, and he received a look that had made him feel like he'd asked a woman a highly inappropriate and profane question.

"See, that's how you know she likes you," Hayden said, patting Shane on his back. "If anyone else asked her how old she was, she would've slashed their throat and bathed in their blood. Like seriously, Evangeline has really mellowed out in her old age --"

"How fucking dare you, Hayden!" Evangeline screeched from the other side of the room.

"-- I should probably stop talking."

Shane raised his eyebrow and stared at him. "It's too late, Hayd."

Harris was a vampire, that much was obvious from the slight paleness of his skin, the preternatural stillness that settled over him between movements. Vampires wore their years

differently and Shane was still learning to read the subtle markers.

Ilya had remained quiet during the introductions, but Shane caught him looking at the assembled staff with an expression that might have been approval. His pale gaze settled on each of them briefly, Mira, Sophie, Harris, before returning to Shane.

"You have good people supporting you," Ilya said, quietly.

"I know and I'm so grateful," Shane said, smiling.

Vasily cleared his throat delicately. "Mira and Sophie will continue their current duties, household management and coordination with palace staff. Harris will handle your schedule, correspondence, and public appearances. If you need anything adjusted, simply let me know."

"This is all really great," Shane said, looking at the three people who were apparently dedicated to making his life easier. "Thank you. All of you."

"We'll leave you to your evening," Vasily said, gesturing to the others. "Harris will meet with you tomorrow morning to discuss your upcoming engagements."

Mira and Sophie offered small bows before departing.

"See you at nine, Consort Hollander." Harris said, cheerfully.

The door closed behind them, leaving Shane alone with Ilya.

"Thank you," Shane said, feeling like saying 'thank you' wasn't enough. "For all of this. The apartment, the staff, your friends – *our* friends. For checking up on me."

Ilya's head tilted slightly. "Checking up on you?"

"You were distant before. After the First Presentation, I thought you were...I don't know. Cold, maybe. Like you regretted the whole thing and were ignoring me." Shane ran a hand through his hair, suddenly self-conscious. "Now you're here. Checking on me. It's nice."

Something flickered across Ilya's face, surprise, perhaps, or discomfort at being read so clearly. "I was not trying to be cold. I was trying to be...respectful."

"Respectful of what?"

"Of you." Ilya's gaze met his, direct and intense. "Of your autonomy, your comfort. You agreed to this arrangement, but you did not agree to having an overbearing vampire hovering over you constantly. I wanted to give you space."

"Oh." Shane absorbed that, recalibrating his understanding of the past weeks. "Well, for what it's worth, I prefer this. The talking. The checking in. I'm not great with distance and ambiguity."

"Okay." The corner of Ilya's mouth curved slightly, not quite a smile, but close. "I will try."

"I'd like that."

They stood there for another moment, the air between them charged with something Shane was afraid to examine too closely. The strange intimacy of two people bound by contract and circumstance, learning to exist in each other's orbit.

Shane didn't know what would happen when they bonded, when Ilya's blood and his own mingled in whatever ancient ritual the vampires used. He really should find out before the actual bonding ceremony. Harris would probably know.

What he had hoped for was friendship, at a minimum. Partnership would be better. Anything beyond that felt too complicated to consider, too tangled with power dynamics and immortality and the fact that Shane was desperately, stupidly attracted to the centuries-old vampire currently standing in his apartment.

Because he was. *Attracted*. Ilya was beautiful in a way that made Shane's brain short-circuit, all sharp elegance and contained power, and Shane did absolutely think about him in the shower while he was jerking off. He wondered what it would feel like when Ilya finally bit him – the pierce of sharp fangs, the rush of sensation, the intimacy of blood sharing that every vampire text described in terms that sounded suspiciously like euphemisms for sex.

Shane was pretty sure Ilya found him attractive, too. And he didn't think it was only for his *Sanguis Resonans* blood. The way the Prince looked at him sometimes, the careful touches during his panic attack and the apartment in his private residence, those weren't the actions of someone indifferent.

But attraction was just attraction. It didn't mean anything had to happen. They could be friends. Partners in the kingdom. Two people working together for the good of the Great Truce.

Shane could absolutely be professional about this.

Probably.

"I should let you rest," Ilya said, moving toward the door with that liquid grace. "You've had a long day."

"Yeah. Thanks for stopping by."

Ilya paused at the threshold, looking back. "Sleep well, Shane."

"You, too."

The Prince's smile was small and genuine. Then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him, leaving Shane alone in his ridiculously opulent apartment in the North Tower, next door to the Crown Prince of the Vampire Kingdom, with a new staff and new friends and a future that felt both terrifying and exhilarating.

Shane walked to his bedroom and flopped backward onto the massive bed, staring up at the canopy overhead.

"This is fine," he told the ornate ceiling. "This is totally, completely fine."

The ceiling, like his reflection in the mirror earlier, seemed unconvinced.

But Shane was getting better at ignoring his own doubts.

Mostly.

He really needed a shower. A cold one.

The Rozanov Palace was absurd.

That was Shane's primary thought as he walked through what Harris called the Portrait Gallery, a corridor so long Shane couldn't see the end of it, lined with huge wall-sized portraits of stern-faced beings in clothing that spanned centuries. Crystal chandeliers hung every twenty feet, each one probably worth more than a house. The marble floors were so polished he could see his reflection, distorted and ghostly.

"I need a map," Shane said, stopping to stare up at a portrait of a woman in an elaborate Renaissance dress, her pale face austere and beautiful. "Or maybe a GPS. Do they make GPS for palaces?"

Harris's laugh echoed off the vaulted ceiling, that loud, genuine sound Shane was already becoming fond of. "Most people just get lost for the first few months. I did. Ended up in the wine cellars three times before I figured out the difference between the North and South staircases."

"How long did it take you to learn your way around?"

"Oh, I'd say I'm only seventy percent there." Harris grinned, gesturing for Shane to follow him down a branching corridor. "I've been here for sixty years, though. Give me another decade and I'll know every secret corner here."

Shane tried to imagine sixty years in one place and couldn't quite manage it. His entire life so far wouldn't fill even half that time.

They passed through a room Harris identified as the Blue Salon, all navy velvet and gold trim, with furniture that looked like sitting on it would constitute vandalism, and into another corridor lined with marble statues. Greek, maybe. Or Roman.

"So," Harris said, pulling out a tablet from the leather messenger bag he carried. "Let's talk about your first official event. Week from Thursday, formal State reception and dinner for Premier Roslyn Considine. She's visiting from the Eastern Commonwealth to discuss trade negotiations with King Aurelion and Prince Ilya."

Shane's stomach did an uncomfortable flip. "Formal. How formal are we talking?"

"Very. Full regalia, seven-course dinner, about eighty guests including human dignitaries, vampire aristocracy, a few werewolf pack representatives, Fae delegation, and a couple of mer ambassadors." Harris scrolled through his tablet with practiced efficiency. "You'll be seated next to Prince Ilya, obviously. Premier Considine will be on his other side."

"Seven courses," Shane repeated faintly.

"I know it sounds intimidating, but you'll be fine. Lady Thorne mentioned she'd started you on formal dining protocols?"

"She tried." Shane ran a hand through his hair, embarrassment creeping up his neck. "Mira and Sophie helped, too. There were a lot of forks. And rules about how to address servers. And something about how long to speak to the person you're sitting next to. I've forgotten approximately ninety percent of it."

"Not a problem." Harris made a note on his tablet. "I'll coordinate with the kitchen staff, they'll give you a refresher course. We'll do a full mock dinner and get you comfortable with the pacing, the protocols, all of it. They're planning the menu anyway, and need to accommodate everyone's dietary requirements. Humans, mers who prefer their seafood raw, werewolves who eat enough for three people, Fae who won't touch iron utensils..."

"The mer can come to dinner?"

"Yep. Don't worry about the logistics. That's my job. Your job is to be princely and make Premier Considine feel welcome."

"I'm not princely," Shane protested. "I'm a high school teacher who owns exactly one suit."

"*Owned* one suit. You now own approximately fifteen suits, all custom tailored, all waiting in your closet courtesy of the palace clothiers." Harris's grin was unrepentant. "Welcome to your new life."

"Okay, I'm a little disturbed that everyone knows what size clothes I wear," he mumbled, feeling a little exposed. "Are people buying me underwear, too?"

"Yes. Sorry, Shane, but the palace staff knows everything about everyone. We have no secrets from them. It's how they do their jobs so effortlessly."

They turned into another gallery, this one smaller, more intimate, with paintings that looked like Renaissance-era. Harris slowed, gesturing to a landscape that featured a castle on a hill, surrounded by dark forests.

"That's the Rozanov stronghold as it existed in 1147," he said, admiringly. "Before the palace was built around it. Ilya commissioned the painting about two hundred years after the fact, working from memory and old sketches."

Shane studied the painting, trying to imagine Ilya young, or mortal, anyway. Walking those castle corridors before electricity, before modern plumbing, before the world had transformed around him.

"How long does it take to learn all this?" Shane asked, gesturing vaguely at the artwork, the palace, the accumulated weight of centuries. "The history, the stories, who painted what and when and why it matters?"

Harris laughed, that warm rumble that made the question feel less overwhelming. "Oh, give or take fifty years?"

Shane did the math automatically. "I'll be in my late seventies."

"And still young by vampire standards." Harris clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't stress about it. You're not expected to know everything. You're expected to be present, engaged, and genuinely curious. I've already heard the court gossip about you; the courtiers like your lack of pretentiousness and not putting on fake airs, shit like that. You treat everyone politely. You may not know it, but you have a lot of allies in the court."

They continued through the palace, Harris pointing out significant pieces, a sculpture from ancient Greece, a tapestry woven by Fae craftspeople in the 900s, and a stained glass window that had survived three different wars. Shane tried to absorb it all, his teacher's brain cataloging details even as the sheer volume threatened to overwhelm him.

The corridors opened into a massive room Harris called the Grand Receiving Hall. And it was currently occupied.

Shane had gotten used to the North Tower being relatively empty during his explorations, servants moving quietly through their duties, the occasional vampire noble passing through. But this room held at least thirty people, clustered in small groups, their conversations creating a low murmur that echoed off the painted ceiling.

The moment Shane and Harris entered, heads turned.

"Consort Hollander," a woman's voice called out, warm, slightly accented. A vampire with auburn hair and an emerald dress approached, her smile practiced and perfect. "What a pleasure to see you again. Lady Melinda Kristoff, we met briefly at the reception after your presentation."

Shane had absolutely no memory of meeting her, but he returned her smile as best he could. "Of course, My Lady. Nice to see you again."

"I wanted to extend an invitation to our spring salon," Lady Kristoff continued, somehow managing to stand just slightly too close. "A small gathering, very intimate. Poetry readings, musical performances. I think you'd find it entertaining."

"That's very kind of you –"

"The Consort's schedule is quite full at present," Harris interjected smoothly at Shane's elbow with the efficiency of a well-trained sheepdog. "But I'll make note of the invitation. If you could send the details to my office?"

Lady Kristoff's smile tightened fractionally. "Of course. I'll have my secretary contact you."

She drifted away, and Shane exhaled quietly. "Thanks."

"Part of the job. And you will not be attending any of her spring salon activities, unless you want to be part of their blood orgy," Harris murmured. "Here comes another one. Werewolf representative, William Harte. He's actually genuine, not a social climber."

A tall man with dark skin and warm brown eyes approached, his movements carrying that barely contained energy Shane associated with werewolves. He wore a modern suit but somehow made it look casual, someone who was comfortable in his skin.

"Consort Hollander," he said, bowing slightly. "William Harte, representing the Silverpine Pack. Welcome to the madness."

Shane liked him immediately. "Is it always this...crowded?"

"Court days are worse. This is actually pretty calm." William's smile was crooked, friendly. "Fair warning, people are going to want to talk to you. Get your measure. Some are genuinely nice, some are politically motivated, most are somewhere in between."

"That's terrifying."

"Little bit, yeah." William's expression turned sympathetic. "You'll figure out who's who pretty quick. And Harris here is excellent at extraction when you need it."

"Thank you, Ambassador Harte, I do try my best," Harris said modestly, his face flushing.

He moved Shane around the room, taking a quick glance over his shoulder at the werewolf. "Shit, he's gorgeous."

Shane smiled, looking over at William. "Yeah, he is, and he's nice. Are you, um, interested in him?"

"Who *isn't* interested in him," Harris said, laughing. "The question is, who is Ambassador Harte interested in?"

Over the next twenty minutes, Shane was introduced to what felt like dozens of people. A Fae ambassador with silver hair and eyes the color of amethyst, who spoke in riddles Shane pretended to understand. A human trade representative who seemed genuinely excited to discuss agricultural exports. A vampire aristocrat who complimented Shane's "refreshing authenticity" in a tone that might have been sincere or might have been deeply sarcastic, Shane honestly couldn't tell.

A few were obsequious in a way that made Shane's skin crawl. One elderly vampire actually attempted to kiss Shane's hand, calling him "Your Grace" despite Harris's gentle correction that Shane's proper address was simply "Consort Hollander." A human representative, some kind of minor noble from a southern territory, laughed too loud at everything Shane said and kept touching his arm.

Harris was masterful at extraction. A brief touch to Shane's elbow, a polite phrase about scheduled appointments, and suddenly Shane was being guided away before he could get

trapped in another circular conversation about trade tariffs or poetry salons or whatever courtly nonsense was trending in the room.

"Thanks. I was starting to get a headache." Shane asked when they'd escaped to a quieter corridor.

Harris glanced at him, green eyes sympathetic. "You adapting okay? I know it's a lot, having everyone suddenly know your name and wanting your attention."

Shane thought about his old life, walking through Commonwealth streets anonymously, being just another teacher at parent conferences, existing in comfortable obscurity.

"It's weird," he admitted, thoughtfully. "I'm not anyone important. I'm just...me. But they're all treating me like I matter."

"You do matter," Harris said, gently. "You're the Consort of the Crown Prince. That's not a small thing."

"I know, but –" Shane struggled for the words. "I didn't earn it. I was selected because of my bloodline. That's different from actually being worthy of all this." He gestured vaguely at the palace around them.

Harris stopped walking, turning to face Shane fully. "Can I tell you something? No one famous actually wants to be famous. Not really. It's not glamour and glitz. It's scary. It's being watched constantly, judged, having every word and action analyzed. And you got dropped right into the middle of it, straight into a pond full of hungry piranhas."

Shane laughed despite himself, the sound echoing off the corridor walls. "That's actually pretty accurate."

"You'll learn to tell the difference between people who genuinely want to know you and people who just want something from you, it just takes time, but you'll get there."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, you have me. And Mira and Sophie. And your friends. We're piranha repellent."

"Is that in your job description? Piranha repellent?"

"It is now." Harris started walking again, leading Shane through another series of corridors.

They emerged into another grand room, this one clearly a ballroom, with soaring ceilings and tall windows. The floor was inlaid wood in complex geometric patterns, polished to a mirror shine. Shane could imagine it filled with dancers, music echoing off the walls, centuries of celebrations compressed into this one perfect space.

"This is where the State dinner will be," Harris said. "Well, not dinner itself, that's in the formal dining hall. But the reception beforehand, and the dancing afterward if you're up for it."

"Dancing," Shane repeated. "Do I need to know how to waltz?"

"Eventually. We'll get you lessons." Harris made another note on his tablet. "But for this event, you can probably skip the dancing. Stick close to Prince Ilya, make polite conversation, and survive the seven courses. That's ambitious enough for your first formal dinner."

Shane walked to one of the windows, looking out at the gardens.

"Harris?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For being piranha repellent."

Harris joined him at the window, his reflection ghostly in the glass. "You're welcome. For what it's worth, I think you're going to be good at this. You care about getting it right. That's more than most people bring to the job."

Shane wasn't sure he believed that, but he appreciated the vote of confidence anyway.

"Alright. Let's get you back to your apartment so you can get ready for your outing. We still got a week to prepare you for eighty judgmental aristocrats and seven forks. No pressure."

"None at all," Shane agreed, dryly.

But as they made their way back through the labyrinthine corridors of the Rozanov Palace, Shane found himself feeling slightly less overwhelmed. The palace was still absurd, the situation still terrifying, the piranhas still circling.

Maybe he could do this. He just needed to survive the seven forks first.

The ice rink wasn't anything like the professional arenas Shane had visited, there was no stadium seating, no massive Jumbotron, no corporate sponsorship banners plastered across the boards. Just a clean sheet of ice roughly the size of a standard rink, enclosed by modest walls and lit by overhead fixtures that cast everything in clean, white light. A few benches lined one side, and the whole space had that particular cold-and-clean smell Shane associated with early morning practices. Vasily had rented out the rink for them so that they could have it to themselves.

It was fucking perfect.

"Kip sends his regrets," Scott said, lacing up his skates on one of the benches. "He's hosting a painting workshop for new patrons who might commission actual work."

"Translation: rich and vain vampires who want portraits that make them look brooding and mysterious," Hayden added, pulling his own skate laces tight. "Kip's exact words were 'I'm prostituting my artistic integrity for rent money.'"

"Does Kip pay rent?" Shane asked, sitting down to work on his own skates. He'd brought his hockey skates, proper ones, with the aggressive blade profile and reinforced boots he'd used throughout college. They felt like old friends, worn and comfortable.

"No, of course not. But he likes having his own money." Scott stood, testing his balance. "He's stubborn like that."

"I'm going to be in the stands, taking pictures and videos to add to your social media," Harris said, holding up his phone in the air and waving it at them. "So don't look stupid on the ice, Shane."

"Fuck off," he said, laughing.

Shane finished lacing up, anticipation building in his chest like fizzy soda. It had been weeks since he'd been on ice, not since leaving the Commonwealth, where he'd sometimes joined open skate sessions on weekends, chasing the ghost of what might have been.

The sound of the rink door opening made all four of them look up.

Ilya stepped through, carrying skates Shane immediately recognized as high-end speed skates. He wore dark athletic pants and a fitted long-sleeve t-shirt that somehow made him look both approachable and impossibly elegant. Of course he wasn't bundled in a warm coat as he was impervious to cold temperatures.

Harris made a perfect bow and Ilya waved them off, noticing that they were alone.

"If you're friends with him, do you have to do all the bowing and honorifics, too?"

Scott smiled, rubbing his bearded chin with his hand. "The first protocol of being a friend of the Crown Prince is that we bow to him when we're in public, but not in private. The second protocol of being a friend of the Crown Prince is that we do not use our friendship to our advantage. The third protocol of being a friend of the Crown Prince is to never discuss the friendship in public. Our identity is never shared or confirmed."

"Shit. You have friendship protocols?"

"There's a protocol for everything," he said, letting out a deep laugh.

Shane mulled it over for a long moment. "Is it hard being friends with the Crown Prince?"

*"Yes," Scott said, amused. "But not with my **friend** Ilya."*

"Ilya," Hayden said, surprise evident in his voice. "Didn't expect to see you here today."

"I thought I would join you to skate," Ilya said mildly, moving to the benches. "When Vasily told me that he'd rented the rink for you, I remembered that I haven't skated in a long time."

"You're always welcome," Scott said, though he exchanged a glance with Hayden that Shane couldn't quite interpret.

Shane felt something warm and pleased unfurl in his chest. Ilya had come. To skate. To spend time doing something normal and fun and entirely divorced from court politics.

"I'm curious to see you on the ice," Shane said honestly, standing and moving toward the rink entrance. "You're probably an awesome skater to watch."

Ilya's smile was inching towards smugness. "Yes."

Shane chuckled and then stepped onto the ice, and the world immediately felt *right*.

The glide of blades on fresh ice, the particular resistance and give, the way his body remembered exactly how to balance and shift weight, it was like coming home after a long absence. He pushed off experimentally, feeling the bite of his edges, the smooth acceleration. There weren't a lot of places where Shane felt completely confident, but on the ice, he was in his element.

God, he'd missed this.

"Show off moves later," Hayden called, waving for Shane to come back towards them. "Humans need to warm up first unless you want to pull something."

"Yes, *Dad*," Shane muttered, but Hayden was right.

He skated back towards the entrance and dropped to his hands and knees.

The ice was cold against his palms, even through his gloves. Shane spread his knees wide, arched his back, and began the hip flexor stretches that had been drilled into him by every coach he'd ever had. He moved his hips in careful, slow thrusts, feeling the burn in his pelvis and lower back. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, enjoying the stretch. He really should do more yoga so that he could stay flexible. Core engaged, he slid his knees apart as far as they'd go, feeling the pull in his groin muscles, the stretch along his inner thighs, and then slid them back together. Again. Out. Wider. In. Again. Using his forearms for better stability, getting lower, hips undulating as he worked through the full range of motion.

This was standard. Every hockey player did this as part of their warm ups. You couldn't play properly without releasing your hips, without preparing your groin muscles for the lateral movements and sudden direction changes the sport demanded.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the benches where Hayden, Scott, Harris, and Ilya stood watching him.

All four of them were staring.

Specifically, they were *staring* at Shane's ass. Harris calmly held up his phone at Shane.

Shane bit back a smile and continued the stretches, sliding his knees wider, arching his back a bit more than strictly necessary. He quickened his pace, sliding his knees faster, out and in, out and in, staring at the ice and trying not to laugh.

"This is what we all do as part of warm-ups," he called out, his voice carrying across the ice. "You have to release your hips. People don't realize how important it is to stretch your groin muscles properly before the action starts. Then you can play for hours without straining anything."

Hayden made a strangled sound.

Ilya had gone completely still, his eyes fixed on Shane with an intensity that would've been alarming if Shane didn't know *exactly* what he was doing. The Prince took a step forward, then another, moving toward the ice entrance with clear intent.

Scott and Hayden both grabbed his arms simultaneously.

"Oh no you don't," Scott said, hauling Ilya back with surprising strength.

"I'm getting on the fucking ice," Ilya hissed, and Shane had never heard the Prince sound quite so...flustered. His accent had thickened slightly, the vowels going rounder.

"He's *stretching*," Hayden protested, though his grin suggested he knew better. "He doesn't even know what that looks like. He's innocent. He's a teacher."

Shane completed one more hip slide, really making it count, getting the full extension and letting out a pleased moan at the stretch, before pushing himself up to his feet with easy grace. He absolutely knew what it looked like. Had known since the moment he'd dropped to his knees. The things hockey players had to do for flexibility weren't obscene, but Shane had learned a long time ago that what looked like athletic preparation to him looked like something *entirely different* to non-players.

Especially to a vampire who was starting to look at Shane with hunger.

"All warmed up," Shane announced cheerfully, pushing off and accelerating down the length of the rink. "Let's go, boys!"

The speed was intoxicating. Air on his face, blades cutting clean lines in fresh ice, his body remembering every skill he'd honed over years of practice and games and early morning training sessions. He hit the far end and carved a tight turn, staying close to the boards as he came back around, building speed until the rink blurred at the edges.

When he passed Hayden, Scott, and Ilya, who had finally made it onto the ice, Shane let himself grin widely, the pure joy of movement lighting him up from the inside.

"Fuck yeah, Shane!" Harris shouted, following him around the rink with his camera phone.

This. *This*. He'd forgotten how much he loved it.

For a while in college, Shane had thought he might have a real shot at professional hockey. He'd been good, maybe not NHL good, but good enough for minor leagues, maybe the European Commonwealth teams. He was fast, strategic, and excellent at reading plays before they developed. His coaches had been optimistic.

Then a bad hit during his junior year – a wrong angle, a wrong timing, a collision that sent him into the boards with his knee twisted wrong, and suddenly his future had narrowed dramatically. There was surgery and physical therapy, but he had a knee that never quite trusted him the same way again.

He had grieved it. The loss of that possible life, that version of himself in team colors, making goals, hearing crowds cheer. But teaching had filled some of that void. And coaching the high school hockey team had filled even more, watching kids discover their own love for the sport, helping them improve, and celebrating their victories.

This, though. Just skating, just moving, no pressure or expectations or what-ifs. *This was pure.*

Shane completed another lap and slowed to watch the others.

They were all strong skaters, Hayden with a more aggressive style, Scott smooth and efficient, Ilya...

God, of course Ilya was something to watch on the ice.

Powerful, exactly like Shane had suspected, moving with that preternatural control that made everything look effortless. His speed skates gave him an edge in straight-line velocity, and he used it, cutting across the rink with precision that suggested centuries of practice. He took turns that seemed to defy gravity, whipping back up for the long glides.

"Race you to the far end," Hayden called out, already accelerating.

"You're on," Scott shot back.

And suddenly all four of them were speed skating, competitive energy crackling through the rink like electricity. Shane pushed hard, his hockey skates giving him superior maneuverability if not quite the same top speed. Hayden cut him off at the blue line, laughing as he used his wings in some crazy aerodynamic way. Scott, with his thick thighs and long strides, tried to pass on the outside and nearly crashed into the boards. Ilya moved like liquid shadow, appearing in gaps that shouldn't have existed.

They collided, separated, and regrouped. Hayden checked Scott into the wall with an impact that would've injured a human. Scott just laughed and shoved back, sending both of them careening across the ice.

Shane spotted an opening and went for it, building speed, aiming to pass Ilya on the inside turn –

Except Ilya saw him coming and shifted slightly, lowering his center of gravity, and Shane had a split second to decide between braking or committing to the collision.

He committed.

They went down in a tangle of limbs, sliding across the ice in a spray of frost. Shane had years of experience in controlled falls, knew how to tuck and roll and protect vulnerable

joints, but he also made sure to take the brunt of the impact, twisting so they wouldn't actually get hurt, making it playful rather than painful.

They came to rest near center ice with Ilya on top of him.

Shane laughed breathlessly, heart pounding from exertion and adrenaline and the sudden proximity of the vampire currently braced above him. Ilya's hands were planted on either side of Shane's head, his body firm over him.

"That was so fucking awesome," Shane managed, still grinning.

Ilya stared down at him with those pretty blue eyes. His lips were slightly parted, and Shane could see the tips of his fangs, extended just slightly, catching the overhead light.

The sight sent a shiver through Shane that had nothing to do with the cold.

His smile softened into something shy. He swallowed, feeling his pulse jump in his throat, and watched Ilya's gaze track the movement. Without thinking about it, or maybe thinking about it too much, Shane licked his lips. And *tilted* his chin slightly to the right.

Ilya's pupils dilated and his fangs fully descended inside his opened mouth.

For a heartbeat, maybe two, the world narrowed to just them. The ice beneath Shane's back, the weight of Ilya above him, the visible evidence of hunger and want...

Then Hayden and Scott appeared like a cavalry charge, skating over with more speed than strictly necessary.

"Alright, break it up," Scott announced, grabbing Ilya's arm and physically hauling him up. "No mauling the Consort on the ice. That's definitely against rink rules."

"Pretty sure it's not even in the rink rules," Hayden said, helping Shane to his feet with easy strength. "But probably should be. We'll add it. New rule: no vampire-human make-outs during rink hours."

"We weren't making out," Shane protested, though his face felt hot despite the cold.

"Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, buddy," Hayden agreed cheerfully, patting Shane on his back.

Ilya allowed himself to be pulled away, though he was still looking at Shane with an expression that made Shane's lower belly quiver. Shane brushed ice crystals off his pants and pushed off, suddenly needing the movement, the speed, the rush of cold air to clear his head.

"Shane, can you take a turn around the rink again?" Harris called out.

"You got it!"

He took a turn around the rink at full speed, letting his body do what it did best, skate, move, *fly* across the ice like he was built for it. The air stung his heated cheeks, made his eyes water,

and he laughed just because he could.

It was a good day.

Behind him, he could hear the others resume their chaotic skating, voices calling out challenges and trash talk, the sound of blades on ice creating its own kind of music.

Shane carved another tight turn, leaned into the momentum, and let himself just *be* here. In this moment. In this place. With people who were friends, and a vampire Prince who looked at him like he was someone worth his attention.

Yeah, definitely a *fucking* good day.

Chapter 8: A Late Night Confession

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: I'm so exhausted. If you see any mistakes, I'll fix it later. I've been editing in some kind of fugue state. LOL! Happy reading, everyone!!! Wait until you get to the last scene. Heh.

The intelligence report had been open on Ilya's monitor for the past twenty minutes, the same paragraph glowing accusingly at him while his mind replayed an entirely different scene on an endless loop.

Shane on his hands and knees on the ice, back arched, hips moving in slow, deliberate thrusts as he stretched. The curve of his ass in those athletic pants. The small, pleased sound he'd made when the stretch hit just right.

Ilya dragged a hand through his hair and forced his attention back to the screen. Ashen Cross activity in the Eastern Commonwealth territories. Three new cells identified. Increased chatter about the upcoming State dinner. All very important. All completely failing to hold his focus.

Shane's laugh, bright and unguarded, echoing across the rink.

"Fuck," Ilya drawled out, leaning back against his chair.

His study was exactly as he'd left it that morning, books stacked on the side table, a half-empty glass of blood wine on the desk, the leather chair still indented from where he'd sat reading correspondence at dawn. The fire crackled in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the walls.

So why did he feel like he was coming apart at the seams?

Shane beneath him on the ice, flushed and breathless, that shy smile softening into something that looked almost like an invitation. The way he'd tilted his chin, exposing the long line of his throat.

Ilya's fangs ached at the memory. He pressed his tongue against them, feeling the sharp points, the involuntary descent that happened whenever his mind circled back to Shane. Which it had been doing with alarming frequency for the past three hours.

This was ridiculous. He was six hundred years old. He'd had countless lovers, fed from thousands of humans, navigated desire and politics and the complicated intersection between them with ease. He shouldn't be sitting in his study like some lovesick adolescent, obsessing over the way his Consort moved, the sound of his laughter, the warm scent of his skin.

Except "Consort" felt increasingly inadequate as a descriptor. Political arrangement. Tributary offering. Blood match. All technically accurate. All completely failing to capture whatever the hell was happening between them.

Ilya reached for the mouse and clicked opened another report, this one detailing potential security vulnerabilities at the State dinner. Premier Considine would be arriving with a full diplomatic retinue. Eighty guests total. Multiple courses. Hours of careful social navigation where one wrong word, one misplaced gesture, could undermine months of careful diplomacy.

And Shane would be at the center of it, seated at the high table, representing not just himself but the entire human-vampire alliance that the Tribute Consort arrangement symbolized.

A soft knock interrupted his spiraling thoughts.

"Enter," Ilya called, grateful for the distraction.

Vasily glided into the study with his characteristic silent grace, carrying a crystal decanter of blood and two glasses on a silver tray. The Seneschal had developed an almost preternatural ability to know exactly when Ilya needed intervention.

Apparently, tonight qualified.

"Your Highness," Vasily said, setting the tray on the desk with precise care. "I thought you might require refreshment."

"I've fed. I'm fine."

"Of course, Your Highness." Vasily poured two glasses anyway, the blood dark and rich in the crystal. "Perhaps a brief respite would help restore your focus."

Ilya accepted the offered glass, recognizing the maneuver for what it was. Vasily didn't simply deliver blood. He delivered blood when he wanted to have a conversation that required privacy, formality, and the particular intimacy that came with sharing sustenance.

"I'm working," Ilya said, taking a sip. The blood was excellent, well-aged, with notes of earth and a hint of wine. "There's a significant amount of preparation required before the State dinner."

"Indeed. The entire household is working around the clock in our preparations." Vasily settled into the chair opposite Ilya's desk, his own glass held with elegant precision. "Captain Marlow's security briefing was quite thorough. As was Seneschal Gregor's report on diplomatic protocols. And Harris has prepared Consort Hollander admirably for his first formal event."

"Shane," Ilya corrected automatically, then caught Vasily's knowing expression and felt the blush creep up the back of his neck. It was just due to the blood heat. That was all. "He prefers Shane."

"My apologies. Shane." Vasily's lips curved slightly, not quite a smile but close. "I understand the ice skating excursion went well this afternoon."

His Seneschal knew everything that happened within the palace walls and most of what happened beyond them. It was his job to know, to catalogue information and determine what required Ilya's attention. Though Ilya suspected this particular line of inquiry had less to do with official duties and more to do with Vasily's frankly annoying tendency towards being a nosy busybody.

"It went fine," Ilya said, keeping his tone neutral. "Shane's an excellent skater. Better than I expected. He has proper technique, good speed, and clear athletic training."

"I see." Vasily took a measured sip of his blood. "And did you enjoy skating with him?"

"I enjoy skating generally. It's good exercise."

"Of course. Exercise." Vasily's expression remained perfectly neutral, which somehow made it more pointed. "Lord Pike mentioned that you and Shane ended up on the ice together. Quite literally, if I understand correctly."

Ilya set his glass down with careful precision. "Hayden talks too much."

"Lord Pike is refreshingly honest about palace affairs. It's one of his more endearing qualities." Vasily tilted his head slightly, regarding Ilya with those dark, knowing eyes. "He also mentioned that you seemed...particularly attentive to Shane's presence."

"Shane is my Consort. I'm supposed to be attentive."

"Indeed. Though there's attentive in the sense of fulfilling one's political obligations, and attentive in the sense of watching someone skate with an expression that Lord Pike described as 'absolutely fucking besotted.'"

"Hayden's exaggerating. He's Fae, they're romantic by nature and he's particularly dramatic."

"*Mmm.*" Vasily's noncommittal sound conveyed volumes. "Your Highness, might I speak freely?"

"You're going to anyway."

"True." Vasily set his glass down and leaned forward slightly. "In the three centuries that I've served you, I've watched you navigate countless political arrangements, numerous romantic entanglements, and situations that required you to separate duty from desire. You've always been remarkably good at compartmentalization. At maintaining the appropriate distance between your public responsibilities and your private wants."

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"But," Vasily continued, his voice gentle but firm. "I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at Shane. And before you protest, Your Highness, I've been paying attention. The way you positioned his apartment next to yours. The late-night visit to the cottage that

you thought no one knew about. The security detail you personally selected. The careful questions you ask about his welfare, disguised as general household inquiries."

Ilya opened his mouth to object, then closed it again. Because Vasily was right. All of it was right and denying it would be insulting to both of them.

"It's complicated," Ilya said finally, the words feeling inadequate even as he spoke them.

"Most worthwhile things are." Vasily picked up his glass again, swirling the blood gently. "The bonding ceremony is two months away. You'll be bound by blood and magic, tied together in ways that go beyond mere politics. Some level of...investment...is not only appropriate but necessary."

"Investment," Ilya repeated, tasting the word. "That's one way to frame it."

"What would you call it?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, watching the fire cast shadows across his bookshelves. What *would* he call it? This growing preoccupation with Shane's well-being, his comfort, his happiness. The way Ilya's protective instincts flared at the mere mention of threats against him. The visceral, possessive response to seeing Shane interact with others, not jealousy, exactly, but something close to it. That thing inside of him that whispered *mine* with increasing insistence.

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "I didn't want this arrangement. You know that. Father orchestrated it brilliantly, but it wasn't my choice. Shane wasn't my choice."

"And now?"

"Now..." Ilya exhaled slowly, letting himself acknowledge what he'd been trying to ignore for weeks. "Now I find myself thinking about him constantly. Wondering if he's comfortable, if he's happy, if he's overwhelmed by court life. I want to know what he's reading, what makes him laugh, what he dreams about. I want to..."

He stopped, the words catching in his throat.

"You want to what?" Vasily prompted, his voice carrying no judgment, only patient curiosity.

"I want to go to his apartment right now," Ilya said, quietly. "I want to knock on his door and ask him about the skating, about how he learned to move like that, about what it felt like to be on the ice again after weeks away from it. I want to watch his face light up when he talks about something he loves. I want to hear him laugh again, that genuine, unguarded sound he makes when something truly delights him."

He picked up his glass and drained it in one long swallow, the blood warm and grounding. "I want to press him against a wall and kiss him until he makes those soft sounds I know he'd make. I want to bite into that pretty throat and taste his blood and feel his pulse flutter against my tongue. I want to take him to bed and learn exactly what makes him come apart, what makes him gasp and arch and beg."

The confession hung in the air between them, raw and honest in a way Ilya rarely allowed himself to be.

Vasily's expression softened into something that looked almost like approval. "That sounds significantly more complicated than political obligation, Your Highness."

"You think?" Ilya set his glass down with a sharp click. "This isn't what I signed up for. Shane was supposed to be a political solution that my father demanded. Someone I'd have to protect and manage and tolerate for the sake of the Great Truce."

"But he's not."

"No," Ilya admitted, the word coming out rougher than intended. "He's not. He's kind and genuine and tries so fucking hard to do everything right. He's funny in ways I didn't expect, clever without being calculating. He treats servants with the same courtesy he shows to King Aurelion. And he's —" Ilya stopped, running a hand tangling in his hair in frustration. "He's becoming important to me."

There. He'd said it. The truth he'd been dancing around for weeks, the acknowledgment he'd been trying to avoid.

He *cared* about Shane. He fucking *wanted* him. He was developing feelings that went far beyond the bounds of their formal arrangement.

Vasily was quiet for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "Your Highness, may I ask what you're afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid —"

"You are." Vasily's voice was gentle but implacable. "You've faced down armies, negotiated with ancient beings with supernatural powers, survived six centuries of political intrigue and violence. But the thought of genuinely caring for your Consort has you retreating to your study and brooding."

Ilya wanted to argue, but the words wouldn't come. Because Vasily was right again, damn him.

"He's human," Ilya said, finally. "He's twenty-six years old. He's been thrust into a world he doesn't understand, bound to a vampire he didn't choose, forced into a role he never wanted. And I'm..." He gestured at himself, at the study, at the accumulated weight of six hundred years. "I'm cold and controlling and I've forgotten how to be anything other than the Ice Prince. What if I hurt him? What if I'm too much, or not enough, or what if he only tolerates me because he thinks he has no choice?"

"Have you considered that Shane might surprise you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shane chose to accept this role. He could have refused, could have hidden, could have let the world burn rather than sacrifice his autonomy. But he didn't. He chose to be here." Vasily

leaned forward, his gaze intent. "And in the weeks since his arrival, he's made friends, adapted to court life, and navigated situations that would have broken weaker people. He's stronger than you're giving him credit for."

"That doesn't mean he wants –" Ilya waved his hand vaguely. "This. Me. Genuinely, rather than out of obligation."

"Ilya." Vasily's voice carried a note of fond exasperation. "I've watched Shane's face when you enter a room. I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one's paying attention. I've heard him ask careful, casual questions about your interests, your history, what you like and dislike. That young man is not merely tolerating you out of obligation."

"You can't know that."

"I've been reading people for my entire existence. I know attraction when I see it. I know genuine interest versus political performance." Vasily stood, collecting the empty glasses and returning them to the tray. "Shane likes you, Your Highness. He's drawn to you. And if you continue to maintain this careful distance, you'll miss the opportunity to build something real with the one person you've shown genuine interest in during my entire tenure as your Seneschal."

"That's not –"

"Name one other person you've cared about this way," Vasily challenged. "One other person whose happiness mattered to you before your own. One other person you wanted to know, truly know, rather than simply bed or feed from or use for strategic advantage."

Ilya opened his mouth, then closed it. Because he couldn't. In six hundred years, he'd had lovers aplenty, friends he valued, allies he respected. But someone whose mere presence in the palace made him feel more alive? Someone he thought about constantly, worried over, and wanted to protect?

Shane was his first.

"Fuck," Ilya said quietly, the realization settling over him like a physical weight.

"Indeed." Vasily's expression was knowing and perhaps a touch smug. He moved toward the door, the tray balanced perfectly. "I suspect, Your Highness, that the only thing you'll regret is waiting too long to acknowledge what's already happening between you."

He paused at the threshold, looking back. "Shane is just next door, probably still restless from this afternoon's excitement. Perhaps a conversation is in order. Before you talk yourself out of it."

Then he was gone, the door closing with a soft click, leaving Ilya alone with his thoughts and the uncomfortable truth Vasily had forced him to confront.

He wanted Shane. Not just physically, though God knew the attraction was intense enough to make his fangs ache. But genuinely just wanted him – his company, his laughter, his

thoughts, his presence. He wanted to know him in ways that had nothing to do with political necessity and everything to do with the fact that Shane made Ilya feel something he'd thought he'd lost centuries ago.

Human. Warm.

Ilya looked at the closed door leading to the hallway. Three doors away. Close enough that Ilya could hear Shane's heartbeat if he focused, could track his movements through the shared walls, could knock and bridge the distance between them in seconds.

Ilya grumbled and cursed in Old World. “*Yebat.*”

Vasily was right. Damn him, but he was right.

He wouldn't go to Shane's apartment tonight, the hour was too late, the situation too charged, and Shane deserved better than Ilya showing up in the middle of the night like some desperate suitor. But tomorrow. Or the day after. Soon. Probably.

He would stop hiding behind political distance and careful control. He would acknowledge what was happening between them, give it space to grow or fade naturally rather than strangling it with his own fear.

He would let himself want Shane. Openly. Honestly.

And maybe, Shane would want him back.

Ilya returned his attention to the monitors and finally, *finally*, managed to focus on the intelligence reports with clearer attention. The Ashen Cross threats needed addressing. The State dinner required perfect execution. His responsibilities hadn't disappeared simply because he'd admitted to having feelings.

Three doors away, Shane's heartbeat continued its steady rhythm, a counterpoint to the silence of Ilya's study. Ilya let himself listen to it for a moment, let himself imagine walking to his door, knocking, seeing Shane's face light up with that shy smile.

But first, he had a State dinner to prepare for and a Consort to protect from threats both external and internal. Everything else could wait.

Almost everything.

The formal dining hall was a masterpiece of architectural intimidation. Vaulted ceilings soared three stories overhead, painted with frescoes depicting the signing of the Great Truce. Crystal chandeliers the size of small carriages hung at precisely measured intervals, their thousands of facets catching and multiplying the afternoon light streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. The dining table itself stretched nearly forty feet, dark mahogany polished to a mirror shine, already set with china, crystal, and silverware that represented centuries of accumulated wealth.

Ilya stood in the musicians' balcony above the main floor, hands clasped behind his back, watching the controlled chaos below with the practiced eye of someone who'd overseen thousands of State functions. Servants moved with choreographed precision, adjusting floral arrangements, testing the acoustics, and ensuring every detail met the exacting standards required for hosting a visiting Premier.

Captain Marlow stood beside him, reviewing security protocols on a tablet. "We've completed the third sweep. No anomalies detected. Guard rotations are finalized, and we've installed additional surveillance in the service corridors."

"The Ashen Cross chatter?" Ilya asked, not taking his eyes off the preparations below.

"Increased but non-specific. They know about the dinner, obviously, it's public information. But no credible threats against specific individuals." Marlow swiped through screens of data. "We're monitoring social media, tracking known sympathizers, and we've embedded additional security among the serving staff."

"Double the detail on Shane," Ilya said, frowning. "Visible and invisible. I want him protected from every angle."

"Already done, Your Highness. He won't be able to sneeze without three guards saying 'bless you.'" Marlow's voice carried a hint of amusement. "Though if I may say so, Consort Hollander seems to be handling the pressure remarkably well."

Ilya made a noncommittal sound, watching as Harris entered the dining hall below, followed by Shane, Mira, and Sophie. Shane wore casual clothes, jeans and a dark blue sweater that brought out the warmth in his brown eyes, and carried a black notebook that was already bristling with colorful tabs.

Even from this distance, Ilya could see the nervous energy in Shane's posture, the way he rolled his shoulders back and took a deliberate breath before approaching the table. Preparing himself. Centering himself.

God, he's trying so hard.

"The rehearsal's about to begin," Marlow observed. "Should we –"

"Stay," Ilya said, quietly. "I want to observe."

If Marlow found this unusual, he didn't comment. Instead, he simply shifted position to better view the scene below, his expression neutral but his attention sharp. After two centuries of service, Marlow knew when his Prince wanted something witnessed and documented.

Harris gestured to the table settings with the enthusiasm of a professor approaching a particularly interesting lecture. His voice carried clearly in the hall's perfect acoustics.

"Alright, Shane, this is the full formal setting. Seven courses, which means approximately fourteen pieces of silverware per place setting, four glasses, three plates, and a partridge in a pear tree."

Shane laughed, the sound nervous but genuine. "I'm pretty sure the partridge is optional."

"Thank God for small mercies." Harris pulled out a chair. "Okay, sit here. You'll be here, with Prince Ilya on your left and the vampire ambassador from the Eastern Commonwealth. Did you read the bios?"

"Yes. Ambassador Carlos Russo. He prefers AB positive blood and enjoys Scrabble."

Shane sat down, his posture automatically straightening into something approximating formal bearing. Ilya noticed he'd been practicing, his shoulders were back, chin level, hands resting lightly on the table edge rather than hidden in his lap.

Evangeline's training was showing.

Mira and Sophie took seats on either side of Shane, both wearing expressions of friendly encouragement. They'd been briefed to act as dinner companions, providing Shane with practice in managing conversation while navigating the complexities of formal dining.

"First thing," Harris continued, walking around the table. "Silverware works from outside in. Each course has its own utensils, and you never reuse them. Start with the outermost fork and knife, work your way toward the plate."

"Outside in," Shane repeated, studying the bewildering array of silver with evident concentration. "What if I forget mid-dinner and grab the wrong fork?"

"Then you've committed a social faux pas that will haunt you for eternity and probably cause an international incident." Harris deadpanned, then grinned when Shane's face went pale.

"I'm kidding. Mostly. If you grab the wrong fork, just use it confidently and no one will say anything to your face. They'll gossip about it later, but that's unavoidable anyway."

"That's not comforting."

"It's not supposed to be. It's supposed to be realistic." Harris picked up a small fork with three tines. "This is your oyster fork. It's the only fork that goes on the right side of the plate, because apparently our ancestors enjoyed making things complicated."

Shane picked up his own oyster fork, examining it with the careful attention of someone memorizing for an exam. "Oyster fork. Right side. Got it."

"You won't actually need it tonight," Harris said, taking the fork from Shane and setting it aside. "Premier Considine is allergic to shellfish, so the first course is going to be amended. But you need to know what it is in case it appears at future events."

"How many future events are we talking about?" Shane asked, and Ilya could hear the slight edge of anxiousness in his voice.

"Oh, you know. Just the rest of your life." Harris's tone was cheerful enough to make the statement sound almost reasonable. "But we'll tackle them one event at a time. For now, focus on this one."

Ilya watched as Harris walked Shane through each piece of silverware, each glass, each subtle rule of formal dining that aristocrats learned from childhood but which must seem utterly arbitrary to someone from Shane's common background. The soup spoon never scraped the bottom of the bowl. The knife rested at a precise angle when pausing between bites. The napkin folded and left on the chair when excusing yourself temporarily.

Shane took notes. Actual notes, in his already overstuffed notebook, occasionally asking Harris to repeat something or clarify a point. His focus was intense, and his determination was evident in every careful annotation.

"He's going to give himself an aneurysm," Marlow murmured beside Ilya.

"He's thorough," Ilya countered, though he shared the concern. "He wants to do it right."

"Most Consorts would just wing it and blame any mistakes on being new."

"Shane's not most Consorts."

Marlow made a small sound of agreement, returning his attention to the scene below.

Harris had moved on to conversation protocols. "You'll need to split your attention between your dinner companions. Traditional etiquette says you speak to the person on your right during the first course, switch to your left for the second, and alternate throughout the meal."

"That seems overly complicated," Shane said, frowning. "What if the conversation on the right is really interesting and I don't want to switch?"

"Then you politely conclude that thread and pivot to your left anyway, because rules are rules and society is built on arbitrary restrictions that make everyone uncomfortable." Harris grinned. "Welcome to court life."

"I'm starting to understand why so many courtiers seem so miserable."

Mira snorted with laughter, quickly covering her mouth. Sophie's shoulders shook with suppressed mirth.

Harris pointed at them both. "See, that's perfect. You made a relatable joke, they laughed, everyone's more relaxed. Humor is your secret weapon, Shane. Use it strategically to defuse tension and make people like you. Never use humor to offend. It's a fine line."

"I thought I was supposed to be formal and dignified?"

"You're supposed to be both. Formal enough to show respect, human enough to be relatable." Harris pulled out his tablet, consulting something. "Okay, let's run through a mock dinner. Mira, you're playing a vampire countess from the Northern territories. Sophie, you're a human trade minister. Shane, you need to engage them both while managing seven courses of silverware. Ready?"

"Absolutely not," Shane said, but he picked up his napkin and placed it in his lap with careful precision. "But let's do it anyway."

What followed was simultaneously painful and endearing to watch.

Shane fumbled the first course almost immediately, reaching for the wrong spoon and having to course-correct when Harris cleared his throat meaningfully. His conversation with Mira started off stiff, his questions too formal, his responses overly rehearsed. But slowly, gradually, he found his rhythm.

He asked Sophie about trade negotiations with genuine curiosity, not just polite interest. When Mira made a comment about the weather, the most boring of all possible topics, Shane somehow turned it into a discussion about climate patterns in the north and their effects on agriculture that actually sounded engaging.

He was getting better. Finding his footing.

Then came the fish course.

"This is your fish knife," Harris explained, pointing to a flat, oddly shaped blade. "You'll use it to gently separate the fish from the bones, working from the spine outward."

Shane picked up the fish knife, studied the whole roasted trout on his plate with visible trepidation, and gamely attempted to follow Harris's instructions.

The fish proceeded to fall apart in the most spectacular fashion possible, sliding off the plate and landing with a wet slap on the pristine white tablecloth.

Shane stared at it for a beat. Then another.

"Well," he said finally, his voice admirably level. "I've just failed at fish. That's a new low, even for me."

Mira lost it first, her laughter ringing out across the dining hall. Sophie followed, her professional composure cracking into genuine amusement. Even Harris couldn't maintain his serious instructor face, his shoulders shaking as he tried to suppress his grin.

"I'm so sorry," Shane said, still staring at the fish with what looked like betrayal. "I swear I know how to eat. I've been doing it successfully for twenty-six years. But apparently formal dining has defeated me."

"You're doing fine," Harris managed, wiping his eyes. "Fish is notoriously difficult. Even aristocrats mess it up."

"Do they also launch it onto the tablecloth?"

"Oh, constantly."

Shane finally looked up, meeting Harris's eyes, and grinned with self-deprecating warmth. "Should I just skip the fish course at the actual dinner? Tell people I'm allergic?"

"You could," Harris hedged, smiling. "But then you'd miss the chef's spectacular preparation, and he'd be devastated."

"Right. Can't devastate the chef. That's probably in the protocol somewhere." Shane made a note in his notebook while he said aloud: "*Practice fish. A lot. Maybe with protective eyewear.*"

The laughter that followed was easy, comfortable, the kind that came from shared absurdity rather than mockery. Even the servants who'd been working quietly in the background were smiling, their movements slightly less rigid.

Ilya found himself smiling, too, a small expression he quickly schooled into neutrality when Marlow glanced at him.

"He's good with people," Marlow observed quietly. "Natural rapport. That's going to serve him well."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, watching Shane try again with the fish, this time with slightly more success and a lot more commentary about negotiating with stubborn sea creatures.

They continued watching as Harris coached Shane through the remaining courses. The salad (successful, though Shane questioned why the fork was smaller than the dinner fork). The palate cleanser (successful, and Shane pronounced it "unnecessarily fancy lemon ice"). The main course (mostly successful, with only minor confusion about which sauce went with which protein). The cheese course (successful after Harris explained that yes, people really did eat multiple courses *after* the main dish, and no, it wasn't just an elaborate prank).

By the time they reached dessert, Shane had relaxed considerably. His conversation with Mira and Sophie flowed naturally, his questions thoughtful, his humor keeping them engaged. When he successfully navigated the dessert fork and spoon, using both in the specific choreography required for the layered confection, he actually looked pleased with himself.

"That was terrifying," Shane announced when Harris finally called an end to the rehearsal. "But less terrifying than I thought it would be? And all the food was delicious. I'll have to thank the chef and his staff for preparing all those dishes for this mock dinner."

"You did great," Sophie assured him, reaching over to pat his hand. "Honestly, Shane, you were wonderful."

"I murdered a fish."

"Everyone murders fish," Mira said, loyally. "The trick is doing it with confidence."

Shane laughed, closing his notebook with evident relief. "Thanks for this. I know I'm probably the most clueless Consort in the history of vampire courts."

"You're the most *prepared* Consort I've ever worked with," Harris corrected. "Most aristocrats just coast on their breeding and assume everyone will forgive their mistakes. You actually care about getting it right."

"I don't want to embarrass anyone," Shane said, the words carrying unexpected weight. "Especially not Prince Ilya. He's...this is already a complicated situation. The least I can do is

not make it worse by using the wrong fork."

Shane wasn't concerned about his own reputation or social standing. He was worried about reflecting poorly on Ilya, about making the Crown Prince look bad by association. The selflessness of it, the genuine consideration, hit Ilya with unexpected force.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Ilya moved toward the balcony stairs.

Marlow's eyebrow rose fractionally. "Your Highness?"

"Continue the security review," Ilya said, already descending the curved staircase that led from the balcony to the main floor. "I'll want your report in an hour."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Ilya emerged into the dining hall just as Shane was gathering his notebook and thanking the kitchen staff for the delicious meals and for their service. The afternoon light caught in Shane's dark hair, made his skin look warm and alive, and highlighted the slight flush of exertion and stress on his cheeks.

"Your Highness," Harris said, bowing smoothly. Mira and Sophie followed suit with their curtsies, their expressions carefully neutral but their eyes bright with curiosity.

Shane turned, and his entire face transformed when he saw Ilya. Surprise, pleasure, and a flash of nervousness competed for dominance in his expression.

"Your Highness," Shane said, executing a bow that was nearly perfect in its execution. "I didn't realize you were here."

"I was overseeing security preparations," Ilya said, moving closer with measured steps. He nodded to Harris and the others. "Thank you for your excellent work. You're all dismissed."

Harris gathered his tablet, herded Mira and Sophie toward the service entrance, and evacuated the dining hall with impressive efficiency, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in the cavernous space.

Shane stood by the table, notebook clutched against his chest like armor, watching Ilya approach with an expression caught between hope and wariness.

"How much did you see?" Shane asked when Ilya stopped a few feet away.

"Enough." Ilya's lips curved slightly. "You're a very diligent student."

"I'm a disaster with fish."

"Fish is notoriously difficult. I've seen lords with centuries of formal dining experience make the same mistake."

Shane's tension eased fractionally. "Harris said that, too, but I thought he was being nice."

"Harris is many things, but he's not usually nice out of pity." Ilya gestured to the table. "Walk with me. I want to show you something."

Shane fell into step behind him, one pace behind, as they moved along the length of the grand table, their footsteps echoing softly on the marble floor.

"This table has hosted some of the most significant diplomatic negotiations in the past four centuries," Ilya said, trailing his fingers along the polished wood. "Treaties signed, alliances forged, wars prevented. My father once negotiated a peace accord with the werewolf packs right here in 1847. It took three months of dinners, and by the end, everyone was sick of fish courses."

Shane smiled at that, some of his nervousness dissolving. "I'm guessing they didn't launch any fish onto the tablecloth."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Lord Matthias, one of the werewolf alphas, got so frustrated during a particularly tense negotiation that he threw his entire plate across the room. It shattered against that column." Ilya pointed to a marble pillar near the windows. "We've never quite gotten the stain out."

"Really?"

"Really. Formal dining is theater, Shane. Everyone's performing, trying to maintain this illusion of perfect civility while underneath, we're all just trying not to embarrass ourselves or start wars." Ilya stopped at the head of the table, looking back down its impressive length. "The fish thing? Completely insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

Shane was quiet for a moment, processing. "Harris made it seem like every tiny mistake would be analyzed and judged."

"It will be," Ilya said, honestly. "The court gossips about everything. But analysis isn't the same as condemnation. Most people are far too concerned with their own performance to worry much about yours."

"But you'll be judged, too," Shane said, and there was that selfless concern again, evident in the slight crease between his eyebrows. "If I mess up badly enough, it reflects on you. On the kingdom. That's why I'm so worried about getting it right."

Ilya turned to face Shane fully, studying his face in the afternoon light. "Is that what you've been thinking? That you need to be perfect to protect my reputation?"

"Well...yes?" Shane shifted his weight, clutching his notebook tighter. "I mean, that's part of my role, isn't it? To represent the Crown Prince well. To show the court and the visiting dignitaries that you chose—" He caught himself, correcting quickly. "That the kingdom chose wisely. That I'm worth the political capital invested in this arrangement."

"Shane." Ilya kept his voice gentle but firm. "I'm not worried about you embarrassing me."

"You should be. I murdered a fish."

"I'm concerned," Ilya continued as if Shane hadn't interrupted. "About you feeling so overwhelmed by expectations that you forget to breathe and enjoy yourself. I'm concerned about you working yourself into exhaustion trying to memorize protocols that took the rest of us decades to learn. I'm concerned about you losing that humor and warmth that makes people want to be around you, because you're too afraid of making mistakes."

Shane blinked, clearly not expecting that response. "I...what?"

Ilya moved closer, closing some of the distance between them. Not crowding Shane, but present. "You won the loyalty of my household staff in a matter of weeks, Shane. Not through perfect protocol or flawless formal dining etiquette, but by being yourself. By treating them with respect. By making them laugh when you dropped your fish." He gestured back toward where Harris and the others had been. "They adore you. Do you know how rare that is?"

"They're just being nice."

"They're not. Palace staff are some of the most discerning people you'll ever meet. They see everything, judge everyone, and their loyalty is earned through years of consistent behavior. You earned theirs in less than a month." Ilya let that sink in for a moment. "So when I watch you practice for this dinner, when I see you taking notes and worrying about fish knives, I'm not worried about my reputation. I'm worried that you're putting too much pressure on yourself."

Shane's expression did something complicated – surprise, relief, confusion, all chasing across his face in rapid succession. "But the dinner *is* important. Premier Considine is important. I don't want to be the weak link."

"You won't be. You're intelligent, adaptable, and genuinely interested in people. Those qualities matter far more than knowing which fork to use." Ilya paused, then added with deliberate honesty. "And even if you do make a mistake, I'll be right there beside you."

"Yeah?"

"Yes." Ilya held his gaze, letting Shane see the sincerity in his expression. "This arrangement may have started as a political necessity, but we can make our own rules. As partners who support each other, especially during seven-course dinners with eighty judgmental aristocrats."

Shane laughed, the sound startled but genuine. "When you put it that way, it sounds almost manageable."

"Almost," Ilya agreed. "The key is remembering that everyone else at that table is also performing, also worried about their own mistakes, also trying to navigate impossible social expectations. You're not alone in that."

"And you'll be there. On my left."

"Yes. Feel free to nudge me under the table with your foot."

"I'm pretty sure that's not in the protocol."

"Consider it our own personal protocol." Ilya's lips curved into something approaching a real smile. "A secret signal. One nudge means 'help, I'm lost.' Two nudges means 'rescue me from this conversation.' Three nudges means 'I need wine immediately.'"

Shane's grin was bright and unguarded. "What about four nudges?"

"Four means you are having a seizure and I should call for medical attention."

"Good to know. I'll try to keep it to three maximum."

They stood there for a moment, the massive dining hall around them feeling smaller, more intimate. The afternoon light was fading, casting everything in shades of gold and amber. Shane's face was softer now, the anxiety that had been tightening his features eased by their conversation.

Ilya found himself wanting to touch him, a hand on his shoulder, fingers brushing his arm, something to bridge the remaining distance between them. But he held back, aware that they were still navigating the boundaries of whatever this was becoming between them.

"I should let you get back to your studies," Ilya said finally, though he didn't actually want Shane to leave. "Harris will probably want to run through more scenarios before the actual dinner."

"Probably," Shane agreed, but he didn't move. "Thank you for telling me that I don't have to be perfect."

"Perfect is boring. I'd rather you be yourself." Ilya gestured toward the doors. "Come on. I'll walk you back to your apartment."

They left the dining hall together, moving through the palace corridors with easy companionship. Shane asked questions about the portraits they passed, and Ilya found himself sharing stories he rarely told, the history behind certain paintings, scandals involving specific nobles, small details that brought the palace's past to life.

Shane listened with interest, occasionally making observations that were surprisingly insightful or hilariously irreverent. He really did have a dry sense of humor.

When they passed a particularly pompous portrait of a long-dead vampire lord, Shane muttered, "he looks like he's constipated," and Ilya laughed before he could stop himself.

By the time they reached the North Tower, the ease between them felt natural. Comfortable. Like they'd been doing this for years rather than weeks.

At Shane's door, they paused. Shane shifted his notebook to one hand, looking up at Ilya with an expression that held equal parts gratitude and something warmer.

"Thanks for checking on me. For the pep talk. And for the secret foot protocol."

"You're welcome. Shane?" Ilya waited until he had Shane's full attention. "I meant what I said. I'm not worried about you embarrassing me. I'm proud to have you as my Consort."

Shane's face did that thing again, the rose-gold flush spreading across his cheeks, making his freckles stand out. "I'll try to live up to that."

"You already do."

Shane smiled, shy and pleased, and let himself into his apartment.

Ilya stood in the hallway for a moment after the door closed, listening to Shane's footsteps retreat into his sitting room, hearing the soft thud of his notebook being set down, the everyday sounds of someone settling into their space.

Three doors away. Close enough to hear. Close enough to reach.

The State dinner would be fine. Shane would be brilliant, even with the occasional fish mishap. And Ilya would be right there beside him, ready to nudge his foot back under the table if needed.

In the morning, Director Cassimir knocked on his study door. The fact that he'd found him in the North Tower meant something had gone catastrophically wrong.

"Your Highness." Cassimir's voice was clipped, professional, but Ilya had worked with the intelligence director long enough to recognize the tension beneath the controlled surface. "We have a situation."

Ilya looked up from the briefing documents he'd been reviewing – final security protocols for the dinner, seating arrangements, and contingency plans for various diplomatic scenarios. All suddenly feeling inadequate in the face of whatever had brought Cassimir to his door on the morning of the most important State function in months.

"Report," Ilya said quietly, setting down his tablet.

Cassimir complied, then crossed to Ilya's desk with his leather portfolio clutched in one hand. His silver hair was immaculate as always, his pale eyes sharp with the kind of focus that came from decades of intelligence work, but there was something else in his expression. Something that looked uncomfortably like concern.

"The Ashen Cross," Cassimir said without preamble, opening his portfolio and extracting a tablet. "They've made a specific threat against Consort Hollander. Tonight. During the dinner."

Every muscle in Ilya's body went still. Not the controlled stillness of composure, but the predatory freeze of a hunter who'd just scented prey. His fangs descended involuntarily, pressing against the inside of his lips.

"Tell me everything," Ilya said, his voice dropping into the register he used for interrogations and declarations of war. "Now."

Cassimir set the tablet on the desk, the screen displaying a series of intercepted communications. Encrypted messages, social media posts from burner accounts, and what looked like internal Ashen Cross planning documents.

"We intercepted these communications approximately two hours ago and we only just completed vetting the veracity of them. They reference 'disrupting the Tribute spectacle' and 'exposing the Commonwealth's weakness' during tonight's event." Cassimir swiped through the documents with practiced efficiency. "The language is coded, but our analysts cross-referenced it with known Ashen Cross terminology. They're planning something for the State dinner. Something public."

"What kind of something?" Ilya's hands had curled into fists on his desk, his nails leaving small indentations in the dark wood. He forced them to relax, to maintain some semblance of control while his instincts screamed for immediate, violent action.

"That's where it gets worse, Your Highness." Cassimir looked up from the tablet, meeting Ilya's gaze directly. "We've identified a compromised staff member. Someone inside the palace who's been feeding information to the Ashen Cross. Details about Consort Hollander's schedule, his habits, his vulnerabilities. They've been planning this for weeks."

The rage that swept through Ilya was ancient and absolute. Someone under his protection, within his walls, had betrayed not just him but Shane. Had actively worked to harm the one person Ilya was bound to protect.

Mine, his monster hissed in the back of his mind. *They threatened what's mine.*

"Who," Ilya said. Not a question. A demand.

"Thomas Whitmore. Junior footman, third year of service. We've had him under surveillance since this morning when the communications first flagged our systems. He's currently in the servants' quarters, unaware that we've identified him."

Ilya was already moving, rising from his chair with the fluid speed that made humans' eyes water trying to track the movement. "Bring him to Interrogation Room Three. Quietly. I don't want anyone knowing we've compromised their operation until I understand the full scope."

"Your Highness—" Cassimir began, something almost cautionary in his tone.

"Now, Director."

Cassimir inclined his head in acknowledgment and pulled out his phone, sending rapid orders to his team. Ilya paced his room with barely controlled violence, his mind racing through scenarios, possibilities, and the hundred different ways this could go catastrophically wrong.

A public disruption during the State dinner. With eighty witnesses, multiple diplomatic delegations, and Shane seated beside Ilya as a symbol of human-vampire cooperation.

Whatever the Ashen Cross had planned, it was designed for maximum visibility and maximum humiliation.

And Shane would be at the center of it.

Over my dead corpse, Ilya thought savagely. *Over the dead corpses of everyone who even thought about touching him.*

"Captain Marlow is en route," Cassimir said, pocketing his phone. "He's conducting a full security sweep as we speak. Guards are being repositioned, and we're running background checks on every staff member scheduled to work tonight's event."

"Not enough." Ilya stopped pacing, turning to face Cassimir fully. "I want triple security on Shane. Visible and invisible. I want guards in the dining hall who can reach him in under three seconds from any position. I want eyes on every entrance, every service corridor, every potential point of compromise."

"That level of security will be noticed, Your Highness. It might cause alarm among the guests –"

"I don't care." Ilya's voice was flat, absolute. "Let them notice. Let them be alarmed. The King said that Shane is to be protected at all costs. His safety takes precedence over diplomatic comfort."

Cassimir studied him for a long moment, something unreadable flickering in his pale eyes. Then he nodded. "As you command, Your Highness. I'll coordinate with Captain Marlow immediately."

"Good. And Cassimir?" Ilya met his gaze. "No one speaks to Shane about this except me."

"Of course, Your Highness."

After Cassimir left, Ilya allowed himself sixty seconds of complete stillness. Sixty seconds to feel the full weight of his fury, to let it crystallize into something cold and sharp and useful. Then he straightened his jacket, schooled his expression into the mask of the Ice Prince, and left his study.

Interrogation Room Three was in the palace's lower levels, accessible through corridors that most residents didn't know existed. The room itself was austere, stone walls, a metal table bolted to the floor, chairs designed for discomfort rather than rest, and lighting that could be adjusted from gentle to interrogation-bright at the touch of a switch.

Thomas Whitmore sat in one of those uncomfortable chairs, his wrists bound with metal restraints, his face pale with the dawning realization that he'd been caught.

He was young, perhaps early twenties in mortal years, with sandy hair and the kind of unremarkable features that made him perfect for service work, easily overlooked, quickly forgotten. He wore the palace's standard footman livery, the fabric rumpled now from however roughly Cassimir's team had extracted him from the servants' quarters.

Captain Marlow stood against the far wall, arms crossed, his expression grim. Two of his security team flanked the door, their hands resting on weapons that were visible enough to serve as deterrent but discreet enough not to appear overtly threatening.

The moment Ilya entered, Whitmore's fear crystallized into something approaching terror. His heartbeat, already elevated, spiked into a frantic rhythm that Ilya could hear from across the room.

"Thomas Whitmore," Ilya said, his voice conversational as he circled the table. "Junior footman. Three years of exemplary service. Excellent recommendations from your supervisors. Recently received a commendation for your attention to detail during the Winter Solstice celebrations."

"Y-Your Highness," Whitmore stammered, his eyes tracking Ilya's movement with the focus of prey watching a circling predator. "I don't understand why I'm here. I haven't done anything –"

"Don't." Ilya's voice dropped several degrees, the single word cutting through Whitmore's protest like a hot blade through flesh. "Don't insult my intelligence by lying. We've intercepted your communications with the Ashen Cross. We know you've been feeding them information about Consort Hollander. We know you're involved in whatever they're planning for tonight's dinner."

Whitmore's face went from pale to gray. "I – I can explain –"

"I'm sure you can." He stared at the human. "What did they promise you, *hmm*? Money, wealth, immortality."

Ilya stopped directly behind Whitmore's chair, close enough that the human could feel the unnatural coldness that radiated from all vampires. Close enough to smell Whitmore's fear-sweat, sharp and acrid.

"And you're going to explain everything. Every communication. Every piece of information you passed along. Every detail of their plan for tonight. You're going to tell me all of it, and you're going to do it quickly, because my patience is not infinite and my Consort's safety is at stake."

The last words came out with barely controlled violence, and Whitmore flinched as if struck.

"They said –" Whitmore's voice broke. He swallowed hard, trying again. "They said they just wanted to make a statement. To show that the Tribute Consort arrangement was a mistake. They said no one would get hurt."

"And you believed them." Ilya moved around to face Whitmore directly, leaning against the table with deceptive casualness. "You believed that an extremist organization dedicated to overturning the Great Truce simply wanted to make a peaceful statement during a State dinner."

"I –" Whitmore's gaze dropped to the table. "They offered money. A lot of money. And they said...they said humans shouldn't be given to vampires like livestock. That Consort Hollander was a symbol of everything wrong with the current system."

"So you decided to help them." Ilya's tone was almost gentle now, which somehow made it more terrifying. "Tell me, Thomas, what exactly did you give them? What information did you pass along about Shane?"

The use of Shane's given name, spoken with unmistakable possession, made Whitmore flinch again.

"His schedule," Whitmore admitted, the words tumbling out in a rush now. "His daily routine. When he takes meals, when he studies, when he goes for walks. His security protocols. The gaps in his protection. They wanted to know everything about how he moves through the palace."

Ilya's hands, resting loosely on the table edge, had gone white-knuckled. Captain Marlow shifted slightly against the wall, his expression darkening.

"And tonight's dinner?" Ilya prompted, his voice still that dangerous gentleness. "What's the plan?"

"During the fourth course," Whitmore said, speaking faster now, desperate to get it all out. "One of the serving staff, another sympathizer, is going to spill wine on Consort Hollander. While he's distracted, they're going to...to announce something. Publicly. About how he's unfit to be a Consort. About how the arrangement is an insult to both humans and vampires. They said it would embarrass him. Undermine his credibility."

"Who's the other sympathizer?" Captain Marlow demanded from his position against the wall.

"I don't know! They only told me my part. They keep everything compartmentalized, separate cells, no one knows more than they need to –"

"Names," Ilya interrupted, his patience fraying. "You must have names. Contact points. Someone you reported to."

"I swear, I don't know –"

"Where is your human family, *hmm*? Perhaps I should have them brought here so they can know the full extent of your betrayal. It would be a shame that they should suffer for your greed."

Whitmore's resistance crumbled entirely under the weight of Ilya's threat. Now that he was cooperating, he didn't need to know that Ilya would have dragged his entire human family into the dungeons and made him watch as he tortured them and bled them dry.

He provided three names, two of which Cassimir's team was already tracking, and one that was new, a vampire sympathizer working in the palace archives who'd been feeding

information to the extremists.

The irony would have been amusing if Ilya weren't so furious.

By the time Whitmore finished talking, Ilya had a complete picture of the Ashen Cross's plan. It was simultaneously more and less dangerous than he'd feared. Not a physical attack, thank God, but a calculated social assault designed to humiliate Shane in front of diplomatic witnesses and undermine the Tribute Consort arrangement before it could fully solidify.

Public humiliation. Social destruction. Making Shane look foolish, unprepared, unworthy of his position.

They wanted to break him without laying a hand on him.

"Captain Marlow," Ilya said, not taking his eyes off Whitmore. "Arrest the other sympathizers immediately. Quietly. I don't want anyone alerted that we've compromised their operation. Replace the compromised serving staff with our own trusted people. The Ashen Cross thinks their plan is intact. Let them continue thinking that until it's too late."

"Yes, Your Highness." Marlow was already moving, speaking rapid orders into his communication device.

Ilya leaned down, bringing his face level with Whitmore's. Close enough that the human could see his fangs, fully descended now, gleaming in the interrogation room's harsh light.

"You're going to spend a very long time regretting this decision," Ilya said, softly. "And in case you were wondering, no one will get hurt is a lie the Ashen Cross tells to recruit people like you. People who are foolish enough to think extremists have limits. They don't. And neither do I when it comes to protecting what's mine."

"Your Highness, please –"

"You will be tried under palace law for treason to the Crown and conspiracy to harm a member of the Royal household." Ilya straightened, his voice returning to that cold formality. "Captain Marlow will see to it that you're comfortable while awaiting trial. Well, comfortable enough. We're not monsters, after all."

The last words were delivered with enough irony to make Whitmore sob.

Ilya left the interrogation room without looking back, his mind already racing ahead to the next problem. The plan was neutralized, the Ashen Cross wouldn't get their public spectacle. But Shane still needed to be warned. Still needed to understand that there were people who wanted to hurt him, who saw him as a symbol rather than a person.

And Ilya needed to tell him without causing panic. Without making Shane feel unsafe in what was supposed to be his home.

Fuck.

He found Shane in his apartment, exactly where Ilya had expected. The sitting room was warm with lamplight, a fire crackling in the hearth, and Shane was stretched out on one of the leather couches with a book in his hands and reading glasses perched on his nose.

He looked peaceful. Utterly unaware that there had been a credible threat against him mere hours before one of the most important events of his life.

Shane looked up when Ilya entered, Ilya hadn't knocked, a liberty he was taking more frequently, and his face lit up with that genuine smile that made Ilya's chest do complicated things.

"Hey," Shane said, setting the book aside and removing his glasses. "I thought you'd be busy with last-minute dinner preparations. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's handled," Ilya said, which was technically true. "But I needed to speak with you. About tonight."

Shane sat up straighter, something like nervousness flickering across his face. "Did I do something wrong? Is it the fish thing again? Because I've been practicing, and I think I've got it, "

"It's not the fish." Ilya moved to sit on the couch next to Shane, close enough for conversation but not crowding. "Shane, there was a security situation this morning. A credible threat against you from the Ashen Cross. It's been neutralized, but I wanted you to know before the dinner."

The color drained from Shane's face. "What kind of threat?"

"Nothing physical," Ilya said quickly, watching Shane's reaction carefully. "They were planning to humiliate you publicly and socially during the dinner. Spill wine on you, make accusations about your fitness as a Consort. Cause a scene designed to undermine the arrangement."

Shane was quiet for a long moment, processing. "But it's been handled?"

"Yes. We identified the compromised staff members, arrested them, and replaced them with our own people. The Ashen Cross thinks their plan is still intact. They'll attempt it but we're ready."

"So I just...act normal? Pretend I don't know?"

"Yes. You'll be completely safe. I'll be right beside you. Captain Marlow will have guards positioned throughout the dining hall. Nothing will happen to you, Shane. I promise."

Shane nodded slowly, then met Ilya's eyes with unexpected steadiness. "Okay. I trust you."

Three words. Simple, direct, and they hit Ilya with the force of physical impact.

I trust you.

"I won't let anyone hurt you," Ilya said, and the possessive edge in his voice was unmistakable even to his own ears. "Anyone who tries will answer to me personally. And I am not known for my mercy toward those who threaten what's mine."

Shane's breath caught slightly, his gaze holding Ilya's. "Yours?"

"Yes." Ilya didn't look away, didn't soften it. "Mine. My Consort. My responsibility. Mine to protect."

The air between them felt electric. Shane's pulse jumped visibly in his throat, and Ilya tracked the movement with predatory focus.

"I'm okay with that," Shane said with a nervous smile. "With being yours. Just so you know."

Ilya's control, already strained by the evening's events, frayed further. He wanted to close the distance between them, to pull Shane into his arms and feel the warm, living reality of him, safe and whole and his.

But the dinner. The responsibilities. The dozens of details still required his attention.

"We should both get ready," Ilya said, forcing himself to stand. "The welcome reception begins in two hours. You'll need to dress, and I need to ensure all security measures are in place."

Shane stood as well, moving closer. "Your Highness?"

"Yes?"

Shane's hand came up, hesitating for just a moment before resting lightly on Ilya's forearm. "Thank you."

The touch, casual and warm, sent a spike of sensation through Ilya's entire body. He looked down at Shane's hand on his arm, then up at Shane's face, earnest and grateful. Something that looked like the same want that was currently making Ilya's fangs ache.

"Always," Ilya said, the promise rough in his throat. "I'll always protect you."

Shane's smile was soft and genuine. "I know."

Ilya left before he could do something impulsive, like kiss Shane senseless in his sitting room when they both had responsibilities to attend to.

Later, he promised himself. After the dinner. After he'd proven to Shane and to the entire court that no one threatened his Consort without consequences.

After he'd made it abundantly clear that Shane was his, in every way that mattered.

The North Tower was quiet in the way only the very late hours could make it, not empty, but hushed, as if the palace itself were finally exhaling after holding its breath for an entire evening.

The State dinner had concluded without incident. No scandals. No public humiliations. No Ashen Cross spectacle designed to humiliate Shane in front of witnesses. Premier Considine had departed flushed with wine and goodwill, murmuring effusive praise about hospitality and cooperation that would make its way into official reports and strengthen the alliance. The court buzzed with satisfaction, servants moved with the loose grace of a job well done, and the night had closed over the palace like a curtain finally drawn.

By every political and strategic measure, it had been a triumph.

And yet Ilya's pulse was still too fast as he made his way back toward his apartment, the remnants of adrenaline humming beneath his skin like electricity through wire. The threat had been neutralized before it could manifest. The compromised staff were in custody, their Ashen Cross contacts identified and monitored. Shane had been magnificent, navigating seven courses and complex social dynamics with a grace that had surprised even Ilya, who'd begun to expect excellence from his Consort.

His Consort.

The possessive pronoun settled over the thought with increasing naturalness. When had that shift happened? When had Shane stopped being *the* Consort, a political necessity, a formal arrangement, and become *his* in ways that transcended their official relationship?

Ilya suspected it had been gradual, a slow erosion of his carefully maintained distance. The ice skating afternoon when Shane had laughed with unguarded joy. The rehearsal dinner where he'd made self-deprecating jokes about fish. The moment in the cottage when Shane had emerged from the shower wearing only a towel and Ilya's entire world had narrowed to want and heat and possession.

Or perhaps it had been inevitable from the beginning, written in blood and fate and the peculiar alchemy that happened when two people were thrust together and found, against all odds, that they fit.

The corridor leading to the North Tower residences was dimly lit, sconces turned low in deference to the hour. Most of the palace had retired or dispersed to their own pursuits. Only the most dedicated revelers would still be drinking and gossiping in the lower salons, dissecting every moment of the dinner with the ruthless precision of people who lived for social theater.

Ilya had already half-formed the intention of retreating to his study, of forcing himself back into the routines of composure and analysis and distance. He would review the evening's success with Cassimir, confirm that all security measures remained in place, perhaps read through the intelligence reports that never stopped accumulating regardless of the hour.

Anything to occupy his mind and give the adrenaline somewhere to drain before he did something impulsive.

And then he saw Shane.

He was outside his apartment door, dinner jacket draped loosely over one arm, bow tie undone and hanging around his neck in a way that should have looked disheveled but somehow managed to look endearing instead. His white dress shirt was faintly wrinkled from hours of careful sitting and standing, the top two buttons undone to reveal the hollow of his throat. His hair had escaped whatever product he had used to style it, falling into his eyes that made him look younger, less formal, more *himself*.

There was a looseness to his posture that hadn't been there during the dinner, when every movement had carried the weight of careful protocol. Now, he simply leaned against his door as if he'd paused halfway through the motion of entering and forgotten to complete it.

Relief radiated from him like heat, the particular exhaustion that came from sustained performance finally released.

Shane looked up at the sound of footsteps, and his entire face transformed when he saw Ilya. The tired lines smoothed into genuine pleasure, his dark eyes brightening, his mouth curving into a smile that was entirely unguarded.

"Oh," Shane said softly, like he hadn't expected anyone to be there and was suddenly very glad someone was. "Hey."

That single syllable, *hey*, delivered with such casual warmth, hit Ilya with unexpected force. Not the formal "Your Highness" of public spaces, not even the more relaxed "Prince Ilya" that Shane used when they were semi-private. Just *hey*, like they were friends returning home after a long day, like this was normal and comfortable and right.

Ilya slowed, then stopped a few feet away, suddenly uncertain how to navigate this moment. What were the rules here? They'd spent the entire evening performing their roles with practiced precision. But now, in this quiet corridor with no witnesses and no protocol to guide them, what were they to each other?

"You're not asleep," Ilya observed, his voice coming out rougher than intended.

Shane huffed out a quiet laugh, the sound genuine and a little breathless. "I don't think sleep is happening anytime soon. My brain's still..." He gestured vaguely at his head, searching for words. "Vibrating. Like I drank ten cups of coffee and my thoughts are all moving too fast to settle."

"Adrenaline," Ilya supplied, understanding completely. He felt the same restless energy coursing through his own system, the aftermath of hypervigilance and controlled performance finally crashing into the reality that the danger had passed, the evening had succeeded, and Shane was safe.

Safe and beautiful and standing three feet away looking at Ilya like his presence was a gift rather than an intrusion.

"You did just survive your first State dinner. It's a reasonable reaction."

Shane's smile widened slightly. "That feels accurate."

He shifted his weight and Ilya tracked the movement with the kind of focus that would have embarrassed him if he'd had more control over his attention. The way Shane's shirt pulled across his shoulders. The play of lamplight on his skin. The visible pulse at his throat, slightly elevated still, blood singing just beneath the surface.

Ilya's fangs ached at the sight, descending slightly before he forced them to retract. *Not now.* Not when Shane was exhausted and vulnerable and trusting him with this unguarded moment.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. The corridor felt narrower than usual, the silence intimate rather than empty. Ilya was acutely aware of how close they were to one another's doors, three doors, the same three doors that had seemed so significant when he'd assigned Shane this apartment.

Close enough to blur the careful boundaries Ilya had tried to maintain.

How late it was. How unguarded this moment felt compared to the carefully curated public spaces they'd inhabited all evening. The dinner had required masks and performance and the constant awareness of watching eyes. Here, now, it was just them. Just Ilya and Shane in a dimly lit hallway, both still wearing the remnants of formal dress but somehow feeling more naked than if they'd shed the clothes entirely.

Shane shifted again, leaning his shoulder against his door, the movement casual but the effect devastating. The lamplight caught in his hair, turned his skin warm gold, and highlighted the freckles scattered across his cheeks and nose. He looked tired and beautiful and real in ways that made Ilya's chest tight.

"I wanted to ask," Shane said, and there was something vulnerable in his voice now, beneath the casual tone. "Did I do okay? Really okay, not just the polite version you'd tell someone to make them feel better."

The question hit harder than Ilya expected, cutting through his carefully maintained composure with surgical precision.

All evening, Shane had navigated impossible social terrain with a grace that no amount of training could manufacture. Ilya had watched from his position beside Shane, hyperaware of every interaction, ready to intervene if needed. But Shane hadn't needed intervention. He'd deflected Premier Considine's subtle tests with humor and intelligence. He'd listened to the mer ambassador's complaints about territorial waters with genuine interest, asking thoughtful follow-up questions that turned what could have been a tedious recitation into actual conversation. He'd handled the vampire countess's thinly veiled condescension without rising to the bait, responding with such polite graciousness that she'd been left with no target for her malice.

He'd been human and warm and utterly disarming, representing their alliance not as a political necessity but as something worth believing in. He'd made the arrangement look not

just functional but genuinely hopeful, proof that humans and vampires could coexist not merely peacefully but harmoniously.

And he was *still* worried about whether he'd met Ilya's expectations.

"You did more than okay," Ilya said, the words coming out with more intensity than he'd intended. He took a step closer, then another, until only a few feet separated them. "Shane, you were extraordinary."

Shane searched his face with those dark, expressive eyes, as if gauging whether this was reassurance or truth, whether Ilya was offering comfort or genuine assessment.

He stepped closer again, closing more of the distance deliberately, watching Shane's reaction. Shane didn't retreat, didn't tense. He just watched Ilya approach with something that looked like anticipation warming his expression.

"You represented our alliance as something worth believing in. You made them see possibility instead of compromise. No amount of protocol training can teach that. It's just... who you are."

Shane's smile bloomed slow and genuine, transforming his entire face from tired to radiant. "That means a lot. Especially coming from you."

"I've hosted dinners like this hundreds of times. They blur together after a while, same conversations, same performances, same careful dance of politics and power. Very few people leave a lasting impression."

He was close enough now to see the exact shade of Shane's eyes in the lamplight, not just brown but layered with warmth, like whiskey held up to the firelight. Close enough to smell the faint residue of the dinner's wine and food mingling with Shane's own scent, soap and skin and something uniquely him that made Ilya's pulse quicken.

"You left an impression that I won't forget."

The corridor seemed to hold its breath around them. Somewhere deeper in the palace, a door closed with a distant thud. A servant's footsteps echoed faintly from a lower floor. But here, in this small pocket of space between their apartments, the world had narrowed to just them.

Shane swallowed, his throat moving in a way that drew Ilya's gaze despite himself. His pulse was visible there, slightly elevated, blood singing warm and alive just beneath the skin. Ilya could hear it if he focused, the steady rhythm that defined mortality, that marked Shane as temporary and precious and fundamentally different from Ilya in ways that somehow made him more appealing rather than less.

"I'm...glad you came skating," Shane said, and his voice had gone softer, more uncertain, like he was navigating something fragile. He paused, then added with a small, self-conscious smile. "And tonight. I'm glad we're...becoming friends."

Friends.

The word landed between them, well-intentioned and completely inadequate for what Ilya was feeling.

Friendship implied equality and choice and boundaries that Ilya was rapidly losing interest in maintaining. Friendship was what he had with Hayden, centuries of loyalty and shared history and comfortable companionship. Friendship was what he had with Evangeline and Scott and Svetlana and Kip and the others who'd earned his trust over decades of proven reliability.

Ilya stepped closer again, deliberately crowding into Shane's space until there was nowhere for him to retreat except the wall beside his door. He didn't touch Shane, not yet, but the proximity was unmistakable, an announcement of intent, a question posed through nearness rather than words.

Shane didn't retreat. Instead, he turned slightly, leaning back against his door, his gaze fixed on Ilya's face with an intensity that sent heat cascading through Ilya's entire body.

"Shane," Ilya said softly, and felt the truth rise unbidden from somewhere deep in his chest, from the place where he'd been trying to contain it for weeks. "Friendship might not be enough for me."

Shane's breath caught audibly, his eyes widening fractionally before darkening with recognition. Like he'd been waiting for Ilya to say it, to acknowledge what had been building between them since that first awkward meeting in the Amber Room, since Shane had surprised him by approaching first and offering gratitude with unguarded sincerity.

Shane's gaze dropped to Ilya's mouth for just a fraction of a second, long enough for Ilya to notice, to catalog, to feel his entire body respond to that small tell, before flicking back up to meet his eyes.

"Oh," Shane breathed, and the single syllable carried so much weight. Surprise, yes. But also relief. Hope. *Want*.

That was all the permission Ilya needed.

He lifted one hand, moving slowly enough that Shane could stop him if he wanted to, and braced it against the wall beside Shane's shoulder. His other hand followed, caging Shane in with deliberate care, not trapping, not forcing, but creating a space that was theirs alone.

Close. So close now that Ilya could feel the warmth radiating from Shane's body, could count his individual eyelashes, could see the exact moment when Shane's breathing shifted from steady to slightly elevated.

Shane tilted his head back slightly, exposing more of his throat, the gesture unconscious but devastatingly effective. An invitation, whether Shane realized it or not.

Ilya leaned in and kissed him.

It was gentle. A question rather than a claim, a tasting rather than a conquest. Ilya pressed his lips and tongue to Shane's with careful reverence, mapping the shape of his mouth with the focus he usually reserved for battle strategy or diplomatic negotiations. Shane's lips were warm and soft, slightly parted in surprise, and Ilya felt the small hitch in his breathing like a physical touch.

For a heartbeat, Shane was still, processing, perhaps, or simply shocked that this was actually happening. Then he made a soft sound, barely audible but expressive, something between a sigh and a moan that went straight to Ilya's hindbrain and lit up instincts he'd been carefully controlling.

And then Shane kissed back.

His dinner jacket slipped from his arm, landing on the floor with a muffled thud. Both of Shane's hands came up hesitantly, resting against Ilya's chest as if unsure they were allowed there, fingers spreading over the fabric of Ilya's tuxedo jacket with tentative pressure.

The contact sent a sharp, startling awareness through Ilya's entire body. He could feel Shane's warmth through the thin barrier of clothing, could feel the slight tremor in his hands that betrayed nerves or excitement or both. It made Ilya want to pull him closer, to eliminate every remaining inch of distance between them, to feel the full length of Shane's body pressed against his own.

But he held back, maintaining just enough space to keep the kiss gentle rather than overwhelming.

Ilya kissed him slowly, thoroughly. He traced the seam of Shane's lips with his tongue, a playful request, and when Shane opened for him with a small gasp, Ilya explored with adoration rather than urgency. Shane tasted like the wine from dinner, something sweet and slightly fruity, and beneath that, something uniquely him that Ilya wanted to memorize.

Shane's responses were earnest and unguarded, lacking the practiced seduction of experienced lovers but all the more affecting for his honesty. He kissed like someone discovering something precious, like each point of contact mattered, like he was paying attention to every detail with the same focused intensity he'd brought to learning formal dining protocols.

Ilya's hands ached to touch more of him, to slide into his hair, to trace the line of his jaw, to map the curve of his throat with fingers and then with lips. But he kept them braced against the wall, giving Shane the illusion of control even as Ilya's entire body screamed for more contact, more closeness, *more*.

There was no rush, no hunger sharpened into violence, just discovery and connection, the quiet click of something falling irrevocably into place.

Ilya's fangs descended fully, a response to arousal and proximity and the intoxicating scent of Shane's blood singing warm just beneath the surface. He was careful not to let them graze Shane's lips, not to introduce that particular complication when this moment was already charged enough. But God, he wanted to. Wanted to bite into that pretty throat and taste the

Sanguis Resonans that made Shane so precious, wanted to feel Shane's pulse flutter against his tongue, wanted to know if the blood would taste as extraordinary as its reputation suggested.

Later. After the bonding ceremony. After they'd formalized what was already becoming inevitable.

For now, this was enough. This kiss, this moment, Shane's hands on his chest and his breath brushing against Ilya's lips, and the exquisite rightness of finally, *finally* acting on what had been building between them for weeks.

When Ilya finally pulled back, reluctantly, aching, it was only far enough to rest his forehead against Shane's. He kept his eyes closed for a moment, just feeling. The warmth of Shane's skin. The subtle tremor running through both their bodies. The way Shane's hands had fisted slightly in Ilya's jacket, holding on like he was afraid Ilya might disappear if he let go.

"We should probably talk about this," Ilya murmured, his voice rough in a way he couldn't quite control.

Shane's breath was warm against his lips, slightly uneven, his pulse still elevated in a way that Ilya could hear clearly.

"I'd like that."

"But not tonight." The words cost him, but they were necessary. Shane deserved better than a rushed conversation in a hallway at midnight when they were both running on adrenaline and exhaustion and the lingering high of political success. He deserved consideration and honesty and a clear understanding of what this meant, what Ilya was offering, and what they could build together.

Ilya stepped back. It felt like tearing away from gravity, like fighting against every instinct that screamed for him to stay close, to keep touching, to not let this moment end. But he forced himself to drop his hands from the wall, to put physical distance between them even as the connection remained exciting and unmistakable.

Shane's hands slipped from Ilya's chest slowly, as if he too was reluctant to break contact. His face was flushed that beautiful rose-gold color, his lips slightly swollen from kissing, his eyes dark and warm and fixed on Ilya with an expression that made Ilya's control feel gossamer-thin.

"Go and find your rest," Ilya said, trying for gentle authority and achieving something closer to hoarse plea.

They lingered for another heartbeat, neither quite willing to be the first to move. Then another heartbeat. The moment stretched, elastic and precious, neither wanting it to end but both knowing it had to.

Finally, Shane bent to retrieve his fallen dinner jacket, his movements slightly uncoordinated in a way that suggested his brain was still catching up to what had just happened. He straightened and met Ilya's eyes with a smile that was equal parts shy and pleased and a promise for later.

"Good night, Ilya," Shane said softly, and the use of his given name, no title, no formality, just *Ilya*, sent a rush of warmth through him that had nothing to do with blood and everything to do with intimacy.

"Good night, Shane."

Shane opened his door and paused on the threshold, looking back one more time, and the expression on his face was so open, so genuinely happy, that Ilya felt something in his chest crack open in the best possible way.

Then the door closed softly, leaving Ilya alone in the hallway with his racing pulse and the lingering taste of Shane on his lips and the certain knowledge that everything had just changed.

Something fundamental had shifted between them, no longer just obligation and political arrangement, no longer careful distance and formal roles. Whatever this was becoming, it was real and mutual and terrifying in its intensity.

Ilya stood in the corridor for a long moment, listening to Shane's movements through the door. The soft thud of the jacket being tossed somewhere. Footsteps moving deeper into the apartment. The distant sound of water running, maintaining the mundane rituals of human life even while his world had just tilted on its axis.

Ilya would let himself simply enjoy the warmth in his chest. The satisfaction of a threat neutralized and a dinner successfully concluded. The memory of Shane's soft sounds and warm hands and the way he'd opened so sweetly under Ilya's mouth.

And Ilya knew, with quiet certainty, that neither of them would be sleeping anytime soon. Ilya finally turned toward his own apartment, his steps lighter than they'd been in weeks. Maybe centuries.

Inside him, his monster purred with satisfaction for the moment, but demanding *more more more...*

Chapter 9: The Day After

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: OK I think I'm back on my regular writing schedule. I got chapters 10 and 11 drafted, but they need a lot of work so you won't be seeing them any time soon. But YAY! I got this one edited and done.

Author's Note 2: I'm really really sorry Shane. Harris is out of control. LOL! And yes, your mother saw that video and she is going to be calling you very soon. (HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!!)

Shane woke before dawn, wrapped in thick cotton sheets under a velvet blanket and a cloud-like duvet that held in the warmth of his body heat. For a few disoriented seconds he didn't know where he was, the room existed in that strange pre-light dimness where furniture became unfamiliar shapes and shadows pooled in corners like living things. His heart was beating too fast, his breath unsteady, because his mind caught on a single, relentless loop.

Ilya.

The kiss replayed itself with merciless clarity. The way the hallway had seemed to narrow around them, walls drawing closer into a bubble as if the palace itself wanted to protect what was happening. The hush at that hour, so complete Shane had heard his own pulse thundering in his ears. The press of Ilya's mouth against his, cool and deliberate. Not some fever-bright fantasy conjured by exhaustion and proximity.

Shane lifted a hand to his lips, fingers brushing them tentatively, as if he could still feel the imprint there. There was a phantom sensation lingering, a whisper of cold that didn't chill so much as spark, like touching ice and finding it burning instead of frozen. The contrast between Ilya's vampire body temperature and his own had been startling in the moment. It was thrilling to imagine how that coolness would feel on *other* parts of his body – kissing his neck, his chest, wrapping around his hard cock. The *idea* of it was so vivid it made his breath catch all over again.

He swallowed, pulse fluttering, and let his hand fall back to the pillow.

“Ohmygod.”

A soft, breathless laugh escaped him before he could stop it, the sound absurdly loud in the pre-dawn quiet. He turned onto his side and then burrowed deeper into the massive bed, its ridiculous scale suddenly perfect, indulgent, and made for this exact kind of helpless, floating happiness. He inhaled deeply with his eyes closed, gently teasing himself as he rubbed his cock against the bed.

Shane pressed his face into the pillow, smiling to himself like an idiot, like a teenager with their first crush.

He kissed me!

Dreamy didn't begin to cover it. His chest felt light, buoyant, as though something inside him had quietly shifted and decided to stay that way. Like a lock tumbling open. Like gravity reversing. He opened his eyes and stared at the pale morning light creeping across the floor, tracing the beautiful wood floors that he'd barely noticed before, and thought, with a rush of anticipation that made his toes curl and his stomach flip, about seeing Ilya again.

What would he say? What would *Ilya* say? Would they talk about it immediately, or would there be that careful dance of pretending normalcy first? Shane had no template for this. No protocol. Dating etiquette didn't exactly cover "what to do the morning after kissing an immortal Crown Prince in a palace hallway."

Hey Ilya, can we make out some more? Should I schedule something with your Seneschal?

Vasily would put it on their calendars. Probably.

The thought made him laugh again, softer this time, muffled against the pillow.

He should get up. He had a schedule and responsibilities. An official social media persona to maintain and a relationship with the public that Harris had carefully orchestrated over the past couple of weeks. But for just a few more minutes, Shane let himself stay exactly where he was, wrapped in blankets and in his imagination, letting the happiness settle into his bones like warmth after coming in from the cold.

The small dining room nearest to the second kitchen felt like a secret compared to the grand halls that Shane was still getting used to. It was his favorite room to take his meals, often joined by his friends. Sunlight spilled in through tall windows in thick golden shafts, dust motes dancing lazily in the beams. The room itself was intimate, designed for private family meals rather than State occasions. The round polished table set for two gleamed in the morning light, the wood so dark and fine-grained it looked almost black. Crystal glasses caught the sun and threw tiny rainbows across the cream-colored walls. It was quiet enough that voices didn't echo, comfortable in a way the palace rarely managed to be, human-scaled and warm.

Kip was already there, seated sideways in his chair, legs stretched out, and sketchbook open beside his plate, ready for inspiration. Charcoal smudged part of his cheek. His brown hair was rumpled, casual, and he looked utterly at ease in a way Shane envied. He glanced up when Shane entered, and his face broke into a smile, warm and genuine, the kind of smile that made a place feel lived-in rather than merely occupied.

"Oh shit," Kip said, hazel eyes flicking over him with the practiced observation of an artist cataloging details. "You look...different."

Shane laughed softly, suddenly self-conscious, and slid into the chair next to him. The cushion was plush beneath him, the chair itself carved with subtle wolf motifs he traced absently with his fingers.

"Good morning to you, too."

"No, I mean it," Kip insisted, leaning forward slightly, studying him with open curiosity. "You're practically *glowing*. Did you sleep well, or —" His eyes widened with realization. "Oh. *Oh*."

Before Shane could respond, or panic, or deflect, the side door opened and the palace's human chef entered personally with quiet pride, followed by two of his assistants, pushing in a serving cart laden with plates and a pitcher of orange juice and a carafe of coffee. Chef Émile Laurent was in his fifties, silver threading through dark hair at his temples, starched chef whites immaculate despite the early hour. He moved with the precise economy of someone who had spent decades perfecting his craft, each gesture graceful.

"Good morning, Consort Hollander. Mr. Grady," Laurent said, his voice friendly and warm as he greeted them.

The servers set down plates that were nothing short of decadent, each one a small work of art. Flaky pastries brushed with honey and dusted with powdered sugar, their layers visible where they'd been torn. Soft eggs folded with fresh herbs, chives and tarragon, Shane thought, though he wasn't sure, arranged in pale yellow clouds that looked impossibly delicate. Multiple strips of perfectly cooked bacon. Thick slices of toasted bread, the crust dark and crispy, accompanied by cultured butter so pale it was almost white, already beginning to soften in the warm room. Fresh fruit arranged like a still life: berries in jewel tones, sliced pears fanned across the plate, grapes clustered artfully. And porcelain cups steaming with rich coffee, the smell alone enough to make Shane's mouth water.

"Thank you." Shane's eyes widened, taking it all in with genuine wonder. His usual breakfast meals were simple and uncomplicated. "This looks incredible."

Chef Laurent inclined his head, clearly pleased by the reaction, a hint of a smile softening his professional demeanor. His accent was subtle but unmistakable when he spoke.

"I am honored. His Highness requested something comforting for you this morning."

Ilya requested this. The thought sent warmth spiraling through Shane's chest. Ilya, who had kissed him last night and then somehow found time to arrange a special breakfast for him, to think about what Shane might need after the stress of the State dinner. The consideration of it, the *care*, made his throat tight.

Kip beamed at the chef, his smile unrestrained and boyish. "You outdid yourself, Chef. Truly."

Shane echoed it immediately, meaning every word. "Thank you so much. This is, honestly, this is perfect."

The chef's smile lingered a second longer, something paternal and satisfied in his expression, before he excused himself with a small bow. The door closed behind them with a soft click, leaving the two of them alone again.

Shane picked up his fork, still a little stunned by the care wrapped into every detail, the way even breakfast in this place felt like an event, a gift, a statement.

They ate in companionable silence for a minute, the food every bit as good as it looked. The pastry melted on Shane's tongue, buttery and sweet. The eggs were perfectly seasoned, creamy without being heavy. Even the coffee was remarkable, rich and smooth, with none of the bitterness he'd grown accustomed to from the faculty lounge pot at the high school.

Then Kip set his coffee down with a deliberate *clink* and studied Shane openly, head tilted, eyes sparkling with barely suppressed amusement.

"A special comforting breakfast," Kip said, voice gentle but insistent. "Now I *know* something happened."

Shane froze mid-bite, a piece of pastry halfway to his mouth. "Nothing happened."

Kip raised an eyebrow, the expression so knowing it was almost comical. "You've touched your lips four times since you sat down. You're glowing, yes, *glowing*, don't argue. And you're about three seconds away from floating out of your chair."

Shane swallowed and felt heat rush straight to his face, his ears burning. "I am *not* glowing."

"You are *absolutely* glowing," Kip countered, grinning now. "You look like someone just told you you won the lottery and also discovered you have superpowers. So." He leaned towards him, elbow on the table, chin propped on his hand. "Spill."

Shane tried to laugh it off. He really did. He took a sip of the freshly squeezed orange juice, looked out the window, anywhere but at Kip's expectant face. But the smile on Kip's face was too knowing, too *kind*, and before Shane could stop himself the truth spilled out in a breathless rush.

"Ilya kissed me."

For exactly half a second, Kip just stared at him, eyes wide. Then he let out a delighted, utterly unrestrained sound, somewhere between a gasp and a laugh. "*Ohmygod!*"

"Please don't shout." Shane hissed, though he was smiling so hard his cheeks hurt, the joy too big to contain. He glanced nervously at the door as if palace staff might materialize to investigate the commotion.

Kip clapped a hand over his mouth, but his eyes were still sparkling, dancing with barely suppressed glee.

"Sorry. Sorry," he said, muffled behind his palm. He lowered his hand slowly, like he was testing whether he could control himself. "But, Shane. *Finally.*"

Shane blinked, genuinely confused. "Finally?"

"Yes, *finally*," Kip said, leaning forward again, emphatic. "We've *all* been watching you two circle each other for weeks. It's been very intense, very noble, and very 'I will pine silently for eternity while maintaining perfect emotional distance.' It was *painful*. Scott and I had a bet going on how long it would take for one of you to crack."

"You –" Shane stared at him. "You bet on us?"

"I said after the State dinner," Kip said, smugly. "Scott thought it would take until the bonding. I won!" He paused, suddenly concerned. "It was after the State dinner, right?"

"It was," Shane admitted, and Kip pumped his fist in victory.

Shane laughed, helpless, the absurdity of it cutting through his lingering anxiety. "It just... happened. After the State dinner. In the hallway. I was just...hanging outside my apartment, and I might have hoped that he'd show up, and then he was there."

"And?" Kip prompted, shameless in his curiosity.

"And it was..." Shane paused, searching for words that felt adequate. He met Kip's eyes, and the vulnerability in his own voice surprised him. "Just us."

Kip's expression softened into something genuinely happy, the teasing falling away. "I'm really glad, Shane. Truly." He reached over and squeezed Shane's shoulder briefly. "You both deserve that."

"Can I ask you something personal? I mean, I don't know how to ask this without being rude, but –"

"You want to know how a human has sex with a werewolf?" Kip said, smirking evilly.

"What? No!" Shane said, staring at him in horror. He scrunched up his face with an apologetic expression. "*Umm*...I kinda do, but that's not what I want to ask."

Kip smiled, nodding. "You can ask, but I might not answer."

"Okay, fair enough," Shane said, taking a deep breath. "What...what was it like when you and Scott got together? About being a human mated to a werewolf?"

Kip stirred his coffee absently, watching the cream swirl into patterns before dissolving completely.

"Falling in love with Scott was so easy. *So* easy. He's such a good person, kind and loyal and smart. I couldn't believe he was so into me, I really thought it was just hooking up. But he pretty much told me from the start that it wasn't hooking up for him and he wanted a mate – he wanted *me* as his mate." Kip admitted, smiling dreamily. "Being with Scott meant stepping into a world that wasn't built for me. A werewolf taking a human mate, it wasn't exactly popular with everyone. Still isn't, in some circles. I got...looks. Comments. Some of Scott's pack made it very clear they thought he was making a mistake."

Shane leaned forward, intent, absorbing every word. "But he stood up for you."

"Every time," Kip said and there was steel beneath the softness in his voice. "With his pack. With other packs. With anyone who questioned it. The Black Claw pack didn't make things easy for us, they're more traditional and suspicious of outsiders, especially humans. But Scott never lets me feel small. He never makes me question whether I belong." He smiled, private and warm. "We talk. Especially when it's hard. About boundaries, about what we need, about how to navigate his world without losing myself in it. Love isn't about things being perfect, it's about choosing each other anyway. Every day."

The words settled deep in Shane's chest, resonating with something he'd been trying to articulate to himself.

He hesitated, then asked quietly, "can I ask you another personal question?"

Kip smiled, open and easy. "Go ahead."

"The bonding," Shane said carefully, watching Kip's face for any sign he'd overstepped. "What...what happened to you? What was it like?"

Kip's cheeks colored slightly, but he didn't look away or deflect. If anything, he seemed to appreciate the directness.

"Scott bit me. Here." He gestured to the back of his shoulder, his hand moving to touch the spot through his shirt. "During a full moon ceremony. I'm marked. The pack can sense it. Other werewolves can sense it. Werewolves mate for life, you know, they only mate once in their lifetime. The mate bond bite is precious because of what it means for a werewolf who loses their mate. They will never mate again. Some say that they usually don't survive losing their mate."

"Wow." Shane's breath caught, his pulse quickening. "Did it hurt?"

"Fuck yes," Kip said honestly, unflinching. "A lot. More than I expected, even though I knew it would. The bite itself, the chemicals in his saliva, the way the mate bond settled in to connect us, it was intense. Scott says I handled it well, but I remember screaming. I remember thinking I couldn't take any more." He paused, and his expression shifted into something softer. "But the aftercare, recovering together, having him there through all of it, it was intimate in a way I can barely explain. The pain fades, but the memory doesn't." He smiled, soft and private, clearly somewhere else for a moment. "It's *ours*. No one else's. His mark, that moment, belongs to us."

Shane flushed in sympathy and imagination, warmth curling low in his stomach. He could picture it too clearly: the vulnerability, the trust, the irrevocable commitment of letting someone mark you that way.

He took a sip of coffee he no longer tasted, using the moment to compose himself, and met Kip's eyes.

"Thank you, for telling me."

"Anytime," Kip replied, kindly. "And for the record?" He leaned back in his chair, his smile turning genuine again. "Whatever happens, however complicated it gets, I think you and Ilya are going to be just fine."

Shane hoped, fiercely, desperately, that he was right.

Shane's day didn't slow down just because his heart was still doing backflips. He sat in one of the palace's smaller briefing rooms, all dark wood paneling and leather chairs, the kind of space designed for discrete conversations rather than grand pronouncements. A tablet balanced on his knee, his posture carefully relaxed even as his mind raced. He was half-listening as Harris ran through the day's schedule, his assistant's voice crisp and efficient as always.

"-- interviews with *Royal Weekly* and *Supernatural Times* this afternoon, both pre-approved questions. Charity appearance at the children's hospital in two weeks, very low-key, you'll read to the kids and take some photos. Then you have..."

On paper, it all made sense. In reality, Shane found himself staring at the edge of the screen, watching the cursor blink hypnotically, his thoughts drifting somewhere dangerously exciting and blue-eyed. Ilya's face kept surfacing in his mind, the way he'd looked in the hallway last night, open and honest, and so careful with Shane.

"Shane. Friendship might not be enough for me."

"You're distracted this morning," Harris said mildly, setting down his own tablet.

Shane blinked, snapping back to the present. "I am absolutely not."

"You are," Harris replied, utterly unconcerned, almost amused. "And it's adorable."

Shane groaned and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Please don't say adorable."

He swiped his tablet and turned it to Shane. Photos filled the screen, professional pictures from the State dinner, taken by the palace photographer and the handful of approved press photographers who'd been present. Shane and Ilya stepped into the ballroom, posture perfect, shoulders barely brushing. Seated side by side at the high table, their heads inclined toward each other in a private conversation. Ilya's hand at the small of Shane's back in a gesture that looked both protective and possessive.

Shane felt a strange, sinking lurch in his chest as he looked at them, part anxiety and part wonder.

He looked...good.

Better than good. He looked put together and confident. *Radiant*, even, which was not a word he'd ever associated with himself. The formal wear suited him, the midnight blue bringing out his brown eyes, the cut emphasizing his shoulders and the lean strength he'd built over years

of skating. He looked like he belonged there, which was perhaps the most disorienting realization of all.

Ilya was devastating, as always. Beautiful in that sharp, precise way that seemed almost otherworldly. But what caught Shane off guard, what made his breath snag in his throat, was the way Ilya looked at *him* in nearly every photo. Focused. Softened. Like the rest of the world had dimmed around Shane without either of them noticing. Like Shane was the only thing in the room that could hold his attention.

"Oh," Shane breathed before he could stop himself, the sound small and surprised.

Harris smirked, satisfied. "Yeah. That."

Shane swallowed and forced himself to keep looking, to absorb what the camera had captured even as his face heated.

"People are reacting well?"

"Exceptionally well," Harris said, scrolling through what looked like analytics. "Your social media engagement has *exploded*. Humans love you, you're accessible, relatable, you smile like you mean it. Supernaturals love you because Ilya *clearly* thinks you're hot shit, and they trust his judgment. Apparently everyone agrees you're..." He paused, searching for the word. "Authentic. The consensus is that you're not faking it, you're just being yourself and that's incredibly compelling."

Shane snorted, defensive. "I'm a disaster."

"But a relatable one," Harris countered immediately. "Which brings me to this."

He swiped again, and Shane's stomach dropped preemptively.

The video started playing before Shane could stop him.

It was of him on the ice. From that day at the ice rink. Stretching. Doing hip flexor exercises, which were completely innocent, totally practical, and absolutely necessary for maintaining flexibility and preventing injury.

Except now, Harris had taken that footage and...edited it.

There was music now. A thumping, unmistakable beat layered over the footage, the bass line instantly recognizable.

*If you're horny, let's do it
Ride it, my pony
My saddle's waiting
Come and jump on it*

With the music, it made the hip exercises look like he was *grinding*.

Shane made a sound somewhere between a yelp and a choke, his hands flying up instinctively as if he could physically block the screen.

"Jesus Christ. Harris! What the fuck!"

"Am I a fucking genius or what?" Harris said, laughing loudly. "Sex sells, man."

One hundred and fifty million views glowed smugly in the corner of the screen, the number ticking up even as he watched.

One hundred and fifty. Million.

"Does Ilya know you did this!"

"His Highness asked for *all* of the raw video footage *and* this one. I made him an extended version."

"*Ohmygod*," Shane repeated, his voice strangled, hands flying to his face. He pressed his palms against his eyes, as if he could unsee what he'd just witnessed. "Holy shit, my *mother* is going to see this. My *students* are going to see this!"

"Yes, you're pulling in a diverse demographic," Harris said cheerfully, not even attempting to hide his amusement. "And for the record, the comments are overwhelmingly positive. People think it's funny. Sexy. Your ass is trending in all the Territories."

"I don't want my ass to trend," Shane said, weakly, from behind his hands.

"Too late," Harris said, but his voice was gentle now. "Come on, look at the comments. They're actually really sweet."

Thankfully, Harris ended the video and was showing Shane his official IG pictures. He scrolled, and Shane peeked through his fingers despite himself, unable to resist the morbid curiosity.

The comments scrolled past, a blur of usernames and emojis and opinions from strangers who felt entitled to share their thoughts on his life. People talking about his chemistry with the Crown Prince. About how natural he looked beside Ilya, how their body language spoke volumes, how it was clear this wasn't fake PR. Shane's chest tightened painfully at that, heat blooming low and traitorous in his stomach.

He scrolled further, and the tone began to shift.

Humans don't belong in supernatural politics.

This is going to end badly for him.

He's pretty but he's completely out of his depth.

The court will eat him alive.

Blood bag.

Wonder how long before he gets hurt. Fucking a vampire? That's just stupid.

Gold digger.

Bet he signed an NDA thicker than Ilya's dick.

Blood whore.

Some were worse, uglier and more explicit, speculating about his bloodline and his body and what he was doing to keep Ilya's attention. Shane's stomach knotted, the happiness from earlier curdling into something more complicated.

Harris closed the tablet without drama, his expression carefully neutral. "I wanted you to see these, for your awareness only. You ignore these fuckers, Shane. The worst ones are flagged and under investigation. We don't amplify them, we don't respond to them, and we definitely don't let them dictate how you live your life."

"Right. Protocol *never complain, never explain.*"

"Exactly."

Shane nodded slowly, trying to shake off the ugly feeling clinging to him. The buzz of excitement cooled into something more sobering.

"Is it...dangerous? Should I be worried?"

"It's manageable," Harris said, and his voice was gentler now, more serious. "I'm working closely with your security detail. Captain Marlow has already increased the rotation schedule, and we're monitoring social media for any credible threats. Public appearances will be controlled, you won't be in situations where you're vulnerable to anything more than verbal criticism, and even that we can minimize." He leaned forward slightly, catching Shane's eyes. "I don't want you living in fear, Shane. But we do need to be smart. Aware. Careful."

Shane exhaled, grounding himself, focusing on the concrete rather than spiraling into what-ifs. "Okay. I can do that."

Harris smiled, satisfied. "Good. Now drink some Ginger Ale and finish reviewing your schedule."

Shane laughed despite himself, reaching for his glass.

The palace library was quiet in a way that felt intentional, as though silence itself had been curated and preserved between the shelves like one of the rare books.

Shane had retreated there after the two interviews with the press, needing space and time to think without the constant awareness of being watched. He thought that the interviews went

well, they were his first public interviews, and Harris had selected friendly publications. Since the questions were already pre-approved by Harris and the official press offices, he didn't have to worry about being blindsided. Shane tried to give thoughtful answers without coming off like he was reading from a script.

"Should we practice my answers?"

Harris shook his head. "No, just be yourself. Stay on message. You got this, Shane."

The vast room rose around him in tiers of dark wood and black ironwork, an architectural marvel that seemed designed to intimidate as much as inspire. Ladders rested against shelves that vanished into shadow despite the daylight outside, and Shane found himself wondering how many of these books had ever been read, how many existed simply as artifacts of wealth and power.

Late afternoon sunlight filtered through high arched windows, thick beams cutting through the dimness, dust motes drifting lazily in the air like tiny satellites. It smelled like old paper, that distinctive vanilla-lignin scent of aging books, and polish, and something faintly metallic beneath it all. A scent he was starting to associate with vampires and the weight of history they carried, iron and stone and time compressed into something almost tangible.

He sat at one of the long reading tables, several books open around him in a semicircle, fingers curled lightly around the edge of a page he'd been staring at for far too long without actually absorbing the words.

Bonding ceremonies.

He needed to understand what he was agreeing to, what it meant beyond the politics and pageantry, beyond the word *Consort*, beyond the way his pulse leapt every time Ilya looked at him. Understanding felt like the only responsible thing to do, the only way to make a choice that wasn't just driven by emotion and desire and the heady rush of being wanted by someone extraordinary.

The texts did not soften the truth.

Blood exchange, first and foremost. Not symbolic, not metaphorical, *literal*. Blood offered willingly by the human, taken by the vampire in a quantity that was carefully calibrated but still significant. Returned in kind, vampire blood mixed with the human's, imbued with magic and power and permanence. A binding spell woven through ritual marks and spoken vows, sealing the connection not just physically but metaphysically, rewriting something fundamental in the fabric of both participants.

Permanent.

The word appeared again and again across multiple texts, emphasized in different ways. *Irreversible. Eternal. Unbreakable.* Shane swallowed and turned another page, the paper whispering against his fingertips.

The intimacy of the bond unfolded inexorably as he read. Once bonded, they would be able to sense each other, emotions bleeding faintly across the connection, not mind-reading but an awareness of mood and well-being. Awareness of distance and direction, an internal compass that always pointed toward the other person. Instinctive knowledge of injury or illness, the bond acting as an early warning system that had saved countless lives over the centuries.

Some scholars described it as the vampire equivalent of marriage. Others argued, bluntly, that it went far beyond that. Marriage could be dissolved. Marriage was a legal contract, a social convention, a tradition made law. *Bonding* was made with blood and magic.

A joining of lives, one particularly ancient text read, the handwriting spidery and faded. Not ownership. Not control. But an irrevocable intertwining. Two threads woven together such that pulling one affects the pattern of the other. What was separate becomes shared. What was singular becomes plural.

Shane leaned back in his chair, breath shallow, heart beating faster. This wasn't just desire. It wasn't even just trust, though trust was certainly part of it.

It wasn't quite love either, not yet maybe, he wasn't sure he could name it that way with so little time having passed. But something profound and undeniable nonetheless. Something that made the idea of permanence feel less like a trap and more like a promise. The realization sat heavy and undeniable in his chest, warm and frightening at once.

"I thought I might find you here."

Evangeline's voice came from behind him, smooth and unhurried, carrying easily across the library's careful acoustics. Shane turned, startled, he hadn't heard her approach, hadn't sensed her presence at all, which was unsettling in its own right. She stepped into the circle of light cast by the windows, and she looked as she always did: composed, elegant, ageless in the way vampires were, eyes sharp with an intelligence that had seen centuries and survived them.

She wore a deep burgundy dress, the color rich against her pale skin, her blonde hair pulled back in a style that would have looked severe on anyone else but somehow emphasized the classical beauty of her features.

She took the seat across from him, movements fluid and precise, gaze flicking to the open books spread across the table.

"Researching about bonding?"

Her eyes fell on a few texts about being Turned by a vampire.

"Yes. And other things," Shane admitted, seeing no point in pretending otherwise. "I needed to know. Before I..."

"Before you commit," Evangeline supplied, a small smile on her lips. "As you should." She studied him for a moment, and Shane had the uncomfortable sensation of being evaluated,

weighed, and measured against some internal standard he couldn't see. "What have you learned?"

"It's...a lot," he said honestly, gesturing vaguely at the books. "It's not something you do halfway. Not something you can undo if you change your mind later."

"No," Evangeline agreed quietly. "It isn't."

They sat in silence for a beat, the air between them thick with unspoken things. Dust motes continued their lazy dance in the sunlight. Somewhere in the library's depths, old wood creaked and settled.

When Evangeline spoke again, her voice quieter than before, almost contemplative. "You once asked me about my Turning. Do you still want to know?"

Shane's attention snapped fully back to her, the books forgotten. "Yes. And I'm sorry, again, for my rudeness."

Evangeline's mouth curved faintly. "It was exceptionally rude. But you are allowed your curiosity." She folded her hands together on the table, pale fingers steady, perfectly manicured nails catching the light. "I was seventeen."

Shane stilled completely, even his breathing seeming to pause.

"I was human," she continued, her voice level, factual, but something beneath it suggested this was not an easy story to tell. "Poor. No, destitute. And starving, but not in the way people use the word so casually now, but actually malnourished, hungry, and desperate. I was living in a city that devoured girls like me without anyone noticing or caring. Paris, late eighteenth century. Before the Revolution, though not by much."

Her gaze drifted, unfocused, as if the past had risen vividly before her, overlaying the library with older, darker memories.

"I had been sold – or was about to be, the details were unclear to me at the time – to a brothel, most likely. Or to a supernatural patron who wanted something disposable, someone who wouldn't be missed. There were a lot of us, girls and boys with no families, no protection, no value in society's eyes."

Shane's stomach twisted painfully, his throat tight. He thought of his students, so young and so bright, with their whole lives in front of them. He couldn't imagine a world that would throw them out like garbage. He couldn't even imagine the world as Evangeline had known it.

"The vampire who bought me didn't touch me," Evangeline said, and there was something distant in her expression now. "He looked at me, really *looked*, but not like the way men had looked at me before. And he asked me a question."

Her voice did not waver, but Shane could feel the weight of it pressing down on the room, making the air feel heavier.

"He asked if I wanted to be Turned. If I wanted to never be afraid again. Never be weak. Never belong to anyone as a slave or a plaything or property."

She inhaled once, slow and measured, composing herself.

"I begged him," she said simply, meeting Shane's eyes. "On my knees. I begged to be Turned. I would have done anything, *anything*, to escape what was waiting for me."

He couldn't speak; he couldn't process the full horror of what she was describing with such careful composure.

"It was agony," Evangeline continued, unflinching now, her voice steady. "He drained me first, there was so much blood, I didn't think I could have that much blood in me. Then I drank his blood, the chemicals rewriting everything at a cellular level. I screamed until my voice broke. I thought I was dying, and I was, the human girl I'd been, didn't survive that night."

She met his eyes again, her gaze fierce and uncompromising.

"But I survived. And I have never begged for anything since. I learned to be strong, to be powerful, to make others afraid of *me*. My Sire taught me everything, how to hunt, how to navigate vampire society, how to survive in a world that would have destroyed me otherwise."

She paused, and something softened in her expression, just slightly.

"He didn't have to offer me that choice. He could have just used me and discarded me, the way so many others did with mortals like me. But he gave me a choice when I had nothing else. He gave me a chance to find my power. And for that, I will be grateful to my Sire for the rest of my existence."

Shane felt the sting of tears burning his eyes. He didn't look away, didn't try to hide his emotions from her.

"Thank you," he said quietly, his voice rough. "For trusting me with that."

Something in Evangeline softened then, the sharp edges of her usual demeanor easing just a fraction. She reached across the table and placed her cool hand over his, a gesture of affection that felt significant coming from her. He turned his hand so that he could hold hers, sharing a look across the table that deepened their friendship.

"The bond, like being Turned, is permanent, Shane," she said, her voice gentle. She squeezed his hand and then pulled it away, sitting back in the chair. "Once you're connected to Ilya, there's no undoing it. Even if you left afterwards, even if circumstances changed beyond recognition, you would still be bound to him. You would still *feel* him, sense him, be aware of him for the rest of your life." She paused, her eyes searched his face. "Are you ready for that?"

He considered the question carefully, not rushing to answer, giving it the weight it deserved. The blood. The magic. The loss of anonymity and privacy. The certainty that whatever he became after the bonding would be shaped forever by Ilya's presence in his life, woven into the fabric of his existence in ways he couldn't fully predict.

The knowledge that there would be no going back.

"I don't know," he admitted finally, meeting her gaze honestly. "I don't know if anyone can really be ready for something like that. But..." He took a breath, feeling the truth of it settle in his chest. "I want to try. I want to be with *him*. And I think that's enough to start with."

Evangeline studied him for a long moment, her expression unreadable, ancient eyes seeing things he couldn't begin to guess at. Then she nodded, something like approval flickering across her features.

"Ilya is lucky to have you," she said, and there was warmth threading through her words now, a sense of relief. "He needs someone who asks questions, who doesn't simply accept things because they've always been that way. Someone who sees him as more than just the Crown Prince."

Shane felt his chest tighten with emotion, the compliment landing more deeply than he'd expected. "Thank you."

Evangeline rose gracefully, smoothing her dress. "I should let you finish your research. But Shane?" She waited until he looked up at her. "Don't let fear make your decisions. Fear is useful, it helps us survive, but it's a terrible compass. Trust what you feel, not what you're afraid of feeling."

She left as quietly as she'd arrived, her footsteps silent on the library floor, and Shane sat alone again with his books and his thoughts and the weight of everything he was considering. He looked down at the text in front of him, at the description of the bonding ritual, and realized with startling clarity that he'd already made his choice.

He'd made it the moment Ilya kissed him. Maybe even before that. Now he just had to figure out how to tell him.

By evening, the palace had settled into its nocturnal rhythm, that strange shift that happened as sunset approached and the vampire residents began their true waking hours.

Shane lingered in his apartment, drifting from room to room without quite meaning to, unable to settle. He told himself he was unwinding. That he was reading, though he'd reread the same page of his book three times without retaining a word. That he was stretching, though his muscles were already loose from his morning yoga. That he was doing anything other than waiting.

But he kept circling back to the sitting room.

It was the closest to the corridor, positioned so that he could hear footsteps in the hallway if he listened carefully enough. If Ilya knocked, Shane would hear it there first, the soft sound of knuckles against wood, the unmistakable presence he was already too attuned to. Shane straightened a cushion that didn't need straightening, the burgundy velvet already perfectly arranged. Refilled a glass of water he barely touched, condensation forming on the crystal. Sat on the sofa, stood, paced to the window and back, sat again.

The sitting room felt different in the evening light, cozy and warm, the lamps casting golden pools across the antique furniture. Through the windows, he could see the first hints of twilight, the sky fading from blue to violet to that particular shade of indigo that only lasted a few minutes before full darkness fell.

Kip's voice echoed in his head, warm and earnest, the memory of breakfast feeling both recent and impossibly distant.

"Love isn't about things being perfect, it's about choosing each other anyway."

The image of Scott standing between Kip and his pack rose unbidden, Scott's protective stance, the way he'd made his choice clear to everyone. A supernatural being choosing a human. Not lightly or carelessly but completely.

Evangeline's words followed, darker, heavier, and carrying the weight of centuries.

"The bond is permanent."

The agony of her Turning, visceral in its telling. The terror of that night in Paris. The choice made on her knees because the alternative had been worse than death.

Shane pressed a hand to his chest, breathing through the ache of empathy that still hadn't faded, that probably wouldn't fade for a long time.

The magnitude of it pressed down on him now, sharper in the quiet of his apartment, with nothing to distract him from the full weight of what he was considering. He had gone looking for knowledge and found truth instead: that this wasn't a beautifully controlled fantasy. Bonding meant forever, in a way humans rarely dared to promise. In a way that made wedding vows seem almost quaint by comparison.

And still, *still*, he wanted it.

He wanted Ilya.

He wanted to see where this went. He wanted to explore what they could be together without the weight of duty and protocol smothering everything genuine between them. He wanted to know if the connection he felt, this pull, this resonance, this sense of *rightness*, was something Ilya felt, too.

The clock on the mantle ticked on, measuring time in a way that felt almost accusatory. An hour passed. Then another.

No knock.

No soft sound of footsteps in the corridor.

No Ilya.

Shane told himself not to spiral, to be reasonable. Ilya was the Crown Prince. His days, and nights, were not his own. There were probably a hundred legitimate reasons why Ilya couldn't come by tonight, couldn't send a message, couldn't find even five minutes to check in. It was unreasonable to expect him to drop everything, no matter what had happened between them last night.

But doubt crept in anyway, quiet and insidious, slipping through the cracks in his rational thoughts.

What if the kiss had been a mistake?

What if, in the cold light of duty, Ilya regretted it? Regretted crossing that line with a human who stood to complicate everything? What if it had only been adrenaline, the heady relief of surviving the State dinner without incident?

Shane hated how quickly his chest tightened at the thought, how easily the doubt took root.

He stood and walked to the window, pressing his forehead against the cool glass.

Stop it, he told himself firmly. *You're spiraling. You're inventing problems that don't exist.*

But the silence in the apartment felt louder now, more pointed.

Eventually, he gave up pretending he wasn't tired. The emotional weight of the day had caught up with him: the euphoria of the morning, the vulnerability of his conversations with Kip and Evangeline, the social media exposure, the interviews, the research, the waiting. It all pressed down on him now, exhaustion settling into his bones.

He retreated to the bedroom, the vast space feeling even more cavernous in the evening shadows. The bed was enormous, designed for supernatural proportions, and it swallowed him whole as he lay back against the pillows without bothering to change into pajamas. He just lay there in his clothes, soft worn jeans and a hoodie, staring up at the ceiling.

The kiss returned, unbidden, relentless in its clarity.

Shane lifted his hand and touched his lips again, gently, the gesture becoming habitual now. As if memory alone might sustain him. As if touching the place Ilya had kissed could bring him closer across the physical distance.

Tomorrow, he told himself firmly, forcing conviction into the thought. *Tomorrow I'll find him and we'll talk.*

Shane closed his eyes and tried to sleep, even though he knew it would be hours before exhaustion finally dragged him under. The apartment settled around him, old wood creaking, radiators ticking as they cooled. Somewhere distant, he could hear muffled voices, footsteps, the ordinary sounds of the palace at night.

But not the one sound he wanted to hear.

Not Ilya's knock.

Chapter 10: A Dangerous Devotion

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: OMG this flipping chapter fought me! Why did you fight me! Of course it's an Ilya POV chapter, damn stubborn vampire! The good news is that steamy stuff happens! LOL! OK on a more serious note, thank you for continuing to read this story, giving kudos, and leaving me such lovely comments! I'm having a hard time catching up on comments! But just know that I read them, they make me so happy, and appreciate every single one! YAY!

Ilya had been *distracted* all day.

It was a dangerous state for a Crown Prince, distraction meant missed details, slower responses, and vulnerabilities that could be exploited by anyone paying attention. And people were *always* paying attention to him. The vampire court watched him. His staff watched him. The servants watched him. King Aurelion watched him. Even the palace walls seemed to have eyes, centuries of accumulated awareness that noted every shift in routine, every break in pattern.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Shane.

About the kiss in the hallway, the sweet way Shane had looked at him in those final seconds before he closed his door, so shy, flushed, and *happy*. About how right it had felt to close that distance, to stop pretending there was nothing between them, to let himself have just one moment of something real in a life carefully constructed from duty and expectation.

About how desperately he wanted to do it again.

Ilya stood now in one of the palace's administrative corridors, ostensibly reviewing security reports on his tablet, but the words blurred together meaninglessly. His mind kept drifting back to the press of Shane's mouth against his, so invitingly warm where Ilya was cool.

He wanted to go find Shane. He wanted to corner him in his apartment and kiss him properly this time, without the weight of the State dinner hanging over them, without the exhaustion and adrenaline clouding everything. He wanted to see if it would feel the same, *or better*, in the clear light of day rather than an impulse in the dark.

But duty had intervened, as it always did, and the only thing Ilya could do was make sure that Shane had a lovely breakfast, to know that Ilya was thinking of him. He had tried multiple times to sneak off to check in with Shane, but Vasily was always by his arm, taking him to another meeting.

The fucking meetings stretched for hours, each representative grandstanding about policy minutiae. Emergency sessions about border disputes with neighboring supernatural kingdoms. Briefings from his security team about potential threats, the Ashen Cross hanging over him like the Sword of Damocles. By the time he'd finally extracted himself from the last meeting, telling Vasily to fuck off, it had been well past midnight, and Shane would have been asleep.

Ilya had stood outside Shane's apartment for a full minute, hand raised to knock, before logic and propriety had won out over desire.

Shane needed his rest. But not only that, Shane deserved better than Ilya showing up at one in the morning like some lovestruck fool, demanding his attention. Shane was human, and humans needed their sleep, needed routine and consideration and –

"Ilya."

The voice cut through his thoughts like a razor, sharp and familiar and entirely unwelcome.

Aleksandr.

Ilya looked up from his tablet to find his former lover blocking the corridor, arms crossed, expression carefully neutral in that way that meant he was anything but. Sasha looked as he always did, elegant and controlled, dark hair swept back from a face that his vampiric nature had refined into something almost *too* beautiful. He wore modern clothes in a flashy style, designed to remind everyone who looked at him that he was old money, old power, old enough to remember when the Nikitin bloodline was establishing its own family.

They'd been lovers, almost a decade ago, and it had been passionate and complicated and ultimately unsatisfying. Sasha's possessiveness had grated against Ilya's need for autonomy, and the breakup had been ugly enough that they'd barely spoken for a couple of years afterward.

For vampires, time smoothed the worst of the edges. They'd rebuilt something resembling friendship, though it was always tinged with history, with old hurts neither of them fully acknowledged.

But the way Sasha was looking at him now suggested those old hurts were about to resurface.

"Sasha," Ilya said evenly, not bothering to hide his wariness. "I'm a little busy."

"I can see that." Sasha's eyes flicked to the tablet, then back to Ilya's face with an expression that might have been amusement if it weren't so brittle. "You have been *busy* thinking about your human. You've had that look all day."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "I don't know what you mean."

"You don't need to pretend with me. You forget that I know you well." Sasha stepped closer, and there was something predatory in the movement, something that set Ilya's instincts on edge. "I heard about the State dinner. Everyone's heard about it. Quite the success. The

photographs are everywhere, the Crown Prince and his charming Tribute Consort, looking absolutely besotted with each other."

The word *besotted* dripped with disdain.

Ilya set his tablet down on the nearby console table with deliberate care, giving himself time to control his expression and his tone.

"The State dinner went very well. King Aurelion is pleased that the trade negotiations with the Eastern Commonwealth were secured. That's what matters."

"Is it?" Sasha asked softly, and now there was an edge to his voice that Ilya recognized, the jealousy that had always lurked beneath Sasha's sophisticated exterior. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you've forgotten this is supposed to be political theater. You're supposed to be *performing*, Ilya. That's all this is. He's just a human Consort to keep the Great Truce. You're not supposed to –"

He cut himself off, but the implication hung heavy in the air.

"Not supposed to what?" Ilya asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

Sasha's composure cracked slightly, frustration bleeding through. "*Like* him! Look at him like –" He gestured sharply, as if the words were too distasteful to speak. "Like he *matters*."

"He does matter!"

The words came out harder than Ilya had intended, but he didn't take them back. He wouldn't take them back, not when they were true in a way that made his control feel precarious.

Sasha stared at him, something like shock flickering across his features before it hardened into anger.

"You're really doing this? Binding yourself to a human for the rest of your immortality? Ilya, he's going to be dead in sixty years, less probably, given how fragile humans are. You'll have centuries left to live with that bond, with that connection to someone who will no longer exist. You'll feel the absence of him for the rest of your existence."

"I know the consequences," Ilya said tightly.

"Do you?" Sasha demanded, and now he was close enough that Ilya could see the genuine distress beneath the anger, the hurt. "Or are you so caught up in whatever this is – infatuation, curiosity, the novelty of something *forbidden* – that you're not thinking clearly?"

Ilya's patience, already worn thin by a day of meetings and frustration and his own complicated feelings, finally snapped.

"Yes," he said, the word coming out sharp and final. "Yes, I am really doing this. I am bonding with Shane. And if you can't accept that, if you can't be happy for me or at least civil about it, then we're done."

The corridor fell into silence, the kind of profound quiet that felt like the palace itself was holding its breath.

Sasha's expression cycled through shock, hurt, and then something uglier, raw jealousy mixed with bitter resignation.

"We used to have so much fun," Sasha said, lowering his voice and stepping closer, his hand cupping over Ilya's cock.

"We did," he said, completely unaroused.

"Do you think your human will be able to keep you satisfied? You'll get bored of him and watch him grow old and ugly and weak."

"I'll honor his life. For the sacrifice that he made to keep the peace." Ilya said, softly.

He could see that Sasha understood the importance of such a sacrifice, and Ilya didn't want to keep hurting him by throwing Shane in his face. Sasha removed his hand off of Ilya.

"What did you hope would happen between us, *hmm*?"

"I hoped," he said finally, his voice low and rough. "That we might reconcile eventually. That you'd realize what we had was worth something. That given enough time, you'd come back."

"That was never going to happen," Ilya said, and there was no cruelty in his tone, only honesty. "Shane or no Shane, Sasha. We aren't right for each other. We haven't been right for each other in decades. You *know* that."

"I know you were *never* willing to commit," Sasha shot back, some of his old fire returning. "You were always holding back, always keeping part of yourself separate. I gave you *everything*, and you –"

"You gave me everything *except* the freedom to be myself," Ilya interrupted quietly. "You wanted to own me. To show everyone that you had me. To shape me into what you thought I should be. That's not love, Sasha. That's control."

Sasha flinched as if struck, and for a moment Ilya saw genuine pain in his eyes, the kind that came from having an uncomfortable truth laid bare.

"And this human lets you be yourself?" Sasha asked, mocking. "This nobody *teacher* who knows nothing about our world, who'll need constant protection and guidance, who can never truly understand what it means to be what *we* are?"

"Yes." Ilya said and felt the truth of it settle in his chest, solid and unshakeable.

He thought of Shane's honesty, his ability to be vulnerable without expecting anything back, the way he'd looked at Ilya during the State dinner, not with awe or fear or calculation, but with real affection.

Sasha must have seen something in Ilya's expression, because his own face twisted with a complex mix of emotions, grief, anger, acceptance, all tangled together.

"You're in love with him," Sasha said, and it wasn't a question.

Ilya didn't answer immediately. The word felt too large, too significant to deploy casually. But standing there in the corridor with Sasha's jealousy and hurt radiating between them, Ilya found he couldn't deny it either.

"I could be," he finally admitted. "I think I will be."

The confession hung in the air between them, irrevocable.

Sasha laughed, a short, sharp sound devoid of humor. "Then I hope he's worth it. I hope he's worth giving up centuries of your life for, worth the political complications and the kingdoms' disapproval and the inevitable heartbreak when he dies and leaves you alone and bonded to a ghost."

"He is." Ilya said with absolute certainty.

For a long moment, they just looked at each other, two vampires with too much history, standing at the end of something that had never quite healed properly.

"I can't do this, Ilya." Sasha said, his voice hollow. "I can't pretend to be happy for you. I can't watch you build a life with someone else and smile through it. I'm not that selfless."

"I know," Ilya said, quietly. "I'm not asking you to be."

Sasha nodded once, sharp and final. "Then I suppose this really is the end." He gave Ilya a once over and smirked. "Goodbye, Ilya."

He turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing down the corridor with eerie precision, each step measured and controlled even in retreat.

Ilya watched him go and felt...relief.

It surprised him, that relief. He'd expected sadness, perhaps guilt, the weight of a friendship ending. But instead there was only the lifting of a burden he hadn't fully acknowledged he'd been carrying. Sasha's bitterness had been poisoning their dynamic for decades, his unspoken hope for reconciliation creating tension in every interaction. The jealousy had always been there, lurking beneath the surface of civility, waiting for an opportunity to resurface.

Now, it was done. The friendship, if it could even be called that anymore, was over. And Ilya felt lighter for it.

He picked up his tablet, but his mind was already elsewhere. On Shane. On the conversation they needed to have. On the kiss that had changed everything and the future that was beginning to take shape, uncertain and terrifying and full of possibility.

He checked the time. Nearly nine in the evening. Shane should have had dinner and would be awake, probably wondering why Ilya hadn't come by to check on him, and probably overthinking everything with that anxious, analytical mind of his.

Ilya made a decision.

He had obligations, yes. Responsibilities that would never fully release him. But Shane was important. As he told Sasha, Shane *mattered*. And it was past time Ilya made that clear, not just through a stolen kiss in a darkened hallway, but through presence and consistency and the choice to prioritize who he was beginning to care about more than duty.

Ilya turned toward the North Tower, his steps purposeful, his mind finally blessedly clear.

"Your Highness," Vasily said, stepping from the shadows.

Ilya made a disgruntled sound, glaring at his Seneschal. "Fuck. How much of that did you hear?"

"All of it, of course," Vasily said, a small smile on his lips. "But before you visit Consort Hollander, Director Cassimir needs your attention first."

Fuck!

The secured briefing room was located in one of the palace's oldest sections, deep enough that visitors and residents didn't know it existed. The walls were thick stone, reinforced with modern soundproofing and counter-surveillance measures that made it functionally impossible to eavesdrop. No windows. A single reinforced door. The kind of place where secrets were shared and decisions made that would never appear in official records.

Ilya sat at the head of the oval table, fingers steepled in front of him, his expression carefully neutral despite the tension coiling in his shoulders. To his right sat Captain Marlow and to his left was Vasily. He took notes on his tablet, stylus moving in precise strokes, his expression giving away nothing.

At the far end of the table stood Director Cassimir, projecting images onto the wall-mounted screen behind him.

"The Ashen Cross has accelerated their timeline," Cassimir said without preamble, his voice gravelly from centuries of use. He gestured to the screen, where surveillance photos appeared, grainy images of known extremists meeting in what looked like abandoned warehouses and back alleys. "Our sources inside three of the cells report increased chatter, more frequent meetings, and a shift in their strategic focus."

"Shift how?" Ilya asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

Cassimir advanced to the next slide. "They're claiming to target active *Sanguis Resonans* carriers."

The words landed like a physical blow. Ilya felt his jaw tighten, his hands curling into fists.

"How did they discover their identities? The Commonwealth should have secured that information," Vasily said, looking up from the tablet.

"We are in contact with the Commonwealth to determine if and how the identities were exposed."

Vasily frowned. "So either they don't know...or they do and they're not willing to share the information with us."

"Yes, Seneschal, that was our conclusion as well," Cassimir said, gravely.

Vasily made a disgruntled noise, looking over at Ilya. "We must demand transparency and answers, and be allowed to participate in their security."

"Ask my father to put the full weight of the Crown on them."

Vasily nodded his head, tapping on his tablet.

Ilya turned to Cassimir and let out a rough frustrated sound. "Go on."

"Our undercover agents also report that the Ashen Cross have also started planning for another assault," Cassimir continued, his tone clinical. "They want to expose what they perceive as the vulnerability of the blood donation system. They want to demonstrate that relying on donations makes the vampire population overly dependent on humans, that it creates weak points in our society that can be exploited. They're calling it 'Breaking the Chain.'"

"Are we talking about kidnappings? Assassinations?" Marlow asked, sitting up straight in his chair. "Bombing facilities?"

"Yes, potentially all of those are possibilities," Cassimir said, seriously. "Our intelligence suggests they're planning coordinated attacks, simultaneous strikes designed to create maximum chaos and fear. If they can attack or intimidate enough human donors, they believe it will force a crisis. Vampires will start hunting illegally if blood donation centers close; or if they perceive there's a blood scarcity. The system collapses, public trust erodes, and the moderates lose their argument that coexistence is sustainable."

Ilya's mind raced through the implications. The blood donation system was the cornerstone of modern vampire society, the compromise that had allowed them to integrate with human civilization rather than remaining predatory shadows. If it fell apart, if vampires started hunting again...

"The Great Truce would fracture," Ilya said, quietly. "The hardliners would use the crisis to justify extreme measures. We'd be looking at open conflict, possibly war."

"Yes, Your Highness," Cassimir agreed, his voice somber. "Which is why the Ashen Cross sees this as their best opportunity. They don't have the numbers to win a direct confrontation, but they can destabilize the system enough that others do the work for them."

Ilya made a disgruntled sound, shaking his head. "The Ashen Cross is presenting a two-front war, forcing us to divide our resources and leading to logistical challenges that will weaken us. We don't know for sure if they have the identities of the active carriers; and we don't know which of the donation centers they plan to attack."

"The nature of their independent terrorist cells allows them the ability to mobilize against us at any time, at any place," Vasily said, turning to look at Ilya. "Trying to protect all the carriers and all the centers will leave us vulnerable to an attack on our rear flanks."

Ilya met his eyes and nodded. It was straight out of his playbook, when he led the vampire and supernatural armies into war, hundreds of years ago.

"If that's the play, we can concentrate all of our forces to destroy one cell at a time, removing them completely," Marlow said, turning to look at Ilya. "Or we can attack all the known cells at the same time, make our own coordinated attacks. We may not get them all, but taking down cells across-the-board can also send a message."

Vasily offered a small nod to Marlow. "King Aurelion can use diplomacy or offer incentives or create new resource opportunities to the Commonwealth Territories, bring the humans into the fight, and we can use them to create divisions amongst the cells."

"We must use speed and surprise to overwhelm the cells, disconnect their money, their communication network, sow chaos and disorder. Then we can take the remaining threats down, one by one." Ilya said, flicking his eyes at the three of them. "Obliterate the entire board."

"There is a third complication," Cassimir said, turning to the screen.

The next slide made Ilya's blood run genuinely cold.

It was a transcript of intercepted communications, the text stark against the dark background. Highlighted in yellow was a single name.

Shane Hollander.

Ilya sat up abruptly, his chair scraping against the stone floor. "Explain."

Cassimir's expression remained neutral, professional, but Ilya could see the worry in his eyes. "Consort Hollander's name has appeared in multiple intercepted communications over the past seventy-two hours. They see him as..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "The ultimate symbol, Your Highness."

"Symbol of what?" Ilya's voice came out harder than he intended, edged with the protective fury that was threatening to overwhelm his carefully maintained control.

"Of everything they oppose," Cassimir said, solemnly. "A human elevated to Consort status to the vampire Crown Prince. A *Sanguis Resonans* carrier willingly bonding with a vampire. The personification of the moderate vision for vampire-human integration. If they can't have *Sanguis Resonans* blood freely distributed, if they can't return to the old ways where

vampires simply took what they wanted, then they want to destroy the alternative. And Consort Hollander represents that alternative more visibly than anyone else on this earth right now."

The room fell silent except for the quiet hum of the ventilation system.

Ilya's mind was racing, calculating, his protective instincts surging to the forefront with such intensity it was almost painful. Shane was in danger. Real, immediate, documented danger. The staff members who'd been arrested, that had just been the beginning. The Ashen Cross had people inside the palace, or had recently, and they knew Shane's routines, his schedule, his vulnerabilities.

"I want increased security," Ilya said, his voice cutting through the silence. "Captain Marlow, Shane doesn't go anywhere without guards. Not to the rink, not to the library, not even within the palace itself. I want someone watching him every moment he's not in his apartment, and I want his apartment swept daily for surveillance devices."

Marlow nodded, already making notes. "I'll assign a dedicated detail. Four guards rotating in twelve-hour shifts –"

"Six guards," Ilya interrupted. "And I want at least two with him at all times, even inside the palace."

Vasily shifted uncomfortably. "Your Highness, that level of security within the palace itself...it's typically reserved for active threat situations. It might alarm Consort Hollander. Make him feel –"

"This is an *active* threat," Ilya cut in sharply. "And it will make him feel safe."

"With respect, Your Highness," Marlow said gently, and there was something in his tone that made Ilya pause and made him actually listen. "It might make him feel like a prisoner."

The words hit harder than they should have. Ilya turned to look at Cassimir fully, reading the careful concern in the older vampire's expression.

"You're all suggesting I do nothing to protect Shane?" Ilya asked, forcing his voice to remain level.

"We are suggesting you find a balance, Your Highness." Cassimir replied, raising his eyebrow when Ilya used Shane's name. "Consort Hollander agreed to this arrangement, agreed to be your Consort, to bond with you, to take on all the complications that come with that role. But he's still human. Still accustomed to a certain degree of autonomy and freedom. If you surround him with guards, if you restrict his movements, if you treat him like a prisoner in need of constant supervision..."

He trailed off, letting Ilya complete the thought.

He'll feel trapped. He'll resent me. He might even leave.

Ilya sank back into his chair, the fury draining into frustration, fear, and the helpless realization that he couldn't simply lock Shane away somewhere safe and keep him there until the threat passed.

Because Shane wasn't a possession. He wasn't an asset to be guarded in a vault.

He was a person. He was someone who'd been promised choice and respect, not confinement.

But the thought of something happening to him, of the Ashen Cross getting close enough to hurt him, to use him as a symbol or a statement or a *weapon*...

Ilya's hands clenched into fists again.

"What do you recommend?" He asked finally, directing the question to all three of them.

Marlow spoke first, his tone pragmatic. "We can increase his visible security, but make it feel natural. Assign guards who can blend in, younger guards who look less intimidating, who can pose as palace staff or assistants. We can give him space while maintaining perimeter security."

"And we need to brief him," Cassimir added, staring at Ilya. "Fully. He deserves to know what's happening, what the specific threats are. You can't protect someone effectively if they don't understand why the protection is necessary."

"He'll want to help," Vasily said, quietly. "From what I've observed of Consort Hollander, he's not someone who accepts being passive. He'll want to know how he can contribute, how he can be part of the solution rather than just a problem to be managed."

Ilya absorbed this, knowing they were right, hating that they were right.

Shane *would* want to know. He would insist on knowing, probably, once he realized something was wrong. And he would want to do something about it, to be active rather than reactive, because that was who he was, someone who'd built a life on teaching and ethics, doing the right thing when it was hard.

But the thought of putting Shane in any situation where he might be in more danger, where the Ashen Cross might get closer to him...

"I'll talk to him," Ilya said, finally. "Tonight. I'll explain the situation and we'll begin adding Shane to all of the security briefings going forward."

Together. As equals, or as equal as they could be given the circumstances.

Even if every instinct Ilya had was screaming at him to simply lock Shane in the most secure room in the palace and never let him out.

"Good," Cassimir said, and there was approval in his voice. "That's the right call, Your Highness."

"What about the broader threat?" Ilya asked, forcing himself to focus on the strategic picture rather than just Shane's safety. "What are we doing to disrupt their operations?"

Cassimir pulled up another slide, this one showing a complex web of connections, known Ashen Cross members, suspected sympathizers, and financial trails. "We're working with allied intelligence services across the kingdom and neighboring supernatural territories. Several operations are underway to infiltrate additional cells, intercept communications, and identify leadership. But they're decentralized by design, which makes them difficult to neutralize completely."

"Cut off their resources," Vasily said, calmly. "Follow the money. Find out who's funding them and shut them down."

"Already in progress," Cassimir confirmed. "But it's slow work. These organizations survive because they're patient, because they can wait years or even decades for the right opportunity."

"We don't have years. I want you to start cutting these cells down, I don't care if you have to kill everyone. King Aurelion and I will deal with the fall out." Ilya said, flatly. "The bonding ceremony is in less than two months. They know that. They'll want to act before then, while Shane is still vulnerable and unbonded."

The implication hung heavy in the air: once Shane was bonded, once he carried Ilya's blood and the protection that came with it, he would be significantly harder to harm. The bond would make Ilya aware of danger, would allow him to sense if Shane was in distress, would create a connection that the Ashen Cross couldn't easily sever.

But until then, Shane was very, very exposed.

"We'll begin the takedown of known Ashen Cross cells immediately," Cassimir said, with a nod. "We'll keep you informed of any communication mentioning Consort Hollander or the palace. And we'll work with the kingdom's intelligence committees to coordinate a broader response."

"Keep me updated daily," Ilya ordered. "Any new information, any shift in threat assessment, I want to know immediately. Shane will attend every meeting, I'll make sure of it."

"Of course, Your Highness."

The briefing continued for another twenty minutes, covering operational details and resource allocation and contingency plans. But Ilya's mind was only half-present. The other half was consumed with Shane, with the kiss, with the conversation they needed to have, with the realization that keeping Shane safe was going to be infinitely more complicated than he'd anticipated.

After the meeting, Ilya was starting to feel the weight of paranoia settling over him like a physical thing. He couldn't shake the feeling that there were more traitors in the palace. More people who smiled to his face and plotted behind his back. More threats hiding in plain sight.

He trusted Vasily. He trusted Marlow. He trusted Cassimir's competence and wisdom.

But how many of the palace staff had been compromised? How many were reporting Shane's movements, his routines, his vulnerabilities to the Ashen Cross?

How was Ilya supposed to protect Shane when he couldn't even be certain of who was loyal?

The paranoia was irrational, he knew that. The palace employed hundreds of people, and the vast majority were loyal, competent, and had served the Rozanov kingdom for generations. But rationality didn't help when he kept thinking about how easy it would be for someone with the right access to hurt Shane.

Poison in his food. A knife in the corridor. A carefully orchestrated "accident" that would be investigated and mourned but ultimately impossible to prove.

Ilya's jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached.

He needed to see Shane. He needed to lay eyes on him, confirm he was safe, unharmed, and still *here*. And then he needed to have the conversation he'd been putting off, about the kiss, about what it meant, about the future they were building together and the dangers that came with it.

But first, he needed to get his emotions under control.

Because walking into Shane's apartment in this state – murderous, paranoid, protective to the point of territoriality, barely restraining the urge to simply lock him away – would only frighten him.

And that was the last thing Ilya wanted to do. So he took a breath, centered himself, and headed toward Shane's apartment with purpose and care.

Ilya stood outside Shane's door for a full five minutes.

He could hear Shane moving around inside, the soft pad of footsteps across the thick rugs that covered the wood floors, the rustle of fabric, the quiet sounds of someone who thought they were alone. He could hear Shane's heartbeat, elevated slightly above resting, the rhythm speaking to anxiety or anticipation or both. The door was solid wood, centuries old, but to vampire senses it might as well have been paper.

Ilya's hand was raised to knock. But he couldn't quite make himself complete the gesture.

What was he going to say? How did one begin a conversation like this?

Hello, Shane, I kissed you and then disappeared for over twenty-four hours because I had to run the daily operations of the kingdom and then I got cornered by my jealous ex-lover and then I learned that terrorist extremists are specifically targeting you for assassination, but I'm here now and I'd very much like to kiss you again?

Bad form, he could hear Vasily's disapproving voice in his head.

Ilya took a breath he didn't need, an old human habit that still served to calm him, and knocked. Three times, firm but not aggressive.

The sounds inside stopped immediately. Heartbeat spiking. Then footsteps, faster now, approaching the door.

It opened, and Ilya's carefully prepared composure nearly shattered.

Shane stood there in casual clothes, soft gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt that had clearly been washed so many times the fabric was thin and worn. His hair was damp from a recent shower, darkened to nearly black, curving slightly at the ends where it touched his neck. His feet were bare. He looked comfortable, warm, and utterly *human* in a way that made Ilya's gums ache as his fangs tried to descend.

And the relief on Shane's face when he saw Ilya was so palpable, so immediate and unfiltered, that Ilya felt regret and guilt twist painfully in his belly.

"Ilya," Shane breathed, and there was so much in that single word, relief and confusion and hurt and hope all tangled together.

"Shane." Ilya's voice came out rougher than intended. "May I come in?"

"Yes. Of course. Yes." Shane stepped back immediately, pulling the door wider, and Ilya entered the apartment that was already starting to smell like Shane, clean soap and distinctly *him*.

Shane closed the door and turned to face him, arms crossed loosely over his chest in a gesture that managed to be both self-protective and casual.

"I thought..." He paused, swallowed, and tried again. "I was worried you regretted it. The kiss. I thought maybe you'd realized it was a mistake and was ignoring me."

The vulnerability in Shane's voice, the genuine fear that Ilya had changed his mind, cut through every carefully constructed defense Ilya had built.

"No," Ilya said immediately, taking a step closer. "No, Shane. I don't regret it. Not for a moment."

"Then why –" Shane gestured vaguely. "It's been two days. You didn't come by last night, you didn't send a message, and I just...I didn't know what to think."

"I'm sorry." Ilya ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration directed at himself. "I had obligations I couldn't postpone. Meetings that ran until past midnight. I came to your door but it was so late for you. And then...we do need to talk. About several things."

Something in his tone must have conveyed his seriousness, because Shane's expression shifted from hurt to concern.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong with us," Ilya clarified quickly. "But there are new threats by the Ashen Cross. Things you need to know about."

Shane's heartbeat picked up again, but he nodded and gestured to the sitting room. "Do you want to sit down?"

They sat on opposite ends of the large leather couch, maintaining a careful distance. It was a deliberate space between them that felt both necessary and painful. Ilya needed to explain the security situation first, before they could address anything else. Shane deserved to know the danger he was in and deserved to make informed choices about his own safety.

"The Ashen Cross is targeting you," Ilya said without preamble, watching Shane's face carefully. "By name."

Shane went very still. "What?"

"We intercepted communications. Your name appeared multiple times. They see you as..." Ilya forced himself to continue, to lay out the ugly truth. "As a symbol of everything they oppose. A human bonding with a vampire, a *Sanguis Resonans* carrier willingly giving his blood to a vampire, the personification of human-vampire integration."

"And they want to destroy the symbol – me," Shane finished quietly, his voice remarkably steady.

"Yes."

Shane was quiet for a moment, processing. His heartbeat was elevated but not panicking, his breathing controlled. "How serious is the threat?"

"Serious enough that we've increased security across the board. They're claiming that they know the identities of other active *Sanguis Resonans* carriers and they're trying to destabilize the blood donation system."

"The other active *Sanguis Resonans*? There's only eighteen of us, globally."

Ilya stared at him, frowning. "How do you know this?"

"It's what they told me, Director Castellane from the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office. She brought a scientist, bio-genetics or something, and they said that there were only eighteen of us. Twelve are just kids, three were too old, one was in jail, and the person they talked to before me said no. So I was the one remaining to be a Tribute."

Ilya ran his hand over his head. "There's only eighteen active carriers? In the *world*?"

Shane nodded, sliding a little closer to him. "Did you not know?"

He shook his head. "The Commonwealth doesn't share information about the number of active and dormant *Sanguis Resonans* with vampires. Fuck, eighteen, the majority of them

are just kids.”

“If they’re in danger, you have to help them, Ilya. Please.”

“The Commonwealth hasn’t been very forthcoming with this information,” Ilya growled, getting to his feet and reaching into his jacket pocket for his cellphone. “Excuse me, Shane, I need to speak to Vasily.”

Ilya paced around the sitting room, putting the phone to his ear. “Vasily, there are only eighteen *Sanguis Resonans* in the world. Twelve are children, three are elders, one in prison, one refused, and Shane. Be very careful how you share that information.”

Vasily was silent for a long moment. “I will take care of it, Your Highness.”

Ilya ended the call and slid the phone back into his pocket. He turned to look at Shane, who was still sitting on the leather couch, looking up at him with a worried expression on his handsome face.

“Is it just the active carriers? They won’t go after dormant – my mom?”

“Cassimir said that the intel on the Ashen Cross was for active carriers. Your parents should be safe with their werewolf security team. The werewolves would die to save your parents. I believe they are safe.”

Shane exhaled noisily, pressing his hands against his eyes. “Fuck, Ilya, this is making me crazy.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Shane. And I have even more bad news. You’re a high-value target. Eliminating you would serve multiple purposes: remove a symbol, create fear, and potentially weaken my position and the Vampire Kingdom’s influence.”

“Eliminating,” Shane repeated, and there was something almost dark in his laugh. “That’s a polite way of saying it.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Ilya said, and the intensity in his own voice surprised him. “They see you as a symbol to destroy. I see you as...” He paused, searching for words adequate to the feeling. “As someone important. To me. Personally.”

Shane’s eyes widened slightly, and some of the tension in his shoulders eased. “What does that mean practically? For security, I mean.”

Ilya appreciated the pragmatism, the way Shane was handling this better than he’d expected.

“Increased guard presence. Someone with you when you leave your apartment, even inside the palace. Enhanced surveillance. Background checks on anyone who comes near you.”

“That sounds...overwhelming.”

“It is,” Ilya admitted, spreading his hands in apology. “And I know it will feel restrictive. But I need you safe, Shane. I need –” He cut himself off, aware he was veering into possessive

territory that might frighten Shane rather than reassure him.

But Shane was watching him with something that looked like understanding. "You need to know I'm protected."

"Yes."

"Okay," Shane said, simply. "I'll follow all the security protocols. I trust you."

The easy acceptance, the lack of argument or resistance, made Ilya's chest feel tight. "You should ask questions. Push back. Demand explanations."

"I am asking questions," Shane pointed out with a small smile. "And you're giving me honest answers. That's all I need. Is there anything else I should know?"

"You make it so easy for me," Ilya gave him a small grin. "You'll attend all security briefings from now on. I apologize in advance if we speak of you as an object to protect. Feel free to call us assholes and remind us that you are Shane, a person."

"Okay," he said, chuffing out a soft laugh. "Does that make you feel better now? Knowing that I'll do my part to stay safe?"

"Yes," he said, roughly, relief filling him.

"Good." He paused, then added more quietly. "And that's not the only thing we need to talk about, is it?"

Ilya met his eyes. "No."

"We kissed," Shane said, and despite everything, the terrorist threats and the security concerns and the weight of reality pressing down on them, there was something almost shy in his expression. It made Ilya feel better to know that Shane was thinking about him, too. "It was...nice. And I was wondering if that was something you wanted to do again?"

Ilya had been preparing for this conversation since the moment he'd walked away from Shane in the hallway. He had rehearsed various versions in his mind, different approaches and phrasings and ways to explain feelings that felt too large and complicated to articulate properly.

But sitting here, with Shane looking at him with such open vulnerability, all the careful speeches evaporated.

"I want you, Shane," Ilya said, looking into his eyes. "I want *you*. I want to know you, to be with you, to..." He paused, searching for the right words. "To see where this goes. If you'll have me."

Shane's breath caught audibly. "I want that, too. God, Ilya, I want that, too. But I need to know what I'm agreeing to. The bonding ceremony, what does it actually mean? And what happens after?"

This was the harder conversation. The one that required complete honesty about what Shane would be consenting to, what he would be giving up, and what would change irrevocably.

"The blood bond is permanent," Ilya said carefully. "Once we're bonded, I'll feel your emotions. Not read your thoughts, that's not possible, but I'll sense your moods, your distress, your general state of being. You'll feel mine, though likely less intensely since you'll remain human. There's no distance, no privacy in that way. It's..."

"Intense," Shane supplied.

"Yes." Ilya shifted slightly closer to Shane, the distance between them feeling wrong now. "We'll be connected for the rest of your life. I'll always know where you are and how you're feeling. You'll be marked, on your shoulder or neck, visible to any supernatural who looks. Everyone will know you're claimed, bonded to me...and mine."

The possessive word slipped out before he could stop it, and Ilya braced for Shane to pull back.

Instead, Shane moved closer. "And the blood exchange itself? What happens?"

"You'll offer your blood willingly during the ceremony. I'll bite you, and then I'll give you mine in return. The blood magic will bind us together, it's not painful, exactly, but it's overwhelming. Intense. Some humans describe it as..." Ilya paused, considering how explicit to be. "Similar to sexual intimacy. The vulnerability, the intensity of sensation."

Shane's cheeks flushed, but he didn't look away. "And after? What changes?"

"You'll be harder to harm. Supernatural beings will register you as claimed and most won't risk attacking you while under my protection. You'll heal faster than a normal human, though not dramatically. And you'll age slower and live longer, likely decades longer than you would otherwise."

"But I'll still age," Shane said, quietly. "I'll still die eventually."

"Yes."

The word hung heavy between them.

Shane asked the hard question Ilya had been dreading. "What happens then? When I get old? When I die and you're still..."

Ilya found he couldn't quite meet Shane's eyes. He hadn't let himself think about it, about Shane aging while Ilya remained frozen at twenty-seven. About watching Shane's hair gray, his body slowing down, his mortality catching up with him while Ilya stayed eternally the same.

About the day Shane's heart would stop beating and Ilya would feel it through the bond, would feel the absence like a severed limb for the rest of his existence.

"I have heard it is different for each vampire. Aurelion was bonded to my mother when she was killed, and he still carries his grief. I imagine it will be the same for me." Ilya admitted, his voice rough. "The thought of losing you after finally finding you is..."

"What if I wanted to be Turned?" Shane asked softly. "Eventually. Not now, but...someday?"

Ilya's head snapped up, hope and fear warring in his chest. "That's not a decision to make lightly. If bonding is permanent, then Turning is your mortal death. Your only escape will be a final death. We call it walking into the sun, even though the sun cannot harm us. It's the idea of it. And you'll have to give up so many things that you love, like food and Ginger Ale, you'll outlive everyone you know. It changes you in ways that are hard to predict."

"I know," Shane said. "I've been reading about it. I'm not saying I want it now. I'm just...asking. If I decided I wanted it later, after we were bonded, would you do it?"

The question struck at something fundamental in Ilya, something he'd been carefully not examining.

"Yes. If you wanted to be Turned, after the bonding, after you'd had time to truly understand what you were choosing, I would do it. I would love to be your Sire, to have you join my bloodline. But that's your choice, Shane. Always *your* choice. I won't pressure you or try to convince you one way or another. That decision has to be entirely yours."

Shane nodded slowly, absorbing this. "Thank you for being honest."

"Always," Ilya promised. "I'll always be honest with you, even when the truth is difficult."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the conversation settling around them.

Then Shane said quietly, "I can't promise I'll want to be Turned, and I can't promise I won't. But I know I want to try this with you. Can we take it one step at a time? Figure it out together?"

The relief that flooded through Ilya was almost dizzying. "Yes."

The conversation had brought them physically closer without either of them quite noticing, they were sitting next to each other now, knees touching. The careful distance had collapsed into proximity that felt natural and inevitable.

Shane reached out slowly, deliberately, and took Ilya's hand.

The simple touch felt monumental. Shane's hand was warm, calloused, but strong in a human way that Ilya found absurdly precious. He laced their fingers together carefully, mindful of his strength, and felt something settle in his chest that had been restless for decades.

"I should go," Ilya said, though he made no move to stand. "Let you rest. It's late."

Shane's grip on his hand tightened fractionally. "Or you could stay. We don't have to do anything. I just don't want to be alone tonight."

The request was genuine and vulnerable in a way that made Ilya's protective instincts surge alongside his desire for closeness. He knew he should decline to maintain some semblance of propriety; and give Shane space to process everything they'd discussed.

But Shane was looking at him with such open want, such simple need for comfort, that Ilya found he couldn't refuse.

"Okay," he said with a small smile.

Shane's bedroom was through a set of doors off the main sitting room, decorated in soothing blues and creams that reflected palace taste while still feeling personal. The bed was enormous, as large as Ilya's bed, with a dozen thick pillows and soft blankets that looked impossibly inviting.

"Do you sleep with all those pillows?"

Shane laughed, climbing up the bed with an alluring wiggle of his round ass. "The palace interior decorators are out of control, Ilya. I keep asking Mira to take some away but she said that the decorators would cry because it would ruin the aesthetic."

"Yes. You mustn't make the decorators cry." He said, dryly, kicking off his leather shoes and taking off his suit jacket, letting it fall on the floor.

They lay on top of the covers, fully clothed, maintaining a careful respectability even as they sought closeness. Shane curled against Ilya's side naturally, instinctively, his head coming to rest on Ilya's shoulder like it belonged there. His body was warm, radiating heat that Ilya could feel even through their clothes.

Ilya wrapped an arm around Shane carefully, hyperaware of his strength, of how easy it would be to hold too tight. Shane fit against him perfectly, like they'd been designed to slot together this way.

"Tell me something," Shane murmured, his breath warm against Ilya's neck and sending a shiver through him. "Something that has nothing to do with politics or danger or bonding ceremonies. Just...something about you."

Ilya thought for a moment, sifting through centuries of memories for something mundane, something human-scaled. "I used to travel extensively. Before I was Crown Prince, when I could still move relatively anonymously. I spent a decade in the Pacific Commonwealth Territories, in the early 1900s, studying their art and philosophy."

"Really?" Shane shifted slightly to look up at him, genuine interest lighting his features. "What was it like?"

They talked quietly about nothing important, Ilya's travels through the world, Shane's favorite books, the physics professor at university who'd inspired Shane to think differently about

teaching as a career, the vampire composer Ilya had known in Vienna who'd written symphonies that humans still performed without knowing the creator had fangs.

“King Aurelion said that you loved music.”

Ilya made a face. “What else did my father tell you?”

“He said that you only have a sense of humor every ten years or so,” Shane said, chuckling. “Oh shit, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that he told me stuff about you.”

“And what are the inside jokes you share with him, *hmm?*”

Shane gave him a cheeky grin. “He said that I shouldn’t tell you if you asked because he thinks it’s pretty funny that you keep trying to find out.”

Mundane things. Small things. The kind of intimate details that mattered more than grand declarations.

Shane's voice gradually grew softer, his responses slower, his body relaxing completely against Ilya's side. His heartbeat evened out into the steady rhythm of sleep, his breathing deep and peaceful.

Ilya lay awake, listening to Shane's heartbeat, feeling the warmth of his body, acutely aware of every point of contact between them. Shane's hair tickled his jaw. His hand had come to rest on Ilya's chest, directly over where a human heart would beat.

Mine, Ilya thought, pressing a kiss to Shane's hair so gently the sleeping man didn't stir. *Mine to protect. Mine to cherish. Mine.*

Ours. The monster in him growled its approval.

The possessiveness should have worried him. It should have felt like a warning sign of the obsessive tendencies he'd spent decades learning to control. It was the same kind of possessiveness that he accused Sasha of having.

But it didn't feel wrong. He didn’t want to change Shane or control him.

I will keep you safe. Whatever it takes. Whoever I have to become. You are mine, and I am yours, and nothing, not the Ashen Cross, not the humans, not any supernatural beings, not time itself, will take you from me.

That was definitely possessive and probably unhealthy and toxic, as the humans liked to say. Ilya really didn’t give a shit.

Ilya had been watching Shane sleep for a few hours, cataloging every breath, every slight shift of his body, the way his face relaxed in unconsciousness. He'd memorized the pattern of Shane's resting heartbeat, the rhythm of his breathing, the warmth radiating from his skin where they touched.

He knew the exact moment Shane began to wake, felt the subtle change in his breathing, the gradual return of awareness. Ilya could have looked away, could have pretended to be occupied with something else, but he found he didn't want to. When Shane's eyes opened and found him in the darkness, Ilya smiled.

The expression on Shane's face made Ilya forget, just for a moment, what he was. It made him forget the centuries of careful control, the walls he'd built around himself.

"You stayed," he murmured, smiling. Shane shifted closer, moving into Ilya rather than away, and tipped his face up in clear invitation.

Ilya's dead heart shouldn't have been able to race, but something in him responded anyway, a rush of want and tenderness so consuming it was almost frightening in its veracity. He leaned down slowly, giving Shane every chance to reconsider, and kissed him. Soft at first, exploratory, relearning the warmth of Shane's mouth, the way he tasted. But then Shane made a small sound and pressed closer and Ilya's control wavered.

He cupped Shane's face with one hand, thumb brushing across his cheekbone with all the gentleness he could muster. His other hand slid into Shane's hair, threading through the soft strands, and he felt Shane melt into the touch.

This was different from the hallway. That had been a first kiss, a gentle testing of the waters. This was Shane choosing him with full awareness.

Ilya felt Shane's hands on his chest, felt the warmth of them even through his shirt. Shane's desire was palpable, his heartbeat accelerating, his scent changing in ways that made Ilya's instincts roar to life.

He forced himself to pull back slightly, though it cost him. "Shane," he said, voice rougher than intended. "We should –"

"Don't say we should stop," Shane interrupted, quiet but firm. "Please. Unless you want to stop. But if you're saying it because you think you should..."

Ilya's control slipped another fraction. His grip on Shane's hair tightened before he consciously loosened it.

"I don't want to stop. But I also don't want to rush this. Don't want to take advantage –"

"I want you."

Shane pulled him down into another kiss, more demanding this time, and Ilya opened for him, helpless to resist. Shane's tongue traced his lips, entered his mouth, and Ilya knew the moment Shane encountered his fangs.

They'd descended without his permission, responding to Shane's proximity, his scent, the intoxicating pull of *Sanguis Resonans*. Ilya tried to retract them, tried to maintain some semblance of control, but then Shane did something completely unexpected.

Shane deliberately pressed his plump lower lip against the tip of one of Ilya's fangs.

The scent of Shane's blood hit Ilya immediately, copper and sweet and vibrant, rich and warm and so alive it made every instinct in him scream to take. The tiniest drop blossomed a dark red on Shane's lip, bright and wet, and Ilya felt the world narrow to a single point of red.

He froze completely, staring at Shane with shock and dawning horror at what had just happened.

But Shane's eyes were dark with desire, pupils blown wide. His heartbeat was racing beneath his skin, fast, hot, and rhythmic, drumming a seductive beat that had nothing to do with fear.

"Taste it," Shane whispered, a shy look on his face, though his body leaned into Ilya like he was starving for him. He pressed his lips together, letting the blood bead lushly on his lower lip, the scent hitting Ilya with another intoxicating wave.

Ilya felt his control fracturing, cracking down the middle. His hands tightened on Shane almost to the point of bruising before he forced himself to ease his grip, his fingers trembling with restraint.

Shane let out a whimpering moan, closing his eyes.

"Shane," he managed, voice strangled and rough. "Your blood is *Sanguis Resonans*. If I taste it, I won't want to stop."

"I trust you," Shane said, as if it were that simple. As if Ilya had not spent six centuries learning how dangerous trust could be.

Ilya stared at him, this impossibly brave, impossibly foolish human offering him something no one had ever offered before. Trust. Himself.

The vampire in him was screaming to take, to drink, to claim. The man in him knew this was madness, that crossing this line would make everything more complicated, more intense, more dangerous.

Shane's trust won.

Ilya leaned in and kissed him again, gently at first, almost reverently, his tongue carefully collecting the blood from Shane's lip.

The taste exploded across his senses like nothing he'd ever experienced. *Sanguis Resonans* was supposed to be intoxicating, but this was transcendence. It was warmth and life and completion, it was every dormant instinct roaring awake, it was home. It slid over his tongue like molten honey, thick and electric, and he shuddered against Shane, unable to stop the sound that tore from him.

His hands tightened on Shane, pulling him closer, hunger sharpening every touch, and the kiss turned feral. He explored Shane's mouth with new urgency, tasting him, learning him, drowning in the sensation of Shane's blood, Shane's warmth, Shane's willing surrender.

Ilya pressed against Shane more fully, unable to hide his responses. He didn't have enough fresh blood in his system to get hard, but he felt arousal on a whole different plane with just a

simple taste of Shane's blood.

"Fuck, oh fuck, Shane..."

Shane moaned against Ilya's mouth, arching into the pressure like a man offering himself up.

He'd almost forgotten what this felt like, desire this physical, this immediate, this consuming. Vampires needed at least a pint of human blood before they could respond sexually, and Shane's blood was liquid fire in his veins.

He broke the kiss long enough to press his mouth directly to the small cut, sucking gently, drawing out a few more precious drops. His tongue laved over the wound, sealing it with the healing properties of his saliva, even as part of him wanted to keep it open, to keep tasting, to mark Shane from the inside out.

"Ohmygod," Shane breathed, hands fisting in Ilya's shirt, knuckles white with need. "Ilya, please –"

Ilya pulled back, fighting for control, his chest heaving. His fangs were fully descended, his eyes undoubtedly black with desire. He knew he looked dangerous, predatory, and ravenous, but Shane was looking at him like he wanted to be devoured.

"Tell me what you want," Ilya commanded, needing to hear it clearly, needing Shane's explicit consent before he lost himself completely. "Say it clearly, Shane. I need to hear your words."

"Touch me," Shane said without hesitation, voice breaking with his eagerness. "I want you to touch my cock and make me come. Please."

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, fighting the brutal urge to simply take everything Shane was offering. When he opened them, he knew his control was thin as paper, but he also knew he would die before he hurt Shane, before he did anything Shane didn't explicitly want.

"On your side, your back to me," he murmured, gently patting his hip, and Shane obeyed immediately, settling his back against Ilya's chest with a faith that made Ilya's dead heart twist.

Ilya followed him down on the bed, sliding close to him, their legs tangling together, skin against skin through thin layers of fabric. Shane moaned and leaned his head back, throat bared in a stretch that was half instinct, half invitation, an offering of trust so primal Ilya felt dizzy with it.

Ilya kissed Shane deeply, thoroughly, swallowing every small sound, savoring the way Shane's lips softened under his, the way every exhale tasted of yearning and neediness.

Then he slid his hand down Shane's body, feeling the heat of him radiating outward, the way his muscles tensed and relaxed under Ilya's touch like he was trying to sink into him. He stopped at the waistband of Shane's sweatpants, fingers teasing the fabric, brushing the sensitive skin beneath.

"Yes?" He asked, giving Shane one more chance to refuse.

"Yes," Shane gasped, hips already pushing forward. "God, yes."

Ilya pulled down the waistband of his sweats and boxer briefs, exposing his hard cock to the cool air and to Ilya's gluttonous eyes.

"You are so beautiful," Ilya murmured reverently.

Shane flushed, chest rising fast. "You are."

Ilya cupped his hand under Shane's chin and Shane spat into it, obedient and eager, and Ilya smiled, brushing a kiss to the back of his head, lips lingering.

"Good boy," he whispered behind Shane's ear, taking the soft lobe between his lips, feeling heat flood Shane's skin as he blushed.

He wrapped his fingers around Shane's cock, letting his spit ease the glide, and began moving his hand, slow at first, savoring the way Shane reacted instantly, like he'd been waiting forever for this exact touch. The thick heat of him pulsed against Ilya's palm, heavy and slickening quickly.

Shane cried out, hips jerking, and Ilya nearly came undone at the sound. Shane was hard and hot and so achingly alive, his body responding to Ilya's touch with gratifying immediacy.

"You're so warm," Ilya murmured against Shane's neck, inhaling him, drinking in the heady scent of his arousal. His other hand cradled Shane's head protectively, thumb stroking his cheek. "So perfect."

Shane moaned out a shuddery breath, eyes closing, head falling back onto Ilya's shoulder.

"Do you like it like this?" Ilya murmured, slowing the pace of his strokes, loosening his hold until the friction made Shane gasp in frustration.

"Yes —"

"Or maybe like this?" Ilya said, tightening his grip and sliding his hand up the shaft to just under the head, then stroking only the sensitive tip, slick from the pre-come gathering there.

"Yes!" This one was almost a shout.

Ilya chuckled against Shane's neck, slow and wicked, licking the tempting line of muscle and tracing his fangs, teasing Shane with them. "You're so easy to please, *hmm?*"

"Fuck! Oh more, like that, please!"

Shane squirmed, pushing back against Ilya, his ass rubbing against Ilya's groin in a way that made Ilya's breath hitch and his vision spark.

“When we’re bonded, I’m going to fuck you and bite you,” Ilya said, his voice a velvet-dark promise. “I’ll be able to taste your pleasure...in your blood...my cock inside you, so warm and tight, squeezing around me –”

“Ohmygod –”

“-- suck your cock into my mouth, let you feel my fangs drag along your shaft, bite you on your inner thigh –”

“Shit –”

“-- I’ll make you come so hard –”

His strokes grew firmer, more deliberate, using every bit of his centuries of sexual experience, every technique learned from lovers long gone, all of it focused entirely on Shane. Shane's heartbeat was frantic, his breathing ragged, his scent thick with arousal and surrender.

"Ilya," Shane panted, his hand reaching back to clutch at Ilya’s hair, tugging hard. "I'm not going to last –"

"Yes, come." Ilya’s voice was pure satisfaction. "I want to watch you come. I want to know I did this to you."

He adjusted his grip, thumb swiping directly over the head of Shane's cock, and Shane nearly sobbed, body bowing in Ilya’s arms.

"That's it, Shane," Ilya encouraged, voice low and rumbling, lips brushing his ear. "Fuck. Let go. I have you."

Shane closed his eyes, mouth opened wide, and came with a sharp cry, his pleasure ripping through him in waves, his whole body tightening, then melting bonelessly back against Ilya. Hot ropes of release spilled over Ilya’s fingers, Shane trembling, gasping, and pressing back into him like he wanted to climb inside his skin.

Ilya stroked him through it, wanting to extend his pleasure, and only gentling his touch when Shane became oversensitive, then stopping only when Shane whimpered and weakly pushed his hand away.

Ilya withdrew his hand and brought it to his mouth, licking Shane's release from his fingers while holding Shane’s dazed stare. The taste was different from blood but no less intimate, no less precious because it came from Shane.

"Jesus Christ," Shane breathed, looking utterly wrecked, utterly pleased.

Ilya smiled, satisfied and possessive, and leaned down to kiss him gently, tasting him everywhere. "Was that okay?"

"Okay? Fuck, Ilya –" Shane laughed breathlessly. "That was fantastic. That was..." He trailed off, lost for words, chest still rising quickly.

Ilya was feeling very, very self-satisfied about it.

"Good," Ilya said and settled beside Shane again, pulling him close. He was still painfully aroused, but there was not enough blood in his body to completely harden his cock.

"What about you?" Shane asked, clearly aware of Ilya's condition. "Do you want me to..."

"Not tonight," Ilya interrupted gently. "Tonight was about you. There will be time for more."

"But –"

"Shane." Ilya kept his voice firm but kind. "I'm fine. More than fine. Knowing I gave you pleasure is enough for me right now."

It was true. The taste of his blood, the satisfaction of Shane's contentment, the trust Shane had shown him, and the intimacy they'd shared, was more fulfilling than any physical release could be. Shane relaxed against his chest, and Ilya helped him pull up his briefs and sweatpants, and then arranged him comfortably against Ilya, still marveling at how perfectly Shane fit against him.

"I'm glad you stayed," Shane murmured, already drowsy.

Ilya pressed a kiss to the back of his neck, breathing in his scent. "Sleep a little more, Shane. I'll be here when you wake."

He felt Shane drifting off, heartbeat slowing to the rhythm of sleep, body going lax and trusting in Ilya's arms. And because he thought Shane was already asleep, because he allowed himself this one moment of complete honesty, Ilya whispered the truth he'd been holding back:

"Mine. Always mine."

Shane smiled against the pillow and Ilya realized he'd been awake enough to hear. But Shane didn't pull away, didn't tense with fear or doubt. He simply let sleep claim him, apparently content with Ilya's possessive claim.

Ilya held him through the remaining hours of early morning, watching over him, and allowed himself to believe, just for this moment, that happiness might be possible after all.

Chapter 11: Belonging

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This chapter ended being a lot longer than expected. My outline is totally messed up because I was moving stuff around. Things get a little spicy between Shane and Ilya. Shane has like no chill in this chapter. Friendships grow. Feelings deepen. All I can say is: enjoy the sweetness because the pain is coming.

Shane woke up with a deep breath, his hips gently pressing his hard cock against something firm.

The first thing his sleep-fogged brain registered was the softness of his velvet blanket, wrapped around him like he was tucked into the world's most comfortable cloud. The second thing he noticed was that he was clinging to someone and rubbing off against them.

His eyes flew open.

He was plastered against Ilya like a koala on a eucalyptus tree, one leg thrown over Ilya's hip, arm draped across his chest, face pressed into the curve of his neck where he could feel the faint coolness of vampire skin against his lips. Shane had basically climbed the man in his sleep and decided to set up permanent residence there.

Ohmygod.

Heat flooded his face as memory returned in vivid detail. The conversation. The kissing. The way Ilya had touched him, the devastating efficiency of those elegant hands bringing him to pieces, whispering sexy things against his ear. The sounds Shane had made, completely uninhibited, practically begging...

"Holy shit, I'm sorry about that."

Shane started to pull back, mortification winning out over the bone-deep contentment of waking up wrapped around Ilya, but a cool hand settled on his lower back, holding him in place with gentle firmness.

"Stay," Ilya murmured, voice rough with disuse, and Shane froze.

He tilted his head back just enough to meet Ilya's gaze. The vampire was awake, looking far too alert and put-together for someone who'd been lying in bed all night. His pale blue eyes were warm despite their color, tracking Shane's face with open affection that made Shane's chest feel tight.

"Good morning," Ilya said, lips curving into an affectionate smile. "You snore, by the way."

The embarrassment that had been building in Shane's chest deflated into indignation. "I do not!"

"Only a little." Ilya's smile widened, genuine amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. "It's...cute."

"Cute," Shane repeated, unable to decide if he should be offended or charmed. He settled for burying his face back in Ilya's neck with a groan, his arms tightening around Ilya's body. "That's definitely what every guy wants to hear the morning after."

"Would you prefer I lie and say you sleep like a perfect angel, silent and ethereal?"

"Yes, actually. That would've been the polite thing to do."

Ilya's chest rumbled with quiet laughter beneath Shane's palm, the sound doing absolutely unfair things to Shane's heart rate. The hand on his back traced idle patterns, fingers trailing up his spine and back down in a soothing rhythm that made Shane want to melt.

"Did you get any sleep?"

Did vampires need to sleep at all?

Ilya made a soft noise. "I *can* sleep but don't need it, but I did rest."

"You stayed," Shane said after a moment, the realization hitting him with unexpected weight. "All night. You didn't leave."

"No," Ilya agreed, voice soft. "I didn't want to leave."

Shane lifted his head again, searching Ilya's face for signs of regret or second thoughts. He found neither. Just steady warmth and something that looked dangerously close to contentment.

"I thought maybe you'd..." Shane gestured vaguely with his free hand, aware he was being ridiculous but unable to stop the insecurity from creeping in. "I don't know, have to do vampire stuff. Important princely duties. Anything other than watching me sleep and apparently listening to me snore."

"There's nowhere I'd rather be," Ilya said, and the simple honesty of it made Shane's breath catch. "Though I should probably mention that I did have to respond to a few urgent text messages around four in the morning. You drooled on my shoulder while I was handling a minor diplomatic crisis with the mer delegation."

"I did not drool!" Shane protested, then paused. "Did I?"

"Only a little," Ilya repeated, eyes dancing with mischief. "Also cute."

"You're the worst."

"I'm told I have my moments."

They lay there for another few minutes, the morning light gradually strengthening through the windows, neither of them making any move to get up. Shane was acutely aware of every point of contact between them, Ilya's arm under his head, hand in his hair, his own palm resting over where a human heart would beat, their legs tangled together, with Ilya's hand covering Shane's hand.

It felt domestic. Intimate in a way that went beyond what they'd done last night, beyond the physical pleasure. This was waking up together, choosing to stay in bed and talk rather than immediately retreating to their separate spaces and responsibilities.

"Thank you," Shane said quietly, unsure how to articulate exactly what he was thanking Ilya for.

Ilya seemed to understand anyway. His hand slid up to cup the back of Shane's neck, thumb brushing the sensitive skin there. His fingers wove into the back of his hair, scratching his scalp affectionately and Shane made a noise of pleasure.

"Thank you for trusting me."

Shane leaned into the touch, letting his eyes drift closed. He could stay here forever, he thought. Just existing in this perfect bubble of quiet and closeness, before the outside world intruded with all its complications and dangers and –

A loud knock at the door shattered the moment.

Shane's eyes flew open. Ilya's expression shifted from contentment to mild amusement.

"That would be breakfast," Ilya said, making no move to disentangle himself.

"Breakfast," Shane repeated, realization dawning with the force of a freight train. "Sophie. *Ohmygod fuck!* Sophie's going to –"

Another knock, more insistent this time. Then Sophie's cheerful voice came through the door. "Consort Hollander? I have your breakfast!"

"Just a sec, Sophie!" Shane called out, freeing himself from Ilya's arms.

Shane scrambled out of bed, trying to finger-comb his hair into something resembling presentable while simultaneously checking that his clothes were all still in place. He groaned, seeing his hard cock tenting the front of his sweatpants. He looked around frantically for his robe, pulling it on over his clothes and covering his front, tying off the sash. Ilya watched him with a wide smile, rising from the bed with far more grace, and looking completely unruffled despite having spent the night in his dress shirt and slacks, both now thoroughly wrinkled.

"Should I hide in the bedroom?" Ilya asked, sounding far too entertained by Shane's panic.

"No! That would make it worse! Just –" Shane gestured helplessly at him. "Try to look less...satisfied?"

"But I *am* satisfied."

"Not helping, Ilya!"

Shane took a deep breath, smoothed down his robe one more time, and ran out to the sitting room's entrance to open the door.

"Good morning, Sophie. Sorry, you know, I'm kind of running late this morning."

Sophie stood there with a silver serving cart laden with covered dishes, her expression professionally neutral in the way that palace staff had perfected over centuries. Her green eyes, however, were absolutely sparkling with barely suppressed delight as they tracked from Shane's wild hair and disheveled state to where Ilya was very obviously visible in the background, leaning casually against the bedroom doorway.

"Good morning, Consort Hollander," Sophie said with perfect composure, though Shane could hear the smile in her voice. "I've brought your breakfast. I wasn't aware you have...company."

"We just slept together!" Shane blurted out, then immediately regretted it. "I mean, *sleep*, but we didn't *uhhh* – we were just talking and it got late and –"

"Of course, Consort Hollander," she said, mildly amused. She pushed in the cart and moved towards the sitting room where Shane sometimes took his morning meal. She turned and presented a polite curtsy to Ilya. "Good morning, Your Highness."

"Good morning," Ilya called, his voice full of self-satisfaction.

"That's not –" Shane buried his face in his hands, muffling his words. "We didn't do anything except sleep!"

"Well...not *just* sleep," Ilya corrected, walking to the leather couch and sitting down. He watched as Sophie placed the bowl of oatmeal, fresh cut fruits, coffee carafe, cup, utensils, and cloth napkin on the coffee table.

"Shall I include your morning refreshments to breakfast delivery, Your Highness?"

Ilya's voice carried with absolute shamelessness. "Yes, please have the kitchen send up my usual blood service with Shane's breakfast."

Shane's head snapped up, staring at Ilya with a mixture of horror and disbelief. Ilya just smiled back, completely unrepentant.

"Are you in need of blood now?"

Shane watched as Ilya looked at him, considering his answer. "I don't need any right now. I do need to return to my apartment to begin my day, I will drink from my stash there."

Sophie's professional mask slipped for just a second, genuine joy flashing across her face before she schooled it back to neutrality.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Please ask Chef Laurent to add protein to Shane's breakfast."

"Wonderful. I'll coordinate with the kitchen immediately. Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you, Sophie." Ilya said, in full Crown Prince mode now, polite but clearly dismissing her.

She curtsied to Ilya, then gave Shane a look that was part congratulations, part knowing amusement, before departing with a suspiciously cheerful, "enjoy your morning, Consort Hollander."

The door clicked shut behind her.

Shane immediately turned to Ilya. "She knows."

"Of course she knows," Ilya said, moving to examine the breakfast spread with casual interest.

"The entire palace will know by lunch."

"They probably already know now, especially since I didn't go to the kitchen for my morning blood. I'm sure someone tried to deliver it to my apartment and found that I wasn't there. Palace staff are more efficient than any intelligence network. I guarantee my father and Vasily will receive a report by the time Sophie returns to the kitchen."

Shane groaned and collapsed onto the couch beside Ilya. "This is mortifying."

"Why?" Ilya said, genuinely curious. "We're going to be bonded in less than two months. We're expected to have a relationship."

"We just *slept* together –"

"Well, *you* slept. After," Ilya interrupted, a hint of amusement coloring his voice. "You were very adamant about that distinction moments ago."

"You know what I mean!" Shane gestured at the bedroom door. "They're going to assume, everyone's going to think we had sex, and we didn't, not all the way, not that there's anything wrong with that, but I don't want people thinking –"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was gentle now, cutting through his spiral. "Do you regret last night?"

Shane stopped mid-rant, meeting Ilya's eyes. The question was serious despite the lightness in Ilya's tone, genuine concern threading through the words.

"No," Shane said immediately, emphatically. "God, no. Last night was..." He felt heat creep up his neck, remembering exactly how last night had felt. "Really, really good."

"Then that's all that matters," Ilya said, simply. "Let the staff gossip. Let the court speculate. As long as we know what's real between us, the rest is just noise."

Shane absorbed this, the calm certainty in Ilya's voice doing more to settle his nerves than any amount of logic could. The vampire had six centuries of experience navigating palace gossip and political theater. If Ilya wasn't worried about the optics, maybe Shane shouldn't be either.

"Okay," Shane said, exhaling slowly. "You're right. I'm overthinking it."

"You're adorable when you overthink," Ilya observed, staring at the bowl of oatmeal and making a face. "Now, eat your gruel before it gets cold. Unlike me, you actually need food to function – if you can even call *that* food."

"I like oatmeal," he said, smiling. "But I loved the breakfast you ordered for me. That was really nice."

Ilya snorted. "Nice."

Shane picked up a spoon and his bowl of oatmeal, eating slowly while Ilya watched with that particular focused attention he brought to everything Shane did. It should have been uncomfortable, being observed that closely, but somehow it felt caring instead, like Ilya was cataloging every detail because Shane mattered to him.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Shane said around a mouthful of oatmeal.

"I've had my hand around your cock and tasted your come. I think we are beyond asking for permission."

Shane chewed carefully, feeling his face heat up, and made a face at him while Ilya laughed softly. He swallowed and picked up the cloth napkin, making sure to wipe his lips.

"Why did you choose to be Turned?" Shane kept his voice casual, conversational, but the question had been building in his mind since his research in the library. "I mean, I know the basics from the history books, you were twenty-seven, King Aurelion offered, but what actually made you say yes?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, his expression turning thoughtful, distant. Shane half-expected him to deflect, to give some diplomatic non-answer that sounded meaningful without actually revealing anything.

Ilya met Shane's eyes with unexpected vulnerability.

"I was very angry," he said, quietly. "And lost. I was twelve when my mother was killed during the uprisings. She was kind and beautiful and everything good about humanity distilled into one person. She bonded with Aurelion and he adopted me. I don't remember my human father; I think he died from sickness. But Aurelion treated me as his son, from the beginning. And then she was killed before her Turning."

Shane's throat tightened. He reached out, covering Ilya's hand with his own.

Ilya's fingers curled around Shane's, holding on like it anchored him.

"I was reckless afterward," Ilya continued, his voice steady but colored with old grief. "Looking for meaning, for purpose, for revenge, for some way to make her death matter. Aurelion saw me, not just the angry young boy everyone else dismissed, and he offered me a choice. Immortality. Power. A chance to ensure what happened to my mother wouldn't happen to anyone else under my protection."

"And you said yes? But you were twelve..." Shane said curiously.

"I said yes when I was twelve," Ilya confirmed. "But Aurelion refused to Turn me at that age. He wanted me to grow up and become strong; he brought me into his household and hired teachers to teach me to read and write and do maths. Gregor, my father's Seneschal, trained me in warfare, focusing my anger and bloodlust as a soldier. Aurelion wanted me to be able to stand on my own as a man first, so he didn't Turn me until my twenty-seventh summer."

"Wow," Shane said, staring at him. "He really is your father and your Sire."

Ilya nodded, smiling fondly at Shane. "Father has Turned hundreds over the centuries. Many of them died in battles or were killed by humans. I'm his third *surviving* vampire child. I have two older sisters who want nothing to do with ruling the kingdoms and dozens of younger siblings, many of them have their own territories."

"Did it help? Being a vampire?"

"I thought immortality would give me time to fix things, to make the world better, to protect people the way I couldn't protect my mother." His lips twisted into something that wasn't quite a smile. "I was naive. Immortality doesn't fix anything. It just gives you more time to watch people die."

Shane's chest ached at the raw honesty in Ilya's voice, centuries of accumulated loss compressed into those few words.

"Friends, lovers, allies, enemies – they all became temporary," Ilya said, staring down at their joined hands. "I'd invest decades building relationships, and then they'd be gone, human lifespans are a blink compared to mine. So I stopped. Stopped letting myself care deeply. Stopped allowing anyone to matter enough that losing them would hurt."

"Because it hurt less that way?" Shane guessed, watching Ilya carefully.

"Yes." Ilya's thumb brushed across Shane's knuckles, the touch aching gently. "I told myself I was being practical. That emotional detachment was necessary for effective leadership. That caring too much was a weakness I couldn't afford."

"And now?" Shane asked, though he thought he might already know the answer.

Ilya looked up, meeting his eyes directly. "Now I'm terrified because I care about you. You're human. We may have ninety years together, but you'll die, and I'll have centuries left to live

with your absence. The logical part of me knows this will end in pain. But I can't seem to stop myself from wanting more time with you anyway."

The confession hung between them, raw and honest and achingly vulnerable. Shane felt his own eyes burning, overwhelmed by the weight of what Ilya was offering, not just honesty, but trust in Shane to handle that honesty with care.

"Have you Turned anyone?" He said, hesitantly.

Ilya shook his head. "I never wanted the burden of being a Sire."

"But you'd Turn me if I wanted it," Shane said, looking at him. "Wouldn't that be kind of weird? I'd be your Consort and husband and...child?"

"It wouldn't be *weird*, it would only bring us closer." He tilted his head and gazed at Shane. "Did you think I had vampire children?"

Shane let out a short chuckle, part of him relieved. "I thought that maybe you Turned Evangeline."

"Shane! Shane, that's —" Ilya said, incredulously. "Fuck, she would've killed me in my sleep!"

"She's not that bad." He finished his oatmeal and set the bowl and spoon aside.

Ilya narrowed his eyes and stared at him. "She told you about her Turning. She does not share her story with anyone."

Shane nodded. "I made the mistake of asking how old she was and why she looked so young when she was Turned. She basically told me to go fuck myself; but she saw me doing research about the bonding and Turning, and she wanted me to know."

Ilya flinched, hissing through his teeth. "Wow. She must really like you."

"Because she told me about it?"

"Because you're still alive," he said, snorting. "Evangeline is my sibling. Father is her Sire."

He thought that made sense; that King Aurelion was the one who rescued her from her terrible situation. And then Shane let out a breath, his face feeling hot, at the relief that he wouldn't need to share Ilya with anyone, that he wasn't Sire to any vampires.

Ilya raised his eyebrow, gazing at him. "You are thinking something but I am not sure which part has made you blush."

Shane leaned over and kissed him, unable to express in words what he was feeling, pouring it into the press of lips instead. Ilya responded immediately, gentling the kiss into something tender rather than passionate, both of them seeming to understand that this moment called for softness rather than heat.

When they finally pulled apart, Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder, letting himself be held.

"I need coffee before we have any more emotionally devastating conversations," Shane mumbled against Ilya's shirt.

Ilya's laugh was quiet and warm. "Fair enough."

He let out a soft sigh, just enjoying the quiet moment with Ilya, knowing that they would have to get up, the outside world with their demands would encroach this moment sooner than later.

"The security briefing is in a couple of hours," Ilya said eventually, regret evident in his tone. "And you're expected to attend from now on."

"Right. The Ashen Cross assholes." The reminder of external threats felt jarring after the intimacy of the morning, reality reasserting itself. "Should I be worried about walking around the palace?"

"Captain Marlow has increased your security detail," Ilya assured him. "You'll have guards, but we'll try to keep them unobtrusive. And you'll never be alone in situations where you're vulnerable."

"Except here," Shane said, gesturing to the apartment. "In my apartment, specifically."

Ilya's lips quirked. "Here is the safest place in the palace. I'm next door and I can hear if you're in distress. Plus, the North Tower is restricted access. No one gets up here without multiple security clearances."

Shane absorbed this, finding it oddly comforting rather than stifling. "So basically I live in a fortress."

"A very comfortable fortress with excellent breakfast service," Ilya corrected. "And a neighbor who occasionally stays the night."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Shane teased. "Occasionally?"

"Would you prefer I move in permanently?" Ilya's tone was light, but there was a genuine question underneath the humor.

Shane considered it, surprised to find he wasn't immediately opposed to the idea. "Let's start with 'occasionally' and see where it goes."

"We have time," Ilya said, standing and beginning to button his wrinkled shirt properly. "Not as much as I'd like, but some. Now, I should return to my apartment and get ready for my day before my morning meetings. You're expected in Conference Room Three at ten. Vasily should have sent Harris the details."

"Right. Professional Consort Hollander. I can do that." Shane stood as well, walking Ilya to the door.

They paused at the threshold, neither quite ready to separate despite the practical necessities of the day.

"Tonight?" Ilya asked, smiling sweetly. "Dinner? We could eat in my apartment, somewhere more private than the dining halls. I'll have the chef make you something special."

"That sounds perfect," Shane said, warmth blooming in his chest.

Ilya leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's forehead, then his cheek, then finally his lips. "See you later, Shane."

"Okay."

Shane watched Ilya disappear down the hallway to his apartment, already counting the hours until he'd see him again, and allowed himself a moment of pure, uncomplicated happiness. The morning after had been perfect. Whatever came next, security briefings, Ashen Cross threats, court politics, the bonding ceremony looming in their future, they'd face it together.

Shane sat in Conference Room Five, trying not to fidget with his pen as the morning sun streamed through the tall windows. The room was significantly less intimidating than the war room where security briefings happened, and it was decorated with warm wood paneling and comfortable chairs arranged around a polished oval table. Still, the array of people gathered to discuss his first solo public appearance as the Tribute Consort made his stomach flutter with nerves.

Harris sat to his immediate right, impeccably dressed as always, tablet open and stylus poised to take notes. Captain Marlow occupied the chair to Shane's left, his presence both reassuring and a stark reminder that even a hospital visit required serious security consideration. Across the table sat three people Shane had met only briefly before: Victoria Dahlen, the Director of the Irina Foundation, a woman in her sixties with kind eyes and silver-streaked dark hair; Simon Lim, the palace's Director of Public Relations, whose expensive suit and carefully styled appearance screamed "media professional"; and Dr. Petra Sommers, the Chief Medical Officer at St. Catherine's Children's Hospital, who'd arrived via video conference, her face displayed on the large screen at the end of the room.

"Thank you all for making time for this preparation meeting," Harris began, consulting his tablet. "Consort Hollander's visit to St. Catherine's in two days represents his first independent public engagement on behalf of the royal household. We want to ensure he's thoroughly prepared and comfortable with the schedule."

Victoria leaned forward, her expression warm and encouraging. "Consort Hollander, first I want to thank you for agreeing to represent the Irina Foundation. His Highness's mother was a woman who believed deeply in caring for the most vulnerable, especially children. The foundation has provided medical care, housing support, and family services to thousands of families over the past two centuries. Your presence tomorrow will mean the world to these children and their families."

"Please, call me Shane," he said, returning her smile. "And I'm honored to be involved. When Harris told me about the foundation's work, I knew I wanted to help however I could."

"The foundation covers all medical expenses for children with serious illnesses," Victoria continued, pulling up a presentation on another screen. "Everything from cancer treatment to rare genetic conditions to catastrophic injuries. We also provide housing for families who need to relocate for treatment, psychological support services, and financial assistance for basic needs. St. Catherine's is our flagship partner hospital. They have an entire wing dedicated to foundation-sponsored patients."

Shane studied the images on the screen: bright, cheerful hospital rooms decorated with murals, play areas filled with toys and books, smiling children with IV lines and brave faces. His chest tightened with emotion.

"Kip painted all the murals and art for the wing," Harris shared, smiling at Shane. "All of His Highness's close friends volunteer for the foundation."

"That's wonderful," he murmured, softly. "His Highness's friends are really amazing."

"The visit is relatively straightforward," Simon interjected, his tone professionally upbeat. "You'll arrive at 11 AM, meet with hospital administration for about fifteen minutes, then spend approximately ninety minutes visiting with patients and their families. We've selected five children across different age groups and conditions. Each visit will be brief, ten to fifteen minutes, to avoid tiring the patients. You'll present them with gift bags containing toys, books, and foundation-branded comfort items."

"Will there be media?" Shane asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to understand the scope.

"Very limited coverage," Simon confirmed. "One photographer and one videographer from the Royal Press Office. No outside media. This isn't about generating publicity; it's about genuine engagement with the families we serve. However, the images will be released to news outlets afterward, with family permission of course, to raise awareness about the foundation's work."

"We'll use only a couple of pictures of you on your official social media; all very discreet, with the focus on the Irina Foundation and the hospital administration. None of the children and their families will be exposed publicly."

Shane nodded his head in agreement. "Thank you, Harris. The last thing I want to do is exploit them for, *uh*, social media engagement."

Captain Marlow cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "From a security perspective, this is a low-risk event. St. Catherine's is a trusted partner with multiple existing protocols for VIP visits. We've conducted advance sweeps of the facility. Consort Hollander will have a six-person security detail: four guards maintaining perimeter positions and two close protection officers who will stay within visual range at all times."

"That seems like a lot for a hospital visit," Shane observed, frowning slightly. "I don't want to freak out anyone."

Marlow's expression didn't change. "Given the current threat level from the Ashen Cross, we're not taking any chances. However, we'll maintain as low a profile as possible. The guards will be in plainclothes rather than tactical gear. We won't frighten the children."

Shane appreciated that consideration. The last thing these sick kids needed was armed guards making them feel unsafe.

"Let's walk through the specific patient visits," Harris suggested, pulling up a new document on the tablet and projecting it on the screen. "Dr. Sommers, would you provide context for each child?"

Dr. Sommers nodded, her image on the video screen shifting as she consulted her own notes. "Certainly. The first patient is Emma Rodriguez, age seven, currently undergoing treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia. She's responding well to therapy but has been hospitalized for the past six weeks. Emma loves art and horses. She's a bright, talkative child who will probably have many questions for you, Shane."

Shane made mental notes, already thinking about how to connect with a seven-year-old girl interested in art and horses. "Does she have family visiting regularly?"

"Her mother is here every day," Dr. Sommers confirmed. "Her father works in manufacturing and visits evenings and weekends. Emma has two younger siblings who aren't allowed in the oncology ward due to infection protocols. The foundation is housing her mother in our family residence building so she can stay close."

"The second patient is Thomas Shim, age fourteen, recovering from a severe spinal injury sustained in a vehicle accident three months ago. Thomas is paraplegic and undergoing intensive physical therapy. He was a competitive swimmer and he's struggling emotionally with his new limitations. He tends to be quieter, more withdrawn."

Shane's heart ached for this kid, fourteen and dealing with life-altering trauma. "What does he like? Besides swimming?"

"Table top games, primarily. Strategy games, building worlds, that sort of thing. He's quite brilliant actually. His care team thinks he might benefit from talking to someone about adaptation and finding new passions."

"I can work with that," Shane said, thinking about his own students back home who'd struggled with various challenges. Finding the right angle to connect with teenagers was an art form.

"Third is Kyra Clark, age four, born with a congenital heart defect. She's had three surgeries and is currently awaiting a transplant. Kyra is non-verbal but communicates through sign language and a tablet. She loves music and stuffed animals."

Shane hesitated. "I don't know sign language. Will that be a problem?"

He made a note in his notebook to learn a couple of signs.

"Her mother will interpret," Dr. Sommers assured him. "And Kyra is very good at making herself understood through gestures and her device. Just speak to her normally and give her time to respond. She's incredibly perceptive despite her young age."

"Patient four is Donald Okoye, age eleven, in treatment for a rare genetic disorder affecting his bone development. He's had sixteen surgeries in his life and faces several more. Donald is wildly enthusiastic about dinosaurs and can tell you extensive details about every species from the Mesozoic era. Fair warning: he will talk your ear off if you let him."

Shane grinned, noting the Mesozoic era on his notebook. He'd do a little reading to refresh his memory on a couple of dinosaurs. "I love dinosaurs, too. I think we'll get along fine."

"Finally, we have Lily Hooper, age sixteen, battling osteosarcoma. She's an artist, very talented actually. The foundation helped arrange for an art therapist to work with her during treatment. Lily is mature beyond her years and has been incredibly brave throughout her treatment, but she's also realistic about her prognosis, which is currently uncertain."

The weight of these children's stories settled over Shane like a physical thing. Cancer, spinal injuries, heart defects, genetic disorders, all of them fighting battles no child should have to face.

"I want to do this right," Shane said quietly. "These kids deserve more than just a celebrity drop-in. How do I make it meaningful?"

Victoria's expression softened with approval. "The fact that you're asking that question tells me you're exactly the right person for this visit. My advice: be genuine. Don't try to be inspiring or offer false hope. Don't be patronizing or treat them with pity. Just be present with them. Listen to what they want to talk about. Let them lead the conversation. Children are remarkably perceptive; they'll know if you're being authentic."

"Bring your sense of humor," Dr. Sommers added with a smile. "Many of these kids use humor to cope with their situations. Don't be afraid to laugh with them, even about difficult things. And don't treat them as fragile. They're incredibly resilient."

Simon consulted his notes. "From a PR perspective, we want you to be yourself. His Highness specifically requested that you not be over-coached or scripted. The foundation's work speaks for itself. Your role is simply to represent the royal household's ongoing commitment to these families."

Shane felt a flush of warmth at the mention of Ilya. He was so proud to be part of Ilya's foundation and he wanted to do his best to represent it and Ilya.

"What about physical contact?" Shane asked. "Should I hug them if it feels appropriate? Shake hands?"

"Use your judgment," Dr. Sommers said, nodding slowly. "Some children welcome physical affection, others are more reserved, especially teenagers. Just watch for cues. If a child

reaches for you, respond warmly to your comfort level. If they seem hesitant, respect their space. All our patients have been cleared for visitor contact, so there's no medical restriction on appropriate touch."

"And please don't treat the hospital room like a sad place," Victoria added, kindly. "These children live here, sometimes for months. It's their home. Show interest in their space, the artwork on their walls, their collections of stuffed animals or cards. Acknowledge their reality without pity."

Shane absorbed all of this, mentally preparing himself for what was clearly going to be an emotionally challenging but important experience.

"Security protocols," Captain Marlow said, redirecting to his domain. "You'll travel in an unmarked vehicle. We're not publicizing your route or exact arrival time. Once inside the hospital, you'll remain in designated secured areas that have been pre-cleared. The guards will maintain visual contact but give you space during patient interactions."

"What if something happens?" Shane asked, furrowing his eyebrows. "Not that I think it will, but what if there's an emergency?"

"If there's any security concern, your close protection officers will immediately move you to a secure location within the hospital. Don't fight them, just move fast. We have multiple evacuation routes planned. However," Marlow's expression softened slightly. "I genuinely don't anticipate any issues. St. Catherine's has excellent security of their own, the Ashen Cross has no known presence in that area, and frankly, attacking a children's hospital would be strategically idiotic even for extremists. It would turn public opinion so dramatically against them that they'd lose any remaining support."

"The bigger concern is managing *your* energy," Harris interjected gently. "These visits can be emotionally draining, especially your first time. It's okay to need a break. If you need a moment to compose yourself, just signal to me and we'll step away."

Shane nodded, grateful for Harris's understanding. "What happens after the patient visits?"

"Brief press availability," Simon said, nodding to him. "Just a few questions from our pool reporters. We'll prep you with likely questions beforehand. Then you'll meet with foundation donors who happen to be visiting that day, about fifteen minutes of thank-yous and small talk. We will all be there, providing you with a buffer if you need it. Finally, you'll return to the palace around 2 PM. You're scheduled for ninety minutes with the children and families, but we know that you may want to extend your visits with them, and find a natural break in your conversations."

"Thank you. I really like that idea."

"The entire event should run about three hours," Victoria confirmed, checking with Captain Marlow for his agreement. "We want to be respectful of both your time and the patients' energy levels."

Dr. Sommers leaned toward her camera. "Shane, I want you to know that these children and their families are genuinely excited to meet you. Many of them have been following the news about the Great Truce and looking forward to meeting the Tribute Consort. You represent hope to them, not just because of the foundation's support, but because you're proof that ordinary people can become part of something extraordinary. They understand the sacrifice you made, giving up your life to maintain the peace. Your presence matters more than you probably realize."

Shane felt his throat tighten with emotion. He'd been so focused on not messing this up that he hadn't considered how people might actually perceive him.

"I'll do my best," he promised, clearing his throat. "These kids deserve everything we can give them."

"You're going to be wonderful," Victoria said with conviction. "You have exactly the kind of heart this work requires."

They spent another thirty minutes reviewing logistics: arrival procedures, gift bag contents, appropriate conversation topics, how to handle media questions, and emergency protocols. Shane took notes, asked clarifying questions, and tried to absorb everything without letting his nerves show.

Finally, Harris closed his tablet with a satisfied smile. "I think we're well prepared. Shane, unless you have additional questions, I believe we can conclude this briefing."

Shane glanced around the table, these people who'd spent their morning ensuring his success. "Thank you, all of you. I know I'm new to this, and I appreciate your patience in helping me learn."

"You're a natural," Simon assured him, giving him a genuine smile. "Trust your instincts. The children will love you."

As the meeting dispersed, Victoria approached Shane with a warm smile. "May I show you something?" She pulled out her phone, swiping through images until she found what she wanted. "This is His Highness visiting St. Catherine's last year. He tries to visit at least twice a year, though he usually keeps it private."

Shane looked at the photo of Ilya sitting on a hospital bed, a young boy with a bald head laughing at something Ilya had said. The vampire Crown Prince looked relaxed and genuinely happy, so different from his usual controlled public persona.

"He never mentioned that he visits regularly," Shane said, softly.

"He doesn't like publicity for these trips. He says the foundation's work should speak for itself, not his involvement." Victoria squeezed Shane's arm gently. "But I wanted you to know that you're continuing something he cares deeply about. He'll be proud of you tomorrow."

After Victoria left, Shane remained in the conference room with Harris and Captain Marlow. The security chief gathered his materials, preparing to leave, but paused at the door.

"Shane, may I speak candidly?"

"Of course," Shane said, surprised by Marlow's suddenly less formal tone.

"I've served the royal household for two centuries. I've watched Prince Ilya grow into his role as Crown Prince, and I've seen him maintain emotional distance from nearly everyone and everything as a protective measure." Marlow's expression was unusually open. "But watching him with you, seeing the way he is when you're together, it reminds me of who he used to be before he built all those walls. You're good for him. And when you represent his foundation, you'll be showing those children the same kindness and genuine care that made me believe in this family's leadership in the first place."

Shane didn't know what to say to that, overwhelmed by the unexpected vulnerability from the normally stoic captain.

"What I'm trying to say," Marlow continued. "Is that you belong here. Not because you were chosen as Tribute, but because you have the character this position requires."

"Thank you, Cliff," Shane managed, his voice rough with emotion. "That means a lot."

After Marlow departed, Harris turned to Shane with an affectionate smile. "He's right, you know. You're going to be wonderful."

"I'm terrified I'll say something wrong or make one of the kids uncomfortable," Shane admitted, frowning.

"You won't. You're a teacher, Shane. You know how to connect with young people, how to make them feel seen and heard. Just be yourself." Harris stood, gathering his things. "So speaking of you being yourself, I heard that you and Ilya have a dinner date tonight."

"*Ohmygod*, Harris, some things are none of your business!"

"Everything about you is my business, Shane. Like, literally!"

Shane laughed, his nerves about the upcoming visit settling into something manageable. He had a whole support system behind him: Harris with his perfect planning, Marlow with his security expertise, Victoria and her foundation team, and Ilya, who believed in him enough to trust him with something as precious as his mother's legacy.

He could do this. He *would* do this.

For the children who needed hope. For the foundation that gave them care. And for Ilya, who'd built something beautiful from his own grief and wanted Shane to be part of it.

In two days, he'd visit St. Catherine's and meet five brave children fighting impossible battles. But as Harris escorted him through the palace corridors toward the North Tower, Shane felt something he hadn't expected when he'd first arrived as Tribute Consort: he felt like he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Shane stood outside Ilya's apartment door at precisely seven-thirty, heart hammering against his ribs like it was trying to escape. He'd changed clothes three times before settling on the black dress shirt, top two buttons strategically left undone to show off his neck, because he'd learned that vampires appreciated that kind of thing, and dark gray slacks that Harris had assured him were "appropriate for intimate dinners but not so formal you look like you're attending a state function."

He'd been looking forward to this all day. A private dinner. Just him and Ilya. No guards, no court observers, no security briefings or assassination plots. Just the two of them, sharing a meal and conversation in Ilya's personal space.

Shane knocked, then immediately second-guessed the rhythm. *Was that too eager? Not eager enough? Did vampires even care about knock patterns?*

The door swung open and Ilya stood there, looking unfairly gorgeous in casual clothes, tight dark jeans that should be illegal, and a deep blue sweater that made his eyes look impossibly bright. His expression cycled through pleasure at seeing Shane, then something that looked suspiciously like exasperation, then resigned amusement.

"Shane," Ilya said, his accent making the name sound like poetry. "I am very sorry."

Shane's stomach dropped. "Sorry?"

"I did not invite them," Ilya continued, stepping aside to reveal his apartment beyond, where Shane could now hear multiple voices and laughter. "They invited themselves. And I apparently cannot get rid of them."

Shane peered past Ilya into the sitting room, where he could see several very familiar figures lounging on furniture that looked significantly more comfortable than Shane's own. His carefully imagined intimate dinner evaporated like morning mist.

"Do you want to reschedule?" Shane asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "We could do this another night, when you're not being invaded by —"

"Absolutely not," Ilya interrupted firmly, taking Shane's hand and pulling him inside. "You are here. I want you here. They can suffer through watching us be disgustingly domestic, or they can leave. I will not sacrifice time with you."

Despite his nerves, Shane felt warmth bloom in his chest at the words. Ilya wanted him here, even with an audience.

"Are you sure? I don't want to —"

"They already love you," Ilya added, guiding Shane into the apartment proper and closing the door. "Except possibly Evangeline, who loves no one."

"I heard that," Evangeline's voice drifted from somewhere inside, crisp and amused. "And I am quite fond of Shane. Ilya is tolerable."

She appeared in the archway between rooms, elegant in a purple-colored dress that made her look like she'd stepped out of a Renaissance painting. Her sharp blue eyes swept over Shane in a single assessing glance, taking in everything from his carefully styled hair to his deliberately unbuttoned collar to the way he was trying very hard not to look nervous.

Her lips curved in what might have been approval, if one was being generous. "You clean up adequately, Shane."

"That's high praise from her," Ilya murmured in Shane's ear. "She once told me I looked 'not completely offensive' and I was flattered for weeks."

Shane bit back a laugh, some of his tension easing. If Evangeline approved of his outfit, he must have done something right.

Ilya led him through the entryway, which alone was larger than Shane's bedroom, into the main living space, and Shane's eyes widened despite himself.

Ilya's apartment was approximately twice the size of Shane's, which he'd been told was already generous by palace standards. The sitting room soared with high ceilings supported by exposed wooden beams that had to be centuries old. Large windows overlooked the palace grounds and the mountains beyond, currently painted in shades of purple and gold by the setting sun. The furniture was a mix of antique and modern pieces that shouldn't have worked together but somehow did, a contemporary leather sectional faced an ornate fireplace that looked medieval, bookshelves crammed with volumes in multiple languages lined one entire wall, and art that Shane suspected was both priceless and personal decorated every available surface.

But what struck Shane most was how lived-in it all felt. His own apartment was beautiful but sterile, decorated by palace staff to some idealized standard of aristocratic taste. Ilya's space had personality. A violin rested on a stand near one window, well-used and obviously loved. Books lay open on side tables, marking pages Ilya was apparently reading simultaneously. A chess set mid-game occupied a corner desk. Vinyl records were stacked beside a vintage record player that looked both functional and cherished.

This wasn't just where Ilya stayed. This was where he lived.

"Your apartment is amazing," Shane said, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

"It's home," Ilya replied simply, pleasure evident in his expression at Shane's reaction. "I'll give you the full tour later. After we survive the night with these parasites."

"We prefer 'uninvited guests,'" Hayden called from where he was sprawled in an armchair, wings arranged carefully over the back. "It sounds more dignified."

"*Someone* does not know how to keep *his* mouth shut," Ilya said, glaring at Harris.

Shane looked at Harris, who was sitting in a wingback chair, looking slightly apologetic but mostly amused. Harris shrugged at Shane, like *what can you do*.

The sitting room was full of familiar faces, all of whom looked far too pleased with themselves for crashing what was supposed to be a private evening.

Scott and Kip had claimed one of the smaller loveseats, Scott's arm draped protectively around his mate's shoulders. Svetlana had arranged herself on the couch with the kind of elegant sprawl that suggested she'd been born to recline dramatically on expensive furniture. And in the chair closest to the fireplace, looking entirely too satisfied with himself, was Vasily.

"Seneschal," Shane said, surprised. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"We have no titles here, Shane," Ilya said, smiling at him. "You are amongst friends."

"Marlow sends his regrets," Vasily said with a slight smile that suggested he was enjoying some private joke. "He is on duty this evening and could not attend. He asked me to represent the security contingent in his place."

"He asked you to crash our dinner," Ilya corrected dryly.

"Semantics, Ilya."

Shane couldn't help but laugh. The whole situation was so absurd, his carefully planned romantic dinner derailed by what amounted to Ilya's found family deciding to throw an impromptu dinner party.

"Come sit," Kip said, patting the cushion beside him with a welcoming smile. "We promise not to be too embarrassing. Well, we promise to try. No guarantees."

Ilya guided Shane to the loveseat, his hand warm and steady at the small of Shane's back. They settled together on the cushion, close enough that their thighs pressed together, and Shane felt some of his anxiety ease at the casual intimacy of it, that Ilya wasn't going to hide his affection for Shane in front of his – their friends.

Ilya nudged his foot twice against Shane's shoe, and he turned and met Ilya's eyes, sharing a small smile. *Rescue me from this conversation.*

"Should I fake a seizure?" Shane whispered to him, giggling softly.

"*Ohmygod*, do you two have a secret code!" Hayden said, looking at them with a wide smile.

"Shut up," Ilya muttered, narrowing his eyes at the Fae lord. "Mind your own business, Hayd!"

"There's food – ribs, mac and cheese, some veggies," Scott said, slipping away from Kip to the console table against the wall. "We're doing buffet style. Help yourself, Shane."

"Thanks, Scott."

The coffee table in front of them held an impressive array of crystal glasses and several decanters of what Shane recognized as blood wine. The vampires all had glasses already, the

dark liquid catching the firelight in deep burgundy. Hayden was drinking something that looked like whiskey, while Scott, Kip, and Shane had been provided with regular wine, white for Kip, red for Scott.

"We took the liberty of starting without you," Svetlana said, raising her blood wine glass in a toast. "Fashionably late is one thing, but we were getting parched."

"You arrived fifteen minutes ago," Ilya pointed out. "And no one invited you."

"Like I said. Parched."

Ilya grumbled something in Old World that made Svetlana laugh, and picked up a glass of wine to hand it to Shane.

"Thanks."

Shane accepted his wine glass, grateful to have something to do with his hands. The normalcy of it was surreal, sitting in a vampire prince's apartment, surrounded by immortal and supernatural beings, drinking wine like this was a perfectly ordinary dinner party.

"So, Shane," Harris said, leaning forward with the expression of someone about to cause trouble. "Has Ilya given you the full tour of the North Tower yet? Show you all his secret hiding spots?"

"Not yet," Shane replied, taking a sip of wine to cover his nervousness. It was excellent, of course. Everything in this palace was excellent.

"Shame. There's a reading nook in the library that Ilya thinks no one knows about, but we all know about it. He goes there to brood when he's being particularly dramatic."

"I do not brood," Ilya said with dignity.

"You absolutely brood," Evangeline corrected, examining her glass. "You've been brooding for at least six centuries. It's practically your defining characteristic."

"I prefer 'contemplative.'"

"You sulk in corners and stare pensively out windows," Svetlana added helpfully. "That's brooding, darling."

Shane bit his lip to keep from laughing, warmth spreading through his chest at the easy way they teased Ilya. This was what family looked like, not blood relations or formal alliances, but people who'd chosen each other and built something real over years or decades or, in this case, centuries.

"Ignore them," Ilya told Shane, though his eyes were warm with affection despite the exasperation in his voice. "They're all terrible and I only tolerate them because immortality is lonely."

"We're delightful," Hayden protested. "Tell him we're delightful, Shane."

"You're all delightful," Shane agreed diplomatically, then added with a grin. "And also terrible. Both things can be true."

"I like him," Vasily announced to the room at large. "He has backbone."

"Are you hungry?" Ilya said, stroking his hand on Shane's neck. "There's plenty of food. Or I can have the kitchen make something special for you."

"Let's go look," Shane said, putting his wine glass down and taking Ilya's hand as they stood together.

The food was delicious and Shane was used to eating in front of vampires now. They didn't seem to care and it was only Ilya who watched him lick his fingers clean, eating the impossibly delicious ribs, the meat so juicy and tender that it just slid off the bone and into his mouth. Shane found himself relaxing as the meal progressed, Scott on his fourth plate and sharing a few pieces with Kip with his fingers, the vampires drinking through the bottled wine blood, and getting drawn into conversations that ranged from palace gossip to art history to an incredibly detailed debate about the best way to brew coffee that got surprisingly heated.

"French press is the only acceptable method," Hayden insisted.

"Pour-over," Kip countered. "The control over extraction is superior."

"You're both wrong," Scott rumbled. "Cold brew. Fight me."

"I'm not getting involved," Shane said, when they all looked to him for judgment. "I just drink whatever the kitchen makes me and it's always delicious."

"Coward," Hayden teased, but there was no heat in it.

It was Svetlana, three glasses of blood wine in and clearly feeling sociable, who started the real trouble.

"You know," she said, her voice carrying that particular tone that meant she was about to say something incendiary. "I don't think we've properly educated Shane about Ilya's past. He deserves to know what he's getting into."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "Svetlana. Don't."

"What past?" Shane asked, intrigued despite himself.

"Oh, darling, there's *so* much past," Svetlana said with evident glee. "Six hundred years of it. Most of it is embarrassing."

"None of it is relevant," Ilya protested.

"All of it is relevant," Evangeline corrected. "Especially the embarrassing bits. Those build character."

Hayden sat forward, wings rustling with excitement. "Did he tell you about the time in 1890 in New Orleans when –"

"That story is classified," Ilya interrupted quickly, a faint flush coloring his cheeks that had nothing to do with blood wine and everything to do with mortification.

"Nothing is classified after the third glass," Svetlana announced, raising her nearly empty glass as evidence. "It's an ancient vampire law. I think. If it isn't, it should be."

Shane looked between them, torn between curiosity and sympathy for Ilya's obvious discomfort. "You don't have to tell me if he doesn't want you to –"

"He got drunk on bad blood," Hayden said, clearly deciding that asking permission was overrated. "Back then, before the donation centers, vampires drank straight from the source. Ilya consumed approximately two pints of blood from a heavily intoxicated human, got spectacularly blood drunk, and decided he could take on an entire werewolf pack."

"I was not blood drunk," Ilya protested weakly. He glanced at Shane, looking a little guilty. Shane just offered him a smile, who was he to judge?

"You challenged the Alpha to single combat," Evangeline said, not bothering to hide her amusement. "In the middle of a diplomatic reception. You declared that vampires were 'obviously superior' and that you could prove it through 'honorable fisticuffs.'"

"Oh my god," Shane said, trying very hard not to laugh. "What happened?"

"The Alpha," Scott said, his deep voice rumbling with barely suppressed mirth. "Was my grandfather. And he told that story at pack gatherings until his death. It's become something of a legend in our pack; the story dies down and then it comes back. Grandfather was very fond of Ilya, but he thought vampires were ridiculous creatures."

Shane couldn't help it. He started laughing, the image of Ilya – controlled, dignified, vampire Ilya – drunk and picking fights with werewolves really was too ridiculous not to be funny.

Ilya covered his face with one hand. "I'm going to kill all of you."

"You accepted a duel challenge from someone who outweighed you by at least a hundred pounds of pure muscle," Scott continued, clearly enjoying himself. "Grandfather was very gracious about it. He simply picked you up, carried you outside, and deposited you in a fountain to sober up."

"He *threw* me in a fountain," Ilya corrected, muffled behind his hand. "There's a difference."

"Did you fight back?" Shane asked, wiping tears from his eyes.

"He tried to," Hayden said, smirking. "But he was too drunk to coordinate properly. He mostly just flailed and insisted his honor had been impugned."

"My honor had been impugned," Ilya insisted, lowering his hand to glare at them all. "Bad blood makes you irrational."

"You're the one who drank it. I warned you that you should select a different human," Vasily pointed out, looking entirely too amused for someone who was supposed to be Ilya's Seneschal and therefore theoretically on his side.

Shane looked at Ilya, taking in his mortified expression, the faint color still on his cheeks, the way he was trying to maintain dignity despite being thoroughly embarrassed by his friends. It was so human, so relatable, that Shane felt a surge of affection so strong it made his chest ache.

"Are you blushing?" He said, quietly.

Ilya made a disgruntled sound. "No! Never in existence have I blushed."

Shane stroked his fingers against Ilya's cheeks, smiling at his indignant expression.

"I love that story," Shane said, honestly. "It makes you seem less..."

"Less what?" Ilya asked, wary.

"Less perfect. More real." Shane reached over and laced his fingers through Ilya's, squeezing gently. "It's nice to know you've done stupid things, too. Makes me feel better about my own questionable life choices."

Ilya's expression softened, some of the mortification fading. "I've done many stupid things over six centuries. That wasn't even in the top ten."

"Oh, we have a top ten list," Svetlana announced, laughing. "Should we go through them?"

"Absolutely not, *Sveta*!" Ilya said, exasperatedly.

"The Amsterdam incident of 1650," Evangeline began, clearly ignoring him.

"The time he got lost in the Paris catacombs in 1995," Hayden added.

"The great chocolate incident of 1925," Harris contributed, looking delighted.

"The what?" Shane asked, invested now.

"He ate chocolate," Vasily explained, the faintest smile on his usually stoic face. "Vampires can't properly digest it. He was ill for three days."

"Why did you eat chocolate if you knew you couldn't?" Shane asked Ilya, trying very hard not to laugh again.

"It smelled good," Ilya admitted, sounding defensive. "And I was curious. How was I supposed to know it would make me violently ill?"

"Because *everyone* told you it would make you violently ill," Evangeline said, rolling her eyes. "Multiple times. You ate it anyway."

"Out of spite," Svetlana added. "He did it out of spite."

Shane lost it completely, laughter bubbling up from his chest until he was shaking with it. Ilya looked at him with exasperated fondness, then finally smiled, the expression transforming his face from beautiful to absolutely radiant.

"Laugh it up," Ilya said, squeezing Shane's hand. "I'm collecting stories about you, too. Give it a few years and I'll have plenty of ammunition."

"I look forward to it," Shane managed between laughs.

The evening continued in that vein, stories flowing as freely as the blood wine. Shane learned that Evangeline had once gotten stuck in a human ballgown because she'd forgotten how many layers were involved and had to be cut out by mortified servants. That Hayden had accidentally started a small fire during a Fae festival and blamed it on a rival family for two decades before confessing. That Vasily, stoic and unflappable Vasily, had once gotten drunk on sake-infused blood in feudal Japan and tried to teach samurai how to properly fold napkins.

"I maintain that their napkin-folding techniques were inefficient," Vasily said with dignity.

"You demonstrated seventeen different folds," Ilya reminded him. "For two hours. They were very polite about it, but you could tell they wanted you to stop."

"Art takes time," Vasily replied, unrepentant.

"Vasily, did you invent origama?" Shane said, chuckling, as they all laughed.

Through it all, Shane felt something settling in his chest, belonging, acceptance, family. These beings – immortal and powerful and sometimes ridiculous – had welcomed him into their circle. Not because he was Ilya's Consort, though that was the initial connection, but because they genuinely seemed to like him.

Kip caught his eye and grinned, raising his wine glass in a small, private toast. Shane returned it, understanding the gesture: *Welcome to the chaos. You're one of us now.*

As the evening wound down, people began making their excuses to leave. Hayden had an early morning commitment. Scott and Kip wanted to get home before it got too late. Harris had paperwork to finish. Svetlana claimed she needed her beauty rest, which made Evangeline snort.

"You're already perfect," Evangeline told her affectionately. "More rest won't do anything."

"Flatterer," Svetlana replied, but she looked pleased. She kissed Evangeline on her forehead.

Vasily was the last to leave, pausing at the door to give Ilya a knowing look. "I trust you'll have a pleasant evening, Your Highness. Consort Hollander."

"Thank you for being here," Shane said with a soft laugh, but he meant it. "Even though none of you were invited."

"The best gatherings are always the uninvited ones," Vasily replied with the slightest twinkle in his eye. "Good night."

The door closed behind him, and suddenly the apartment felt very quiet. Shane and Ilya stood in the sitting room, surrounded by empty glasses and the remnants of dinner, alone together for the first time all evening.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said, breaking the silence. "This wasn't what I planned. I wanted –"

"It was perfect," Shane interrupted, stepping closer. "Ilya, it was perfect. Our friends are amazing. Watching you with them, seeing you laugh and be embarrassed and just...be yourself, it was perfect."

Ilya searched his face, something vulnerable in his expression. "You're not disappointed? I know you were looking forward to dinner. Just the two of us."

"We have plenty of time for dinners alone," Shane said, reaching up to cup Ilya's face. "And honestly? I needed this. I needed to see that I'm not just tolerated because I'm your Consort. They actually like me."

"They *love* you," Ilya corrected, turning his head to press a kiss to Shane's palm.

Shane kissed him, pouring everything he couldn't quite say yet into the press of lips and the tangle of tongues. He ran his hands through Ilya's soft curls, fisting his hair, and then wrapping his arms around Ilya's head and holding him close. Ilya responded with equal intensity, one hand threading through Shane's hair, the other splayed across his back, tightening his grip as Shane moaned into Ilya's mouth.

When they finally pulled apart, both breathing hard, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's.

"Show me the rest of your apartment," Shane said, smiling. "Especially that reading nook everyone knows about."

Ilya's laugh was warm and genuine. "It's not a reading nook. It's a perfectly ordinary alcove that happens to be comfortable."

"Show me anyway."

So Ilya did, leading Shane through the rooms in the apartment, then to the library next door, filled with six hundred years of accumulated life, books and art and instruments and memories. And later, curled together in the "perfectly ordinary alcove" that was absolutely a reading nook, Shane thought about family and belonging and how sometimes the best moments were the ones you didn't plan.

"I was so scared, when I accepted the order to be Tribute Consort, that it wouldn't be like this," Shane said, into the comfortable silence.

"Like what?" Ilya asked, fingers carding absently through Shane's hair.

"That I'd make friends and be part of your family."

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "They're your family now, too."

And Shane, surrounded by the warmth of Ilya's home and the lingering echoes of laughter, believed him.

The museum rose from the hillside like something out of a fairy tale, all honey-colored stone and soaring glass panels that caught the afternoon sun and threw it back in brilliant fractures of light. Shane had been staring at it from his apartment windows for weeks, the building visible in the distance beyond the palace gardens, nestled among the ancient trees that carpeted the lower slopes of the mountains. He'd wanted to visit since his first day in the kingdom, but between security concerns, protocol lessons, and the general chaos of becoming a vampire prince's Tribute Consort, museums had fallen pretty far down his priority list.

Until Hayden had shown up at his door that morning with a grin that promised mischief and a simple declaration: "Get dressed. We're going on a field trip."

Shane walked beside the Fae lord on the museum's gravel approach, his boots crunching rhythmically, and tried very hard not to look like he was cataloging the security presence around them. It was difficult, given that Captain Marlow had made the security arrangements abundantly clear during this morning's briefing.

Six guards, rotating positions. Two flanking them directly, Shane could see them in his peripheral vision, both vampires in dark tactical gear that somehow managed to look casual despite the very obvious weapons. Four more spread out in a loose perimeter, trying for unobtrusive and mostly succeeding except for the way other museum visitors seemed to instinctively give their group a wide berth.

"You're doing the thing again," Hayden said, without looking at him, his silver and black wings folded against his back in a configuration that suggested relaxation despite the circumstances.

"What thing?"

"The thing where you try to spot all your guards and mentally calculate escape routes and threat vectors." Hayden's dark blue eyes slid toward him with amusement. "Ilya does the same thing. It's adorable on you. On him, it's just paranoid."

Shane huffed out a laugh. "In my defense, there are people actively trying to kill me. Paranoia seems pretty reasonable."

"Fair point." Hayden adjusted his path slightly to avoid a puddle left over from last night's rain, the movement unconsciously graceful in that way all Fae seemed to manage. "Though I should mention that if anyone actually tries anything, I'll personally rip their arms off before your guards even draw weapons. So you're quite safe."

The casual violence in Hayden's tone, delivered with the same inflection someone might use to discuss the weather, should probably have been disturbing. Instead, Shane found it oddly

comforting. He'd learned over the past weeks that supernatural beings had a very different relationship with threats and violence than humans did. They weren't being bloodthirsty or cruel, for the most part, they were simply being honest about their capabilities and their willingness to use them in defense of Shane.

"Thanks," Shane said, meaning it. "I appreciate the arm-ripping insurance policy."

"Anytime. That's what besties are for."

Besties. Friends. The word still gave Shane a little thrill of happiness every time one of Ilya's inner circle used it. He'd gone from complete isolation in a foreign court to having actual friends, people who sought out his company, who showed up at his door to drag him to museums because they thought he'd enjoy it.

They climbed the wide stone steps to the museum's entrance, and Shane couldn't help the small sound of appreciation that escaped him when they passed through the doors. The main hall soared overhead in a cathedral of light and space, the glass ceiling panels filtering the sun into soft, diffused illumination that made everything glow. Art installations hung suspended in the vast volume, abstract sculptures that twisted and turned in the subtle air currents, their shadows dancing across the polished marble floor.

"Okay," Shane said, stopping to stare upward. "This is amazing."

"Wait until you see the cultural history wing." Hayden's smile was genuine, the expression of someone sharing something he loved. "They have artifacts from the founding of the kingdom. Manuscripts, clothing, weapons, the full scope of how this place came to be."

They wandered through the halls with no particular destination, Shane asking questions about everything while Hayden provided commentary that was equal parts historically accurate and delightfully snarky. The guards maintained their perimeter with professional discretion, close enough to intervene but far enough to give the illusion of privacy.

Shane found himself relaxing despite the security presence, drawn into Hayden's enthusiasm for the art and history surrounding them. They paused before a massive painting depicting the signing of the Great Truce, the canvas so large it dominated an entire wall. Shane recognized King Aurelion in the center, rendered in oils with almost photographic precision, surrounded by representatives from every supernatural faction and human territory.

"That was a long day," Hayden said, tilting his head to study the painting with the critical eye of someone who'd actually been there. "The artist took some liberties with the lighting. It was raining on that day, actually. Absolutely pouring. Everyone was miserable and damp, and the werewolf delegation kept complaining about how they smelled wet."

Shane laughed, the image of that momentous historical occasion reduced to soggy supernatural beings bickering about odor undermining the painting's gravitas in the best way.

They moved on, drifting through galleries dedicated to different eras and cultures. Hayden pointed out pieces he particularly loved, a delicate Fae tapestry that seemed to shimmer with its own light, a set of ancient vampire armor that had belonged to one of Aurelion's early

vampire generals, a collection of human folk art that showed the gradual integration of the species over centuries.

It was in the sculpture garden, surrounded by marble figures weathered by time and elements, that Shane finally worked up the courage to ask the question that had been building since they'd left the palace.

"Can I ask you something personal?"

Hayden glanced at him, one eyebrow raised. "You're about to ask about my exile from the Twilight Court."

Shane blinked, surprised. "How did you –"

"Because everyone eventually asks, and you're polite enough that you've been working up to it for weeks." Hayden's smile took any sting out of the words. "It's fine, Shane. I don't mind talking about it."

They settled on a stone bench positioned between two sculptures, the guards adjusting their positions to maintain their protective formation while giving them space. Hayden stretched his wings slightly, the silver and black feathers catching the dappled sunlight filtering through the garden's trees.

"I was exiled seventy-three years ago," Hayden said, his tone conversational despite the weight of what he was sharing. "The Twilight Court has...particular views about propriety and tradition. I was engaged to a Fae in the Moon Court – not by my choice – and I fell in love with someone the Court deemed inappropriate. When I refused to end the relationship and marry the Fae I was engaged to, they gave me a choice: renounce my love or leave the Realm forever."

"They made you choose between the person you loved and your entire home?" Shane's voice came out sharper than intended, anger on Hayden's behalf rising hot and immediate in his chest.

"Yes." Hayden's expression remained calm, though something old and painful flickered in his dark blue eyes. "The Fae are nothing if not dramatic about their principles. And the Twilight Court especially so. They believe in rigid hierarchy, in maintaining bloodline purity, in never allowing personal desire to supersede duty to the Court."

Shane thought about his own situation, chosen as Tribute Consort, his entire life upended for political necessity, bound to Ilya through circumstance rather than initial choice. The parallel wasn't exact, but he understood the weight of duty versus desire.

"So you chose love," Shane said, quietly.

"I chose love," Hayden confirmed. "And I was cast out. Formal exile, which means I can never return to the Fae Realms without facing execution. My family was forbidden from contacting me. Everything I'd known for two centuries was simply...gone."

"God, Hayden. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Hayden's smile returned, softer now, touched with genuine warmth. "Because the story doesn't end there. I was angry and completely adrift. I'd never lived outside the Court, never had to navigate the broader supernatural world alone. And I probably would have done something spectacularly stupid and gotten myself killed if Ilya hadn't found me."

Shane leaned forward, invested now in the story. "What happened?"

"I was in a bar in vampire territory, drunk on Fae wine and picking fights with anyone who looked at me wrong. Ilya walked in, took one look at the disaster I was creating, and instead of throwing me out like any sensible vampire would, he sat down next to me and bought me another drink. We'd been friendly for hundreds of years, but this was the first time that we actually talked. I always thought he was such an asshole."

The image of Ilya sitting in a bar with a drunk, belligerent Fae was so incongruous that Shane laughed.

"I know," Hayden said, grinning at Shane's reaction. "It surprised me, too. But he listened. Let me vent about the exile, about the Court's cruelty, about losing everything. And then when I was done, when I'd exhausted myself, he offered me a place in his household. Not as a servant or an obligation, but as a friend."

Shane felt his chest tighten with emotion, understanding on a visceral level what that offer must have meant. To be seen, truly seen, in your lowest moment and found worthy anyway.

"Ilya gave me a home when I had none," Hayden continued, his voice thick with emotion he didn't bother hiding. "He introduced me to the vampire court, vouched for me, made it clear that anyone who disrespected me would answer to him personally. He's been my friend, my brother in all but blood, for over seven decades. I owe him everything."

"He's lucky to have you, too," Shane said, meaning it absolutely.

"We're lucky to have each other." Hayden's expression turned knowing, almost mischievous. "And now he has you. Which is possibly the best thing that's happened to him in centuries, even if he's too stubborn to admit it in so many words."

Shane felt heat creep up his neck, the blush he couldn't control making Hayden laugh.

"You're good for him," Hayden said, more seriously now. "Ilya's spent so long being the Ice Prince, being untouchable and controlled, that I think he forgot he was allowed to want things for himself. But with you, he's different. Softer. Maybe even more human, in the best way."

Shane didn't know what to say to that, the observation landing with unexpected weight. He'd seen glimpses of Ilya's softer side, the careful way he held Shane, the vulnerable honesty in their conversations, the way he'd stayed all night just to watch Shane sleep, the way he laughed with his friends in private. But hearing it confirmed by someone who'd known Ilya for decades made it feel more real, more significant.

"Can I ask about your love?" Shane ventured, changing the subject before he could spiral into emotional territory in a public museum. "The person you chose over the Court? Are you still together?"

"I asked my love to leave the Realm, but she refused," Hayden said, exhaling softly. "But we were never bound and my feelings for her faded over time."

"Oh, man, that sucks, Hayd, I'm sorry to hear."

"No, don't be! Because I'm in love again and this time, I know it's with the right person." Hayden's entire face transformed, joy radiating from him in a way that made him look younger, lighter. "Lady Jacqueline. Jackie. We're planning to formally mate actually, within the year."

"That's amazing! Congratulations!"

"Thank you." Hayden's wings rustled with what Shane was learning to recognize as a Fae expression of happiness. "She's human and she's also the most extraordinary person I've ever met. Smart, funny, completely unimpressed by supernatural politics. She runs an art gallery in the Capital and has absolutely no patience for aristocratic nonsense."

"She sounds perfect for you," Shane said, grinning.

"She is." Hayden's expression turned more thoughtful. "Human-Fae mating is different from vampire bonding, but there are similarities. We'll exchange vows and blood. The magic will bind us together, let us sense each other's emotions and location. She'll age slower than normal humans, not immortal, but she'll live centuries instead of decades. And she'll carry my mark."

Shane absorbed this information, adding it to his growing understanding of supernatural relationships and bonds. "Wow. Is it permanent? Like vampire bonding?"

"Yes and no." Hayden tilted his head, considering how to explain. "The bond itself is permanent. Once we're mated, we'll be connected for the rest of her life. But Fae bonds don't survive death the way vampire bonds do. When she dies, the connection will simply...end. I'll grieve, but I won't carry the bond like a wound the way vampires do."

"Is that better or worse?"

"Different," Hayden said, simply. "Not better or worse, just different. Fae views mortality differently than vampires do. We understand endings as natural, even necessary. The fact that Jackie's life is finite makes it precious rather than tragic."

Shane thought about that, about the way different supernatural species processed love and loss and time. Vampires carried their bonds into eternity, even after their partners died. Fae released them. Neither was wrong, just different approaches to the same impossible question: *how do you love someone when you know you'll outlive them?*

"I'd like to meet her," Shane said, impulsively. "Lady Jackie. If you'd want to introduce us, I mean. No pressure."

Hayden's face lit up with such genuine pleasure that Shane knew he'd said exactly the right thing. "She'd love that! She's been asking about you, actually. She wants to meet the human who managed to crack the Ice Prince's legendary composure."

"I don't know if I'd say I cracked anything –"

"You absolutely did. Trust me." Hayden pulled out his phone, already texting with the enthusiasm of someone planning a social event. "How about breakfast? Maybe later this week? Somewhere casual, just the three of us and your security detail."

"That sounds great, but I should check my schedule. Harris keeps it updated and I don't want to –" Shane stopped, realizing what he was about to say. "Actually, my mornings are...occupied. For the foreseeable future."

Hayden's grin turned absolutely wicked. "Occupied. Is that what we're calling it?"

"Breakfast," Shane said, his face flaming. "I have breakfast with Ilya. Most mornings. It's become a thing."

"A thing," Hayden repeated, clearly delighted. "You take breakfast with His Highness Crown Prince Ilya in the North Tower, in private, on most mornings. That kind of thing."

"No," Shane said, making a face. "I have breakfast with Ilya."

"*Ohhh...Ilya.*"

"You're an asshole."

"I'm the best and you know it." Hayden's laugh was bright and unrestrained, drawing amused looks from nearby museum visitors and a smile from one of their guards. "Lunch then. Or dinner. Or literally any time you're not otherwise *occupied* with princely activities."

"Lunch works," Shane managed, trying to regain some dignity despite his burning face. "I'd really like to meet her."

"She's going to adore you." Hayden stood, stretching his wings in a way that made the nearest tourists stare in fascination. "Come on. There's one more gallery I want to show you before we have to head back. It's got this incredible collection of human-supernatural collaborative art from the early days of the Truce. I think you'll appreciate the historical significance."

They wandered back into the museum, Shane's embarrassment fading as Hayden launched into an enthusiastic explanation of the collaborative art movement. The conversation flowed easily between them, touching on everything from art history to the general absurdity of palace life.

By the time they emerged back into the afternoon sunlight, Shane felt lighter than he had in days. The security presence that had felt oppressive that morning now seemed merely

prudent. The weight of being Target Number One for the Ashen Cross didn't press quite so heavily on his shoulders.

He had friends. Real friends who knew about his relationship with Ilya and teased him about it but also protected him fiercely. Friends who shared their own stories and vulnerabilities. Friends who invited him to meet their partners and made plans for lunch like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Thank you," Shane said as they walked back toward the waiting vehicles, the guards seamlessly reforming their protective formation around them. "For today. For the museum, for talking about...everything. I needed this."

"Anytime," Hayden said, and bumped his shoulder gently against Shane's. "That's what friends do. We show each other art, share traumatic exile stories, and mock each other's relationship choices. It's very wholesome."

Shane laughed, feeling the last of the tension drain from his body. "Very wholesome. Got it."

"Besides," Hayden added, his tone turning more serious. "You're family now, Shane. Ilya's family, which makes you ours. We take care of our own."

The words settled warm in Shane's chest, a reassurance he hadn't known he needed. He'd been so focused on his relationship with Ilya, on the bonding ceremony and the Ashen Cross threats and the weight of being Consort, that he'd almost missed the broader truth: he wasn't just joining a relationship. He was joining a family.

A strange, supernatural, occasionally violent family, but a family nonetheless.

"I'm so lucky," Shane said quietly. "To have all of you."

"We're lucky to have you, too." Hayden pulled open the car door, gesturing for Shane to enter first. "Now get in. I promised Ilya I'd have you back before nightfall, and if I'm late, he'll brood dramatically and make everyone's evening miserable."

Shane slid into the vehicle, smiling at the image of Ilya brooding. "He does not brood."

"He absolutely broods. He's six hundred years old. Brooding is practically his hobby." Hayden settled in beside him, wings folding carefully in the confined space. "Right after 'being possessive about his Consort' and 'pretending he doesn't have feelings.'"

"I hate you."

"You love me," Hayden countered, grinning. "Everyone loves me. It's my curse."

As the vehicle pulled away from the museum, Shane looked out the window at the building receding in the distance, its glass panels still throwing back fragments of light. He thought about Hayden's exile, his love for Jackie, the family he'd found after losing everything.

He thought about his own journey, from reluctant Tribute Consort to Ilya's partner, from isolated human to member of this strange, wonderful inner circle.

He thought about breakfast with Ilya, about inside jokes with King Aurelion, about friends who would rip arms off anyone who threatened him.

And he thought: *This is my new home.*

The realization didn't come with fanfare or dramatic music. It was simply there, quiet and certain and true. This place, these people, this life he was building, it was home. Even with the security details and assassination threats and the weight of political symbolism pressing down on him from all sides.

Especially because of the people who made it bearable. Who made it more than bearable. Who made it something worth protecting.

"Hey Hayden?" Shane said, as they merged into traffic, the palace was visible in the distance.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad you're here."

Hayden laughed, surprised and delighted. "Me too, buddy. Me too."

Shane stared at the three bottles of blood wine lined up in his mini-fridge like they were evidence of a crime he was about to commit. They sat next to his carefully organized rows of Ginger Ale cans, the deep burgundy glass catching the refrigerator light in a way that seemed almost accusatory.

This is insane, he thought, closing the fridge door and pressing his forehead against the cool metal. *You're basically planning a seduction. With blood. What has your life become?*

Shane wanted more. He wanted everything. And if he had to orchestrate the circumstances to make it happen, well, that was just being practical.

It had started innocently enough that morning when Sophie arrived with breakfast.

"Sophie," Shane had asked, trying for casual and probably failing spectacularly based on the way her eyebrows rose. "What kind of blood does Ilya like? I mean, for drinking. Not like, from people, but the wine kind. Does he have a preference?"

Sophie had smiled in that knowing way palace staff seemed to have perfected, like they could see right through every transparent attempt at subterfuge. "His Highness prefers the 1847 Reserve. It's a particularly fine vintage, aged in oak casks for seventy years before bottling. The palace keeps several cases in the royal cellars."

"Could I...would it be possible to get a few bottles? For my apartment?"

"Of course, Consort Hollander." Her smile had widened. "I'll have them delivered this afternoon. How many would you like?"

"Three?" Shane had suggested, then immediately questioned whether that was too many or not enough. "Is three weird? That's probably weird."

"Three is perfect," Sophie had assured him, though her eyes danced with barely suppressed amusement. "I'll see to it personally."

"Ummm...Sophie. Does Ilya drink human blood, not just the blood wine?"

"Yes."

"Could I get a bottle of fresh blood?"

She gave him a knowing smile. "His Highness has a preferred method of drinking fresh blood. But I can get you a bottle of the freshest catch, if you tell me what time you need it. I can have it delivered in a carafe with a warming mat so that it'll stay at the right temperature."

Shane wondered what she meant by 'preferred method,' but he was so distracted about making sure that he could get fresh blood delivered that it slipped his mind.

The bottles had arrived within hours, wrapped in tissue paper and nestled in an elegant wooden box. Shane had immediately hidden them in his fridge like contraband, his face burning with embarrassment despite being completely alone.

"I'll deliver the fresh blood at seven on the dot."

"Thank you, Sophie."

But having the blood wine and fresh blood service was only half the battle. Shane also needed...information. Tactical intelligence about vampire physiology and sex, which was absolutely not something he could ask Ilya about without dying of mortification.

Which was how he found himself in Harris's office that afternoon, perched on the edge of a leather chair while his social secretary looked at him with unholy glee.

"You want to know about vampire sex," Harris had said, not even pretending it was a question.

"I want to understand the...logistics," Shane had corrected, already regretting every life choice that had led to this moment. "For academic purposes."

"Academic purposes. Right." Harris had leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled like a professor about to deliver a lecture. "Okay, let's talk about vampire anatomy and arousal. First thing you need to know: we can't get hard without fresh blood in our system."

Shane had blinked. "Uhhmm –"

"Blood is what animates our cocks. Without it, we're basically beautiful living corpses. But when we drink, especially fresh blood, it's all systems go. Circulation, body heat, saliva production, sexual function, the whole package." Harris had grinned at Shane's horrified

expression. "So if you're planning anything recreational with His Highness, make sure he drinks first. A lot. Like, at least a pint, more if you want him fully functional for an extended period of time."

Extended period of time...? Shane could probably come twice in one hour. Maybe.

"That's..." Shane had processed this information, his brain immediately providing extremely vivid mental images of Ilya drinking blood and then... "That's good to know."

"Also, we don't produce semen. Just so you're aware. Everything works, we can orgasm, but there's no actual ejaculate. Which makes cleanup easier; honestly. So if you're not into swallowing, then you don't have to worry about it."

"Harris, what the fuck!"

"You asked!" Harris had laughed, clearly enjoying Shane's mortification far too much. "What else do you want to know? Stamina? Because let me tell you, vampires have excellent stamina. We don't get tired the way humans do; no 'one and done' with us. Ilya could probably go for hours if you let him."

Shane had covered his face with his hands. "I'm going to die. I'm going to actually die of embarrassment. This was a big mistake!"

"Better to be informed than surprised, my friend." Harris's voice had gentled slightly. "Look, vampire-human sex can be incredibly hot, but it requires some understanding and communication. The blood thing is important, it's not optional, Shane. And you should probably talk to Ilya about boundaries, especially around biting. Some vampires can get frenzied during sex. Possessive. The instinct to bite and claim can be overwhelming."

"We're not bonded yet," Shane had pointed out. "He can't bite me properly until the ceremony."

He didn't share that he pricked his lip on Ilya's fang and that he had tasted Shane's blood. That information was just between him and Ilya.

"No, but he can bite enough to have a little, like a mouthful. It'll probably drive him crazy, but he won't hurt you. It'll be exhilarating for both of you. It could awaken urges you didn't know you had. You may want to bite him back – my recommendation is to do it. We love getting bit by our lovers. You may get emotional. Just be prepared for that; but it's all completely normal and natural, so don't be afraid. And make sure you're both clear about what you want."

Shane had nodded, absorbing all of this while trying not to combust from sheer embarrassment. "Thanks, Harris. This was...educational."

"Anytime," Harris had said, grinning. "And Shane? Have fun. You deserve it. Both of you do."

Now, standing in his apartment as evening approached, Shane was putting all that information to use in what was possibly the most premeditated seduction attempt in history.

Step one: Get Ilya here at a reasonable hour instead of midnight when they were both exhausted.

That had required recruiting Harris, who'd immediately understood the assignment and enlisted Captain Marlow, who'd somehow convinced Vasily that the Crown Prince needed "quality time with his Consort for relationship building and stress relief."

"And none of you assholes better interrupt us tonight. I don't care if the kingdom is burning down or that the Ashen Cross attacks the palace, you guys take care of it. Figure that shit out. No one disturbs us."

Harris and Marlow exchanged glances and then they bowed their heads to him. "Yes, Consort Hollander."

Vasily, being Vasily, had seen right through the conspiracy but had apparently decided to play along in exchange for what Harris had mysteriously described as "a very rare gift that we'll absolutely regret promising him, but it's worth it for the cause."

Shane decided not to ask for details.

Step two: Create the right atmosphere.

Shane had showered, blow-dried his hair until it was soft and touchable, and then put on his black pajama pants, the soft cotton ones that hung low on his hips, and absolutely nothing else. No shirt. No socks. Just bare skin and carefully calculated casualness.

He'd positioned himself on the leather couch in the sitting room, book in hand, reading glasses perched on his nose, trying to look like he just happened to be lounging around half-naked on a random Tuesday evening.

The blood wine was chilling in the fridge. A crystal wine glass, because apparently he owned those now, waited on the side table. The fresh blood carafe was on the warming mat, set up on the coffee table with a large mug. Everything was ready.

Shane glanced at the clock. Seven PM. Vasily had promised to have Ilya here by seven, which was absurdly early for the Crown Prince, who usually worked until at least ten before even considering personal time.

The knock came at precisely seven-oh-three.

Shane's heart jumped into his throat. He forced himself to stay sprawled on the couch, book held at a casual angle, trying to project an aura of *"oh, I didn't realize you'd be stopping by"* despite having orchestrated this entire evening.

"Come in," he called, proud that his voice didn't crack.

The door opened and Ilya stepped through, still in his work clothes, tailored slacks and a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, revealing elegant forearms that Shane had developed an entirely inappropriate fixation on. His curly hair was slightly disheveled, like he'd been running his hands through it, and his blue eyes scanned the room before landing on Shane.

Those eyes widened fractionally, tracking from Shane's face down to his bare chest, his stomach, the low-slung pajama pants, before snapping back up with visible effort.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice already dropping into that lower register that made Shane's stomach flip. "Vasily suggested I should check on you. He said it was important. Are you okay? Has something happened?"

"Did he?" Shane set his book aside on the coffee table, adjusting his reading glasses. "That was thoughtful of him."

Ilya's gaze tracked every movement. "You're not wearing a shirt."

"It's my apartment. I can wear whatever I want." Shane stretched, arching his back just slightly, watching Ilya's pupils dilate. "Or not wear, as the case may be."

"Are you trying to kill me," Ilya said flatly, but he was already moving closer, drawn in like Shane had hoped.

"Is it working?"

"Completely."

Shane grinned, feeling his confidence grow. He moved up on his knees, facing Ilya. He clasped his hands behind his back. "May I get you something to drink, Your Highness? We have some lovely 1847 Reserve. Or there's also warm fresh blood, if that's what you prefer."

Ilya stopped mid-step, his expression shifting to something between amusement and hunger. His eyes focused on Shane's face, looking at his reading glasses, then to his lips, his neck. His eyes dropped to look at Shane's chest, his nipples, and then down his smooth stomach and lingering at the front of his pants. Shane felt his cock getting harder and flexing under Ilya's gaze. He took his time looking, eyes dragging up and down his body, returning to meet Shane's eyes.

"You know my favorite blood wine." He glanced at the coffee table, at the carafe on the warming mat. "And you have fresh blood."

"I'm told you should drink before...engaging in strenuous activity. Your Highness."

"Shane." Ilya's voice was rough now, strained. "What *exactly* are you planning?"

"Nothing," Shane said innocently, getting to his feet and pouring a generous amount of the warm blood into the large mug, filling it almost to the rim. The mug could hold about 20 ounces, just a bit more than a pint. "I just thought you might be *hungry*. You work so *hard*, Ilya. You should take time to relax."

He held out the mug with a smile that he hoped looked inviting rather than nervous. Ilya took it, fingers brushing Shane's in a contact that felt electric.

"Drink," Shane encouraged, returning to the couch and arranging himself along its length, head propped on the armrest, one arm tucked under his head in a pose that was absolutely deliberate. He pulled his leg up, leaning it on the back of the couch, parting his legs. "All of it. I poured extra."

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, the mug forgotten in his hand. "You've been researching."

"I'm a teacher. Research is what I do."

"And what," Ilya asked, moving to stand beside the couch, looking down at Shane with an intensity that made Shane's breath catch. "Did your research tell you?"

"That you need fresh blood to be fully...functional." Shane felt his face heat but forced himself to maintain eye contact. "So I thought...maybe you'd like to drink some. Here. With me."

Ilya's expression softened into something almost tender. "You orchestrated this entire evening, didn't you? Vasily sending me here. The blood, the..." He gestured at Shane's state of undress. "The strategic absence of clothing."

"Maybe," Shane admitted, his confidence wavering slightly. "Is that...okay? I know you're busy and I didn't want to pressure you, but I thought –"

"Shane." Ilya set the mug down on the side table and braced one hand on the back of the couch, leaning over him. "You're not pressuring me. You're inviting me"

"So that's a yes to the blood?"

"That's a definite yes to the blood." Ilya straightened, retrieved the mug, and drank deeply. The column of his throat moved as he swallowed, elegant and mesmerizing, and Shane found himself staring.

"More," Shane said, surprising himself with the command in his voice. "Finish the whole cup. Have some more if you need it."

Ilya's eyebrow rose, but he obeyed and gave him a wink, drinking steadily until the mug was empty. When he set it down again, there was color in his cheeks that hadn't been there before, subtle, but visible. His eyes had darkened, pupils expanding to eclipse most of the blue.

"Better," Shane said, though his heart was hammering. "Do you want more? I also have the blood wine or I can call the kitchen and have them bring you more fresh blood."

"Greedy," Ilya murmured, but he was already moving, settling onto the couch beside Shane's hip. "Just how much blood am I going to need for tonight, *hmm?*"

"I have some ideas," Shane offered, then squeaked when Ilya's hand splayed across his stomach, warm fingers sliding against his skin.

"Tell me," Ilya said, voice dropping to that dangerous purr that made Shane's brain short-circuit.

"Harris said you'd get warmer. More...animated." Shane was having trouble forming coherent sentences with Ilya touching him like this, fingers tracing idle patterns across his abdomen.

"Harris talks too much." But Ilya's hand slid higher, palm pressing over Shane's racing heart. "He's not wrong, though. But why did you go to him and not me?"

Shane could feel it, Ilya was warmer than usual, his skin not quite matching human temperatures but no longer the cool contrast Shane had gotten used to. It was intoxicating, feeling that warmth seeping through where their skin connected.

"Knowledge is power, Ilya."

"Are you trying to seduce me, Shane?" Ilya asked, leaning down until his mouth was inches from Shane's. "With blood and naked skin and those pajama pants that should be illegal?"

"Yes," Shane breathed, abandoning any pretense of casualness.

"You have no idea what you do to me," Ilya growled, and then he was kissing Shane's stomach, open-mouthed and hungry, trailing up his body with devastating precision.

Shane gasped, arching into the contact. Ilya's mouth was warmer than usual, the blood making him feel more human, more physical. He kissed across Shane's ribs, teeth grazing sensitive skin but never breaking it, wet tongue soothing everywhere he'd kissed and nipped.

When Ilya's mouth found Shane's nipple, Shane actually whimpered. The sensation of Ilya's lips closing around the sensitive peak, tongue circling and flicking while one hand pinned Shane's hip to the couch, was overwhelming in the best way.

"Ilya," Shane managed, fingers tangling in curly hair. "God, that's –"

"Good?" Ilya asked against his skin, moving to give the other nipple equal attention. "Or should I stop?"

"Don't you dare stop."

Ilya chuckled, the vibration making Shane shiver. He continued his exploration, kissing up Shane's chest to his collarbone, his throat, the sensitive spot behind his ear that made Shane's breath hitch.

"You taste like sunshine," Ilya murmured, lips brushing Shane's ear. "You're so hot, Shane. So alive. You make me want to *take* everything you're offering me."

Shane couldn't form words anymore, too overwhelmed by sensation and Ilya's voice and the careful press of teeth against his neck that sent liquid heat straight to his groin.

When Ilya finally kissed his mouth, Shane melted into it. Their lips moved together with practiced familiarity now, moments of kisses making them confident in what the other liked. Shane opened immediately when Ilya's tongue traced the seam of his lips, welcoming him in, tasting the iron flavor of blood on Ilya's tongue, rich and complex with metallic undertones that should have been off-putting but somehow just made everything more intense.

Ilya's fangs were descended, sharp points that Shane was achingly aware of every time they kissed. He loved the careful way Ilya navigated around them, the control it required, the trust implicit in every deep kiss where those fangs could so easily pierce skin.

Shane deliberately pressed closer, chasing that danger, wanting to feel more of it.

"Careful," Ilya warned against his mouth. "I'm trying very hard to maintain control, and you're not making it easy."

"Maybe I don't want you to have control," Shane whispered, emboldened by Ilya's obvious arousal and the way his hands had started wandering possessively over Shane's body. "Harris said that you could bite me and have a little blood. I don't mind if you bite me a little."

"Shane." Ilya pulled back just enough to meet his eyes, and the hunger there made Shane's breath catch. "If you cut yourself on my fangs again, if I taste your blood right now, I'm not sure I could stop. You're too tempting, and my control is very limited when you're spread out beneath me like a feast I'm not allowed to eat."

The words sent heat cascading through Shane's body, settling low and insistent. He could feel Ilya's hardness pressed against his thigh, actual evidence that the blood had worked exactly as Harris had promised.

"Okay. Maybe later," Shane compromised, reaching up to cup Ilya's face. "After we're bonded, you can bite me as much as you want. But for now..." He rolled his hips deliberately, creating friction between them. "There are other things we can do."

Ilya's control visibly snapped. He made a sound somewhere between a growl and a moan, capturing Shane's mouth in a kiss that was more possession than exploration. Shane kissed back just as hungrily, hands roaming over Ilya's back, his shoulders, anywhere he could reach. He threaded his fingers through Ilya's curls, tugging his hair, messing it up. He was seriously developing a new kink for dragging his fingers in his hair.

They made out like teenagers, all desperate touches and breathless gasps, until Shane's glasses fogged completely and started sliding down his nose.

Ilya pulled back with a laugh, carefully removing the glasses and setting them aside. "These are dangerous."

"They're just my reading glasses," Shane protested, but his voice came out wrecked.

"They make you look even more devastatingly attractive." Ilya traced the bridge of Shane's nose where the glasses had rested, his thumb moved over his upper cheeks. "You in those reading glasses, with these freckles, sprawled out on this couch, trying to look casual when

you've obviously planned to seduce me – that image is going to live in my mind for centuries."

Shane blushed, pleasure and embarrassment warring in his chest. "I wasn't, okay, I'm totally trying to seduce you."

"I'm utterly seduced. I love it." Ilya kissed him again, slower this time but no less intense. "But you could seduce me with significantly less effort, honestly. Just existing in the same room is usually enough."

"Good to know," Shane managed, then boldly reached between them to palm Ilya's erection through his slacks. "Can I...?"

Ilya's breath stuttered and hissed through his teeth. "Yes. God, yes. Anything you want."

Feeling brave and desired and desperately curious, Shane maneuvered them until Ilya was on his back against the couch cushions and Shane was hovering over him, fingers working the button of Ilya's slacks.

The sight of Ilya yielding like that, his long body stretched out, breath already a little uneven, sent a hot throb straight into Shane's cock. He felt bold in a way that made his skin buzz, like desire had rewired him and left only his need for Ilya.

"You don't have to –" Ilya started, but Shane cut him off with a kiss.

"I want to," Shane said firmly. "I want to see you. Touch you. Make you feel good."

He could hear the raw honesty in his own voice, and could *feel* how badly he meant it. It wasn't just curiosity anymore; it was hunger – messy, blooming, undeniable.

He got the slacks open and carefully freed Ilya's cock from his underwear, and *ohmygod* –

Ilya was beautiful everywhere, apparently. His cock was thick and flushed with color from the blood, hard and perfect and making Shane's mouth water. Shane's pulse thudded in his ears as he stared. He'd imagined this, wondered about it, but nothing prepared him for the weight of it in his palm or the way the blunt head glistened faintly in the low light, as if inviting his mouth. Heat coiled low in his belly. God, he *wanted* to taste him.

"You're staring," Ilya said, sounding amused despite the strain in his voice.

"You're pretty," Shane countered, wrapping his hand around Ilya's length experimentally. The skin was soft over steel, warmer than he'd expected, and the way Ilya groaned throatily and his hips jerked at the contact made Shane feel powerful.

"Pretty?"

Shane glanced up at him with a grin. "Better than cute, no?"

He rubbed his thumb over the head making Ilya groan, his head falling back on the cushion.

That *definitely* made him feel powerful and daring, because that sound, that helpless groan, hit Shane like a jolt. Ilya always held himself with such careful dignity, centuries of control layered into every movement, and now he was unraveling at just the slide of Shane's fingers. Shane tightened his grip just to see if he'd get another reaction, and he did. Ilya's lips parted on a sharp inhale, his lashes fluttering.

He stroked slowly, learning what made Ilya's breath catch, where he was most sensitive. Ilya's hands fisted in the couch cushions, his control clearly fraying. Shane watched him obsessively, every twitch, every tense line of muscle, the way his thighs spread wider without Shane asking. He catalogued each gasp like it was a secret gifted only to him. It made him feel feverish, drunk on discovery.

"Shane," Ilya said, voice wrecked. "You don't have to –"

"Stop telling me what I don't have to do," Shane interrupted, leaning down with intent. "Just tell me what feels good."

He felt Ilya's cock twitch in his grip when he said it, as though the words alone turned something molten between them.

Then he took Ilya into his mouth, and the sound Ilya made was worth every second of awkwardness and uncertainty.

Heat, weight, the smooth slide of sensitive skin over his tongue, it all flooded him at once. Ilya's taste was subtle but addicting, something that made Shane immediately want more, wanting to take him deeper until Ilya couldn't form words. Ilya's hips lifted before he forced them back down, trying to be gentle, trying not to fuck Shane's mouth, and the restraint itself was erotic.

Shane had never done this before, had barely had time to research the mechanics, but he was a fast learner and highly motivated. He started slow, just licking and sucking on the thick head, tongue exploring while his hand worked the base. Ilya's fingers tangled in his hair, not pushing but holding on like Shane was the only thing keeping him anchored.

He loved that, loved the feel of those cool, elegant fingers buried in his hair, trembling just a little. He hollowed his mouth around the head, relishing the way Ilya's thighs tensed, the way his breath shuddered out like he was struggling not to fall apart too quickly. Shane wanted him to fall apart. He wanted to see what Ilya looked like with every last thread snapped.

"That's, yes, like that," Ilya managed, voice rough and encouraging. "Your mouth is perfect. So fucking warm. You can, if you want to go deeper, relax your throat and breathe through your nose –"

Shane tried, taking more of Ilya's length, and the praise that spilled from Ilya's lips was intoxicating.

"Fuck! God, Shane, you're so good –"

It shot fire through Shane, he hadn't known *praise* could do this to him, hadn't known he'd crave it or crave *earning* it. And the way Ilya said his name, like it was a plea and a blessing, made Shane's cock throb where it was pressed against the couch. He wanted Ilya to keep talking, to keep praising him, wanting to drag every filthy sound he'd been holding back for centuries into the open.

"Fuck. You're perfect – your mouth –"

Shane could barely see straight, focused entirely on Ilya's reactions, the way his hips were starting to move in careful, controlled thrusts.

He let him, meeting each restrained push with enthusiasm, letting the slick weight glide deeper. Ilya's control was slipping and Shane could *feel* it in every trembling breath, every sharp push of his hips that he softened a heartbeat too late. The idea that Ilya might lose it completely because of him made Shane's nerves spark with greedy delight.

Shane sucked harder, and Ilya actually whimpered.

God, that sound, high, desperate, and involuntary, slipped down to Shane's belly. He pressed his thighs together, trying not to rut like an overstimulated virgin, but he was shaking with how badly he wanted friction. Instead, he focused on Ilya, on making him fall apart. He tightened his grip around the base, letting his tongue massage the underside as he bobbed his head.

"I'm close," Ilya warned, but Shane didn't pull away. He wanted this, wanted to make Ilya come undone, and wanted to be the one who reduced six hundred years of control to desperate gasps. "Fuck! Close –"

Ilya's voice cracked on the last word, hips stuttering, fingers flexing in Shane's hair like he was fighting instinct with every ounce of strength. Shane moaned around him, the vibration wringing another helpless sound from Ilya, a broken and startled groan that told Shane he was right on the edge.

"*Shane!*"

Shane felt him pulse on his tongue, but Harris had been right, no semen, just the experience of Ilya falling apart beneath him. He didn't stop, tightening his lips as he continued to suck, bobbing his mouth quickly, trying to keep the rhythm, and feeling Ilya's orgasm ripple through him in shuddering waves. His thighs clenched around Shane's body, his breath catching like he wasn't used to losing control this completely. And Shane held him through all of it, swallowing around the spasming heat in his mouth, basking in the way Ilya gasped and choked on Shane's name again, softer, undone.

"*Oh fuck, Shane! Shane, yes, Shane –*"

Shane pulled off slowly, taking his time as he slid his mouth up the shaft, looking up at Ilya's face. He let go of the head with a filthy pop and wiped his mouth of his drool, grinning up at Ilya with what was probably stupid levels of satisfaction. His lips felt swollen, his pulse

thudding in every inch of him, and the sight above him, *Ilya ruined because of him*, lit him up with fierce, stunned pride.

Ilya looked wrecked. His hair was disheveled, his shirt half-unbuttoned (when had Shane done that?), his expression dazed and content. His eyes were heavy-lidded, pupils blown wide, mouth parted in a way that made Shane want to climb onto him and kiss him breathless. Ilya blinked down at him with a look that was hungry and tender all at once, as if he couldn't quite believe what had just happened – or that Shane had wanted it so desperately.

"Come here," Ilya said, pulling Shane up for a kiss that was tender despite the intensity of what they'd just done. "You're incredible. That was incredible."

"I'm sure you've had better," Shane said, suddenly self-conscious. "I mean, you're six hundred years old. You've probably –"

"No," Ilya interrupted firmly, cupping Shane's face with his hand, thumb rubbing his chin. He tilted Shane's face so that he could look into Shane's eyes. "Don't do that. Don't diminish what we just shared by comparing it to the past. Yes, I've had lovers and I don't even remember any of them. None of them were you, Shane. None of them were my Consort. None of them made me feel the way you do."

Shane's eyes burned with unexpected emotion. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Ilya echoed, softer. "It's different when I care. When it means something beyond just physical pleasure. And you..." He kissed Shane gently. "You mean everything to me."

Before Shane could respond, Ilya was rolling them over with supernatural speed and strength, pinning Shane to the couch with a wicked smile.

"My turn," Ilya said, and Shane's brain short-circuited.

Ilya made quick work of Shane's pajama pants, stripping them off and tossing them on the floor until Shane was completely naked, flushed, and hard cock pressed tight against his lower belly. He was maybe a little embarrassed at being so exposed.

"Don't," Ilya said, reading his expression. "You're beautiful."

Shane tried to swallow the instinctive urge to cover himself, but the vulnerability hit him hard. It was different from the other night when Ilya had stroked his cock and made him come. His shoulders twitched inward, his breath catching in that old, stupid way he hated when he started to spiral. He knew he shouldn't care, not with Ilya, not after everything they'd already done, but the panic still rose like a tide he couldn't fully stop.

Ilya's hands softened instantly, the wickedness in his smile fading into something warmer, deeper. He touched Shane like he was handling something precious, fingertips gliding up his ribs and over the faint curve of his waist.

"Look at me," Ilya murmured kindly. "Shane."

Shane did, reluctantly, expecting judgment or hunger or amusement, anything but the molten affection staring back at him.

"I see you," Ilya said, voice low and steady. "All of you. And there is nothing you need to hide from me."

Heat prickled behind Shane's eyes, embarrassing in a completely different way. Ilya leaned down, kissing the corner of his jaw, then the hollow of his throat, slow and reverent, like he was cataloging every inch.

Each kiss loosened the tight knot in Shane's chest. Each touch told him, wordlessly, that Ilya wasn't tolerating his body, he was adoring it.

"You are everything I want," Ilya said against his skin. "So gorgeous. So smooth. So warm."

Shane's breath shuddered out of him, some of the tension finally unwinding. His body stopped trying to curl away and instead moved toward Ilya on instinct, drawn in by the certainty in every touch.

When Ilya pulled back to look at him again, Shane felt a flush that wasn't humiliation at all but just a little shy and nervous, the type of feeling that came with being with a new lover. Ilya smiled like he recognized the shift, like he'd been waiting for it.

"That's it," he whispered, smiling. "Let me look at you. Let me want you."

And for once, Shane let himself feel desired instead of exposed, treasured instead of inspected. Ilya's gaze held him there, steady and sure, until the embarrassment melted into anticipation.

"Come on, let's switch," Ilya said, patting his thigh with his hand, turning them so that Ilya was on his back again.

"What —"

He positioned Shane over him, kneeling on the couch with Ilya's head between his thighs, and Shane's hands shot out to brace against the couch when he realized what Ilya intended.

"I can't," Shane started, but Ilya's hands on his hips silenced him.

"You can," Ilya assured him. "I want you to fuck my mouth, Shane. I want to feel you lose control. I want to taste your pleasure."

The absolute filth of those words, delivered in Ilya's Old World accent, made Shane's cock jump.

"I don't want to hurt you," Shane protested weakly.

"You won't. I don't need to breathe, remember? And I'm significantly stronger than you. If I want you to slow down, I'll make you." Ilya's smile was wicked, sticking out his tongue to

lick the head of his cock, making Shane shiver at the teasing sensation. "Now stop overthinking and start fucking my mouth."

Shane started tentatively, shallow thrusts that barely counted as movement. Ilya's mouth was heaven, hot and wet and perfect, and the gentle suction was already making Shane's thighs tremble.

He could hear himself breathing too loud, ragged and uneven, the kind of sound he'd never let anyone else coax out of him. Ilya tracked every twitch of his hips, every stutter of breath, like he was reading Shane's body better than Shane could. It made the heat coil low and sharp in his belly.

But when Ilya's hands gripped his hips and pulled him deeper, forcing a faster rhythm, Shane's careful control shattered.

A broken noise tore out of him, a half-moan, half-disbelieving laugh, because Ilya's throat closed around him perfectly, sinfully.

"Oh fuck! Ilya! You feel so good," Shane choked, voice cracking as he thrust harder.

Ilya hummed around him, encouraging, the vibration shooting straight up Shane's spine.

"Yeah – god, take it – take my cock," Shane heard himself say, the filth spilling out without thought or restraint. He was loud now, embarrassingly loud, each thrust accompanied by curses and guttural sounds he didn't know he'd been holding inside himself.

He fucked into Ilya's mouth with increasing desperation, chasing pleasure and connection and the incredible feeling of being wanted this much. Ilya took everything Shane gave him, throat opening to accommodate him, hands encouraging every thrust.

Every time Shane tried to slow down, Ilya guided him right back into that relentless rhythm, silently telling him it was okay to fall apart. Ilya's fingers dug into his hips, grounding him, steering him, making Shane feel controlled and free all at once. Shane's thoughts blurred into sensation: the slick heat, the obscene wet sounds, the sight of Ilya's eyes, so dark, focused, and hungry, watching him come undone.

When Ilya's finger pressed against Shane's hole, not penetrating, just pressing, a promise of future pleasure, Shane came with a shout, hips stuttering as he spilled down Ilya's throat.

He heard his own shout echo off the walls, raw and unguarded, followed by a ragged string of "*fuckfuckfuck – Ilya – don't stop –*" as pleasure tore through him sharp enough to shake him.

Ilya swallowed around him, drawing out every pulse of Shane's orgasm until he was oversensitive and shaking. Only then did Ilya carefully ease him off, gathering Shane against his chest as Shane collapsed in a boneless heap.

Shane felt wrung out, his mind a pleasant static. Ilya's arms came around him immediately, like he knew Shane needed something to anchor him after being pushed that far. That intuitive care made Shane's throat tighten in a different way entirely.

They lay tangled together on the couch, Shane's skin cooling in the air so he wiggled closer, chasing after Ilya's warmth. Neither of them spoke for a long moment, content to just breathe together.

"That was..." Shane started, then couldn't find words adequate to describe it.

"Yes," Ilya agreed, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "It really was."

Shane shifted to look up at Ilya, taking in his relaxed expression, the softness around his eyes that only appeared in private moments like this. And Shane thought, dizzy and certain: he'd never let anyone else see him like this, just Ilya. Followed by another thought: Ilya had never let anyone see *him* like this, just Shane.

"Tell me about your day," Shane said, surprising himself with the request. "I want to know everything."

So Ilya did, his voice low and soothing as he talked about meetings and politics and the dramas of vampire court life. Shane listened, asking questions, offering his own observations.

Shane yawned, closing his eyes and smiling. He pressed his face against Ilya's chest, just enjoying how warm he was. "I think I need to go to bed. Harris said that the children's hospital visit is tomorrow, on behalf of your foundation."

Ilya stroked his head with his hand. "Good. Thank you for representing my foundation. I wanted to do good works in her name."

"I'm honored to be part of it," Shane said, sleepily.

"Rest," Ilya encouraged, adjusting them so Shane could rest more comfortably against him.

"We can't rest out here in the sitting room like this..."

Ilya chuckled, pressing a kiss to Shane's forehead. "I'll take us to your bed, don't worry."

"And stay."

"I'll stay."

"Okay," Shane murmured, already drifting.

"I will always stay," Ilya promised, and Shane fell asleep to the sound of that vow and the feeling of being completely, perfectly safe.

Chapter 12: When the Ice Cracks

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: Brace yourselves.

Author's Note 2: Chapter 13 will be from Shane's POV.

The late afternoon light slanted through the windows of King Aurelion's private study, painting the dark wood paneling in warm golden tones. Ilya sat in one of the leather chairs positioned near the fireplace, a crystal glass of blood wine in his hand, and felt something uncomfortably close to contentment settle in his chest.

His father occupied the chair opposite, legs crossed with elegant casualness, his own glass held loosely in pale fingers. The King looked relaxed in a way he rarely did during official court hours, his long white-blond hair loose around his shoulders rather than tied back, his formal clothes exchanged for a simple black dress shirt and black trousers that made him look almost human.

These moments had become precious to Ilya over the centuries, rare pockets of time when the weight of Crown and kingdom could be set aside, when the formality that governed their public interactions gave way to something more familial. Not King and Crown Prince, but simply Sire and progeny. Vampire father and vampire son.

The private study was a sanctuary from the endless demands of court. No advisors waiting with urgent matters. No diplomatic crises requiring immediate attention. No carefully choreographed public appearances where every word and gesture carried political significance. Just the two of them, with blood wine, and the comfortable silence of family who'd known each other across centuries.

Ilya savored another sip of the 1847 Reserve, letting the complex flavors settle on his tongue. The wine was exceptional, rich and smooth with that distinctive earthiness that only came from proper aging. But more than the vintage itself, Ilya appreciated what it represented: his father's attention to detail, the fact that Aurelion had noticed Ilya's preference and ensured it was always available.

His mind drifted, as it had been doing with increasing frequency, to Shane.

Not just the physical attraction, though that was certainly present, intense and undeniable. But the smaller moments that had somehow become even more significant. Shane's laugh during dinner when Hayden and Scott told that ridiculous story about New Orleans. The way Shane's entire face lit up with genuine delight, head thrown back, the sound of his joy filling Ilya's apartment and making everyone else smile in response.

And their secret code, the one Ilya created for Shane to use during the State dinner if he needed Ilya to rescue him. Of course Shane didn't need rescue; he was such a brave young man, adjusting to the demands of court life.

"Let's change the meaning of the foot nudges for every day messages. One nudge means 'I'm bored.' Two means 'Save me.' Three means 'I'm thinking about you.'"

"And four?" Ilya had asked, intrigued. He wrapped his arms across Shane's chest, his chin on Shane's shoulder, the two of them curled on the firm cushion of the reading nook.

Shane turned his head so he could look at Ilya, his smile wicked. "Four means 'Meet me in my apartment the moment this ends.'"

They'd developed an entire language of small touches and meaningful glances. Shane's hand on Ilya's shoulder when passing behind his chair. Ilya's fingers brushing Shane's lower back when guiding him through doorways. The way Shane would catch Ilya's eye across crowded rooms and just smile. Just genuine warmth that said, *'I see you, I'm glad you're here, I'm thinking about you, too.'*

It was intimate in ways that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with their growing friendship and physical connection.

Ilya realized his foot was tapping slightly, an unconscious echo of their secret code. Three taps. *I'm thinking about you.*

"You're smiling," Aurelion observed, amber eyes glinting with amusement over the rim of his glass. "It's unsettling. I'm not sure I've seen you smile unprompted in at least three decades."

Ilya realized his lips had indeed curved upward, betraying the direction of his thoughts. He schooled his expression back to neutrality, though he suspected it was too late to fool his father.

"I was simply appreciating the 1847 Reserve. The palace cellars continue to impress."

"Mmm." Aurelion's smile widened, showing just a hint of fang. "The same one that Shane's keeping stocked in his apartment for you?"

Ilya felt heat creep up the back of his neck, an echo of the human blush he'd lost six hundred years ago. His father was entirely too observant and far too pleased with himself.

"Shane has good taste and is very considerate," Ilya said, keeping his voice level. "It's a superior blood wine. His choice was only logical."

"Of course it was." Aurelion leaned back in his chair, the picture of paternal satisfaction. "Just as it's logical that you've taken breakfast with him almost every morning. And that you've been leaving work at a reasonable hour to spend your evening in his company. And that Vasily reports you've been daydreaming like a lovesick adolescent."

"Vasily talks too much," Ilya muttered, but there was no real heat in it. His Seneschal's loyalty was absolute, which meant he reported everything to Ilya, but apparently also felt

entitled to share observations with the King and Gregor – the three of them were just a bunch of old gossiping busybodies.

"Vasily is delightful and I appreciate his thorough briefings." Aurelion took another sip of his wine, his expression softening into something genuinely warm. "I am pleased for you, Ilya. Truly. I had hoped this arrangement would become more than a political necessity, but watching it actually happen exceeds my expectations."

Ilya met his father's gaze, recognizing the sincerity there. Aurelion had orchestrated this entire situation with his characteristic manipulation, maneuvering the Tribute Consort arrangement until Shane had been delivered into Ilya's life like a perfect gift. At the time, Ilya had resented the interference, the presumption that his father used him to further Aurelion's political machinations.

Now, sitting here, remembering the taste of Shane's pleasure on his tongue and the memory of Shane's laughter echoing in his mind, Ilya found he couldn't quite summon that resentment anymore.

"He's..." Ilya paused, searching for words adequate to describe what Shane was becoming to him. "Extraordinary. He went to St. Catherine's this morning for the foundation visit. Harris sent me preliminary reports. Apparently, Shane spent three hours with the children instead of the scheduled ninety minutes. He sat with each patient, listened to them, made them feel loved rather than pitied. The hospital staff said he was genuine in a way most royal visitors never manage."

Pride colored his voice, warm and unmistakable. Shane representing the Irina Foundation, carrying on his mother's legacy with such care and authenticity, meant more to Ilya than he could easily articulate.

"He has a good heart," Aurelion agreed, his smile turning knowing. "And you're falling in love with him."

The words should have felt intrusive, presumptuous. Instead, they landed with the gentle weight of truth acknowledged.

"Yes," Ilya admitted quietly, the confession easier than he'd expected. "I didn't want to. I fought against it. But Shane makes it impossible not to care. He's brave and kind and funny in ways I never anticipated. He treats palace staff with the same courtesy he shows you. He asks questions about everything, genuinely curious about the world he's been thrust into. He laughs at stories of my past and calls me out when I'm being an asshole and..."

He stopped, aware he was rambling, heat flooding his face again. His father's expression had gone unbearably soft, amber eyes bright with something that looked uncomfortably like tears.

"You deserve this," Aurelion said, his voice rough with emotion. "After so many centuries of holding everyone at arm's length, of refusing to let yourself want anything but your duty to the kingdom, you deserve to be happy, Ilya. To be loved. To love in return."

Ilya's throat tightened. He took a sip of the blood wine to loosen the knot in his throat.

"The bonding ceremony is in six weeks. Sometimes, I can barely wait for it. Other times, I'm terrified of what it will mean, binding myself to someone so completely when I've spent six hundred years avoiding exactly that kind of vulnerability."

"Fear means it matters," his father said, his voice taking on a thoughtful tone. "If you weren't afraid, I'd worry you weren't taking it seriously. But Ilya, I've seen the way you look at Shane. The way you are with him when you think no one's watching. You're already bonded to him in every way that counts. The ceremony will simply make it official."

Ilya absorbed this, turning it over in his mind. His father was right, he realized with startling clarity. He'd already given Shane his heart, his trust, his carefully guarded affection. The blood bond would only formalize what had already taken root between them.

"He makes me want to be better," Ilya said quietly. "Not different. Just...better. More present. More open. More –"

The door to the study burst open with enough force that it slammed against the wall, the sound cracking through the room like a gunshot.

Both Ilya and Aurelion were on their feet instantly, glasses forgotten, predatory stillness descending as they turned to face the intrusion. No one entered the King's private study without permission. *No one*.

Seneschal Gregor stood in the doorway, his usually composed face pale and drawn with tension. Behind him, Vasily's expression mirrored the same grim urgency. Both of them looked like they'd run through the palace, their formal attire slightly disheveled, their breathing elevated in a way that spoke to supernatural speed rather than human exertion.

Ilya's stomach dropped. Gregor had served his father for more than six hundred years and had seen countless crises. For him to abandon protocol this dramatically meant something catastrophic had occurred.

"Your Majesty. Your Highness." Gregor's voice was steady despite the urgency radiating from every line of his body. "Forgive the intrusion, but we have a situation. A critical situation."

"Report," Aurelion commanded, his voice dropping into the register that had ruled kingdoms for millennia.

Gregor's eyes flicked to Ilya, something that might have been sympathy crossing his features before he spoke. "There's been an attack. At St. Catherine's Hospital. Consort Hollander's convoy was ambushed as they departed the facility approximately twenty minutes ago."

The world tilted.

Ilya heard the words, understood them intellectually, but for a frozen moment they failed to penetrate the sudden roaring in his ears. *Shane. Attack*. The words didn't fit together, couldn't fit together, because Shane was supposed to be safe. Shane had six guards, had Captain Marlow personally overseeing his security, and had every protection Ilya could provide.

"Casualties?" Ilya heard himself ask, his voice coming from very far away, cold and flat and utterly controlled.

Vasily stepped forward, his usual professional mask cracking to show genuine distress. "None. But all six guards are down, Your Highness. Captain Marlow is in critical condition. The attackers used some form of chemical weapon – something we haven't encountered before. It incapacitated the security team within seconds."

"And Shane?" The question came out barely above a whisper, but it cut through the room like a blade. "Where is Shane?"

The silence that followed was answer enough.

Ilya felt something crack inside his chest, ice splintering under pressure, the careful control he'd maintained for six centuries beginning to fracture. His vision tunneled, focusing on Vasily's face with predatory intensity as the monster inside him woke fully, roaring for blood and vengeance.

"Where. Is. Shane."

"Taken, Your Highness." Vasily's voice was gentle but firm, the tone of someone delivering a death sentence. "The attackers extracted him from the vehicle and departed in multiple directions. Director Cassimir is coordinating the response, but..." He paused, clearly choosing his words with extreme care. "Consort Hollander has been missing for approximately eighteen minutes."

Eighteen minutes. Shane was in enemy hands for eighteen minutes while Ilya sat here drinking wine and talking about falling in love like the universe was safe and predictable and kind.

The glass in Ilya's hand shattered.

He didn't remember squeezing it, didn't consciously apply pressure, but suddenly crystal shards were embedding themselves in his palm and blood wine was dripping onto the Persian rug in dark spatters. The pain registered distantly, irrelevant compared to the images flooding his mind unbidden.

Shane, afraid and alone. Shane, hurt. Shane, being used for his blood, his *Sanguis Resonans* making him a target Ilya should have protected better, should have hidden more carefully, should have –

"Ilya." His father's hand landed on his shoulder, grip tight enough to ground him. "Focus. We need you to be focused."

Ilya dragged his gaze from the blood on his hand to meet Aurelion's amber eyes. The King's expression was granite-hard, ancient fury banked behind his control, but his voice remained steady.

"Where do we coordinate?" Aurelion asked Gregor, already moving toward the door.

"War room, Your Majesty. Director Cassimir is assembling the full intelligence brief now. We've initiated total palace lockdown and media blackout. All assets are being mobilized."

"Good." Aurelion turned back to Ilya, his hand still gripping his shoulder. "We will find him. Do you understand me? We will bring Shane home."

Ilya nodded, not trusting his voice. The monster inside him was screaming for immediate violence, for blood and destruction and the complete annihilation of anyone who had dared touch what was his. But his father was right, he needed to be focused, not reactive. Shane needed the general and soldier Ilya had been, not the creature of rage currently howling beneath his skin.

He forced himself to breathe, to think, to channel the fury into something useful rather than letting it consume him.

"I want everyone," Ilya said, his voice emerging cold and hard as winter steel. "Every asset, every contact, every resource we have. I want them called in. And I want the people responsible delivered to me *alive*."

The last word carried enough venom to make even Gregor flinch.

"It will be done, Your Highness," Vasily said solemnly.

They moved as one toward the door, Ilya's mind already racing through tactical considerations even as his hands shook with suppressed violence.

Shane had been gone for twenty minutes now.

Every second that passed was another second he was afraid, another second he was at the mercy of people who saw him as a symbol to destroy rather than a person to protect.

Ilya's fangs descended fully as they swept through the palace corridors toward the war room, staff pressing themselves against walls to let them pass, recognition of danger rippling through the crowds. They could see it in his face, he knew. The Ice Prince had cracked, and something far more dangerous was emerging from beneath the careful civilization he'd cultivated for centuries.

Hold on, Shane, Ilya thought, his hands curling into fists hard enough that his nails drew blood from his palms. *Hold on. I'm coming for you. And I will burn the world down to bring you home.*

The war room was located deep in the palace's fortified core, a space designed for exactly this kind of crisis. Ilya had been in this room countless times over the centuries – during the territorial wars of the 1600s, throughout the complex negotiations that led to the Great Truce, in the tense days following various assassination attempts and political upheavals.

He'd never entered it feeling quite like this: ice-cold fury barely containing his volcanic rage, fear so visceral it tasted like copper on his tongue, and a desperate, clawing need to act, to

move, to do something other than stand here while Shane remained missing.

The room itself was austere by palace standards: concrete walls reinforced with steel, no windows, a single massive table of dark wood surrounded by two dozen chairs, and wall-mounted screens currently displaying maps, surveillance feeds, and cascading data. The air hummed with electronics and the barely controlled tension of people operating in crisis mode.

Director Cassimir stood at the head of the table, his silver hair pulled back severely, pale eyes tracking three screens simultaneously while he coordinated with someone via his headset. Cassimir looked up as Ilya entered, his expression professionally neutral but something that might have been sympathy flickering in his ancient gaze.

Around the table: six intelligence analysts, three senior military commanders, two of Ilya's most trusted diplomatic advisors, and, Ilya noted with grim satisfaction, every member of his inner circle who could be reached on short notice.

Scott stood near the tactical display, his massive frame tense, arms crossed over his broad chest. The werewolf's eyes had gone red, his wolf rising close to the surface in response to the crisis. Beside him, Kip looked small and human and worried, but he was there, one hand gripping Scott's arm as his anchor.

Hayden occupied the space near the eastern wall display, his silver and black wings partially unfurled in unconscious agitation, dark blue eyes tracking the aerial surveillance feeds with hyperfocus.

Evangeline and Svetlana stood together near the communications station, both dressed in tactical gear that made them look like the warriors they were. Evangeline's blue eyes tracked Ilya's entrance with sharp assessment, while Svetlana's usual elegance had been replaced by predatory readiness.

Harris sat at one of the computer terminals, his fingers flying over the keyboard, face pale but determined. When he glanced up at Ilya's entrance, guilt and grief warred in his expression. His hair was a mess, the side of his face bruised and covered with dried blood, and the sleeve of his suit jacket ripped open.

"What happened? How did you escape while Shane was taken?" Ilya said, his voice sharp and low.

A distant part of Ilya was glad that Harris was alive; but the monster demanded answers – why did *he* survive and let Shane be taken! Ilya forced the monster down, needing the clarity of focus to be strategic.

Harris's eyes welled with tears as he stared up at Ilya, his lips trembling. "Shane saved my life. I would've died for him, to keep him safe. But he...he traded himself for my life."

Ilya closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, his hands curling into tight fists. *Of course* Shane Hollander would give himself up to save his friends. *Fuck*. He had to get his fury under control before he did or said something he couldn't take back.

His war against his enemies would come, but he needed to be present to think of Shane's rescue or recovery.

"Help me find him and get him back, Harris." That was the best he could say to keep the monster at bay; he would not allow the monster to hurt one of his own.

"Yes, Your Highness," Harris whispered, wiping his eyes with his sleeve, focused on his computer.

Vasily moved immediately to his customary position at Ilya's right hand, tablet already in hand, ready to coordinate whatever Ilya needed. Gregor took his place beside King Aurelion, the two ancient vampires presenting a united front of deadly calm.

Every person in the room stood as Aurelion entered, bowing or curtsying with automatic precision before returning to their tasks. They all looked to Ilya with varying degrees of concern, determination, and carefully banked rage.

His people. His friends. His family. All of them here because Shane mattered to them, too. Shane had won them over, one by one, with his genuine kindness and self-deprecating humor and earnest attempts to understand their world. And now Shane was taken by people who wanted to hurt him, use him, and destroy what he represented.

Ilya felt the ice in his chest crack a little further, the monster readying for his time to fully awaken.

"Report," he said, his voice cutting through the low hum of activity. "Everything. Now."

Cassimir straightened, gesturing to the main screen where a timeline had been constructed with brutal precision.

"At 15:47 this afternoon, Consort Hollander's convoy departed St. Catherine's Hospital following his visit with foundation patients. The convoy consisted of three vehicles: lead security car with two guards, the Consort's vehicle with Captain Marlow, Harris Drover, and two additional guards, and a trailing security car with two guards."

The screen shifted to show surveillance footage from street cameras. Ilya watched, his hands gripping the edge of the table hard enough to leave indentations in the wood, as Shane's convoy moved through the city streets. He could see Shane's vehicle, recognizable by the royal crest on the flags, moving at a steady pace through light afternoon traffic.

"At 15:49, two civilian vehicles converged on the convoy's route, blocking forward progress here --" Cassimir highlighted an intersection three blocks from the hospital. "-- forcing the convoy to slow. The trailing security vehicle attempted to maneuver around the blockage when the attack began."

The footage switched to a different camera angle. Ilya's breath caught as he watched figures emerge from the blocking vehicles – six of them, moving with military precision, faces obscured by black masks underneath what looked like a sealed helmet, and nondescript tactical gear that could have belonged to any private security firm.

"At 15:49:30, the attackers deployed chemical weapons. We're still analyzing the compound, but initial reports from the hospital treating our people suggest it's a novel agent specifically designed to incapacitate supernatural physiology. Aerosol delivery, fast-acting, with minimal effect on human bystanders."

On screen, Ilya watched as his guards collapsed. It happened so quickly, one moment they were moving to intercept the threat, the next they were falling, their bodies simply giving out as the chemical overwhelmed their systems. Even through the surveillance footage, he could see the confusion, the way they tried to fight effects they couldn't understand or resist.

Captain Marlow, ever the professional, had positioned his body between Shane and the attackers even as he fell. The thought of Marlow using his last conscious moments to shield Shane sent both gratitude and fury lancing through Ilya's chest.

"At 15:50, with the security team incapacitated, the attackers breached the Consort's vehicle. Extraction took approximately fifty-five seconds. They transferred Consort Hollander to a waiting van and dispersed in four different directions."

The screen showed it all with horrible clarity: Shane being pulled from the vehicle, his body language showing resistance but no real defense against trained operatives. Harris grabbed Shane, pushing Shane behind him. The attackers pointed their weapons at Harris, one of them waving his hand for Shane to approach voluntarily. Ilya gritted his teeth, frowning deeply. Ilya watched as Shane made the decision to give himself up, even as Harris tried to pull him back. Shane didn't appear hurt, at least not visibly, but Ilya could see the fear in the way Shane moved, shouting something when one of the attackers beat Harris unconscious with their weapon. Shane fought against them, screaming the entire time as his attackers muscled him into the back of a plain white van.

The footage ended. The van disappeared from the camera's range, taking Shane with it.

"That was thirty-three minutes ago. We've lost track of the van. They switched vehicles twice in the first ten minutes, a classic counter-surveillance pattern. We're tracking all possible routes, but they've gone dark."

Thirty-three minutes. Shane was in enemy hands for thirty-three minutes while Ilya stood here watching footage of his capture like it was some exercise in tactical analysis.

"The chemical weapon," Ilya forced out, his voice grinding like stone. "What do we know?"

One of the intelligence analysts stood nervously. "It is a synthetic compound, Your Highness. Designed to disrupt the supernatural metabolism, specifically targeting the enhanced cardiovascular and neurological systems of vampires and werewolves. Humans exposed to the aerosol experienced mild dizziness, but supernatural beings suffered acute system failure within minutes."

"That level of sophistication suggests significant resources," Gregor observed, his weathered face grim. "This isn't a simple terrorist cell. Someone with scientific expertise and someone with considerable funding backed this operation."

"We've tracked increased chatter over the past two hours. Three separate cells are currently claiming responsibility for the abduction." Harris said, his voice stronger now.

"Three?" Aurelion's voice was dangerously soft. "They're either coordinating at a level we haven't seen before, or one cell is using the others as cover."

"We're analyzing the claim patterns and metadata now," Harris said from his terminal, his voice determined. He looked at Ilya, frowning. "The linguistic analysis of their social media content suggests... Your Highness, I think it's real coordination. The phrasing across all three claims shares specific ideological markers and tactical vocabulary that wouldn't appear in copycats. They're working together."

Ilya absorbed this, his mind shifting into the strategic patterns he'd honed over centuries of military campaigns. A coordinated effort meant planning, infrastructure, and command hierarchy. It also meant more targets to identify and eliminate.

"What about demands?" Ilya asked, frowning. "Ransom? Political statements? What do they want?"

"Nothing yet," Cassimir said, and the silence after those words was somehow worse than any demand would have been. "No communication, no manifesto, no ransom request. They took him and went silent."

The implication hung heavy in the air: if they weren't demanding anything, it meant Shane himself was the objective. Not for leverage, not as a bargaining chip, but the goal was Shane's capture for its own sake.

"His blood," Ilya said, the words tasting like ash. "They want his *Sanguis Resonans*."

Cassimir nodded grimly. "Working theory, yes. The Ashen Cross has been particularly focused on the 'dependence' narrative, claiming that vampires rely too heavily on human blood donations, that we've become weak by abandoning hunting. Capturing an active *Sanguis Resonans* carrier would provide them with –"

"Don't." Ilya's voice cracked like a whip. "Don't say it. Don't even think it."

But the images came anyway, uninvited and horrifying: Shane restrained, his precious blood harvested and distributed like some kind of special drink. Shane hurt and afraid and being used in ways that made Ilya's vision go red with rage.

"They'll keep him alive, Ilya," Evangeline said quietly, her sharp blue eyes on Ilya's face. "*Sanguis Resonans* are only valuable if the source is alive. They won't kill him. Not immediately."

"There's still a lot they can do to hurt him while keeping him alive!" Hayden hissed, his wings fluttering in anger.

Evangeline met Hayden's eyes. "Yes. We can be angry imagining the worst things they could be doing to him. But that means he's still alive."

“You’re so fucking cold, Evangeline,” Hayden mumbled, breathing deeply.

“I’m realistic. I’m thinking of what they want from Shane. His blood. But this whole operation is a little extreme to just get some of his blood and then kill him. They want to do something bigger with his blood. We just have to understand what that is.”

“Find out,” Ilya said, giving her her orders. He watched as Evangeline and Svetlana bowed their heads, leaving the war room.

He turned to the intelligence analysts. “How long? If they’re harvesting his blood and keeping him alive, how long before it becomes dangerous? Before permanent damage...”

He couldn't finish the sentence.

The agent consulted her tablet, her expression professionally neutral despite the grim subject matter. "A healthy adult human can safely donate approximately one pint every eight weeks. More than that risks anemia, organ damage, systemic shock. For *Sanguis Resonans* specifically..." She paused, clearly uncomfortable. "The blood is more potent, which means they might take less per session. But we have no data on what constitutes 'safe' extraction levels for an active carrier. The sample size is too small, and the Commonwealth keeps that information classified."

"Eighteen carriers," Ilya said, the number Shane had shared with him now taking on new, horrifying significance. "Globally. Twelve of them children."

If the Ashen Cross had access to the carrier identities, every single one of those people was now a target. Shane might not be the only victim, just the first one they'd successfully captured.

"We need to contact the Commonwealth immediately," Aurelion said, his voice carrying absolute authority.

"Already in progress, Your Majesty," Vasily confirmed, his fingers moving over his tablet. "I've sent urgent communications to the Commonwealth Diplomatic Office and our embassy liaisons. We've been coordinating with them on the safety of active carriers."

"And Shane's parents?" Ilya asked, a new wave of dread washing over him. "They –"

"Are protected," Vasily interrupted gently. "Their werewolf security detail has been tripled. They've been moved to a secure location and informed of the situation. Mrs. Hollander is..." He paused delicately. "Demanding to be brought here. Mr. Hollander is insisting on joining the search personally. I've denied both requests for their safety."

“No. Bring them to the palace. I want them both here. They cannot join the search, but they need to be close.”

Vasily stared at him. “Do you think that’s wise? To have them here if...something should happen to Consort Hollander?”

"Something has already *happened* to Shane. Bring his parents now. Put them in the guest wing of the North Tower."

"I will do it personally, Your Highness." Vasily said, picking up his tablet and leaving the war room.

Ilya nodded, grateful that Vasily would do it himself. He knew Vasily would take the private jet and escort Shane's parents to the palace. Yuna and David Hollander loved their son desperately, and if something happened to them while Shane was already missing, it would destroy what was left of Shane's world.

When we get him back, Ilya corrected himself firmly. *When we get him back, he'll need his parents whole and safe.*

"What about our wounded?" Ilya asked, forcing himself to address the other casualties of this attack. "Marlow and Shane's guards?"

"St. Catherine's has them in intensive care," Cassimir reported. "The chemical weapon caused severe cardiovascular distress. Marlow's condition is the most critical as he took the brunt of the exposure shielding Consort Hollander. The doctors are working to counteract the compound's effects, but they're operating blind."

Cliff Marlow. His captain, his guard, his friend for two centuries. A vampire who'd served with distinction and honor, now fighting for his existence because he'd done exactly what Ilya had asked him to do: protect Shane at all costs.

"I want to visit them," Ilya said, looking at his father. "After this briefing. They deserve to know I haven't forgotten them."

"The hospital is prepared for your arrival, Your Highness. Harris will coordinate." Cassimir confirmed quietly.

Ilya turned his attention to the maps displayed on the wall screens, tracking the vehicle routes, the search grids, the dozens of tactical markers representing their deployed assets. It wasn't enough. None of it was enough.

"Expand the search radius," he ordered, his voice hardening into command. "Triple it. I want every warehouse, every abandoned building, every potential safe house in a hundred-mile radius identified and searched. Shut down all public transportation and the borders. Nothing leaves the kingdom. Coordinate with local authorities, but make it clear we're not asking permission, we're informing them of what's happening in their jurisdictions."

"Yes, Your Highness," one of the military commanders acknowledged, already typing rapid orders into his terminal.

"The Ashen Cross cells we've identified," Ilya continued, his mind working through the tactical response with cold precision. "Cassimir, begin systematic raids. I want every known member detained and transferred to the black site for interrogation."

The black site was a facility that didn't officially exist, where interrogations could be conducted without legal oversight or documentation. Ilya had used it sparingly over the centuries, reserving it for the most serious threats to the kingdom. Now, he would fill it with anyone who might have information about Shane's location or conspired with the attackers.

"Already underway, Your Highness," Cassimir confirmed. "We've made twelve arrests in the past thirty minutes. More raids are scheduled for the next two hours. All detainees will be transferred to the facility and made available for your questioning."

Your questioning. The phrase was delicate, but everyone in the room understood what it meant: Ilya would personally oversee interrogations. And with King Aurelion's blanket permission, there would be no restrictions on methods, no rules about what constituted acceptable pressure.

Ilya would do whatever was necessary to extract information. Whatever was necessary to find Shane and then shut down the Ashen Cross. He could feel his monster roiling under his skin, waiting to come out and play.

"What about the finances?" Gregor asked, his voice sharp and practical. "Can we cut them off?"

"In progress," Harris reported from his laptop. "We've identified seven bank accounts tied to Ashen Cross leadership. Working with the kingdom's financial intelligence unit to freeze assets and trace the money flow. They've been receiving significant funding from somewhere, more than a grassroots organization should have access to."

"Keep following the money," Aurelion said, his voice hard with determination. "Find out who's backing them. Someone with deep pockets wanted this operation to succeed."

"We'll find them, Your Majesty." Harris promised, his fingers already flying over the keyboard again, talking with the intelligence analysts, sharing information.

"Bring them in alive for questioning," Ilya said, emotionlessly.

A soft chime interrupted the discussion. Hayden straightened, his wings rustling as he focused on his phone.

"That's my Fae scouts," he said, voice tight. "They've finished the initial aerial survey." He listened for a moment, his expression darkening. "They found three locations that show recent activity, warehouses in the industrial district, all abandoned but with fresh tire tracks and signs of occupation. Sending coordinates now."

The tactical map updated immediately on the large screen, three new red markers appearing on the city's outskirts.

"Ground teams are moving to investigate," one of his military commanders confirmed. "ETA fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes to reach the locations. More time to clear them, to confirm whether Shane was there or had been there. Every minute that passed was another minute Shane spent afraid and alone.

Ilya's control fractured a little more.

"I should be there," he said, the words coming out harder than intended. "Not standing here watching screens. I should be searching, interrogating, doing something useful instead of –"

"You're needed here to coordinate our response," Aurelion interrupted, his voice firm. "You're thinking like a general, deploying resources strategically instead of charging in emotionally. That's what Shane needs right now."

"Shane needs *me* to find him!" Ilya's voice rose, the fury he'd been containing bleeding through his careful control. "He's out there, afraid and hurt and thinking I've abandoned him, and I'm standing in this *fucking* room moving pieces on a map like it's some military exercise!"

The room went silent. Even the analysts stopped typing, everyone's attention riveted on Ilya's outburst.

It was Scott who spoke, his deep voice calm and grounding. "Ilya. Look at me."

Ilya dragged his gaze from the tactical displays to meet the werewolf's red eyes.

"I know what you're feeling," Scott said, quietly. "When Kip was in danger, when I thought I might lose him, I wanted to tear the world apart. The helplessness, the rage, the fear, it's overwhelming. But charging in without a plan won't help Shane. It'll just get you killed or captured, and then he'll have no one."

"Scott's right," Kip added, his voice soft but steady. "Shane needs you to think clearly. Be strategic. You're doing everything you can, Ilya. Don't lose faith in that. I never lost faith in Scott. He won't either."

Ilya wanted to argue, to rage, to do something other than accept the rational truth of their words. But they were right. Shane needed the Ice Prince: calculated, strategic, and ruthlessly effective.

The monster was currently howling beneath his skin.

He forced himself to breathe, to center, to channel the fury back into focus.

"Thank you," he said quietly, acknowledging both the advice and the care behind it.

A new alert chimed through the room's speakers. Cassimir's attention snapped to his screen, his expression tightening.

"We have communication," he announced, waving his hand for one of the agents to put it on the main screen. "Ashen Cross just posted to their primary channel. It's about Consort Hollander."

Every person in the room went rigid.

"Show it to us now," Aurelion commanded.

The main display flickered, replacing the tactical map with what appeared to be a manifesto written in the Ashen Cross's typical inflammatory style. Ilya scanned the text, his vision going red as he absorbed the meaning:

"For too long, vampires have hidden behind the fiction of 'voluntary donation.' We've allowed ourselves to become dependent on human generosity, weak and domesticated like pets begging for scraps. The Tribute Consort arrangement represents the ultimate degradation, a vampire prince binding himself to a human as if they were equals.

Today, we reclaim our strength. We have acquired the Resonant One, proof that human blood can be taken rather than begged for. His essence will demonstrate what our kind has forgotten: we are predators, not partners.

This is not murder. This is not cruelty. This is revelation. And it begins now."

The words hit Ilya like physical blows. *Acquired. Essence. Revelation.* Every term reducing Shane to an object, a resource to be exploited.

"Timestamp on the post?" Ilya heard himself ask, his voice gone flat and dead.

"Six minutes ago," Harris reported, his face pale.

Six minutes. The manifesto had been posted six minutes ago, which meant it had been written and planned for release. After Shane's capture. With full knowledge of what they planned to do to him.

This is revelation. And it begins now.

The implications crashed over Ilya like ice water. They weren't waiting. They weren't negotiating. They'd taken Shane and immediately begun whatever horror they'd planned, documenting it, preparing to broadcast it as propaganda for their twisted ideology.

"Find them," Ilya said, his voice emerging as something barely human. "Find them now. Trace the post, track the IP, use every tool we have. Find where that message came from and get me an address."

"Working on it," Harris said, his fingers flying. "The post was routed through multiple proxy servers, but I'm running traces on – there! I've got a location. Warehouse district, eastern sector. Sending coordinates."

A new red marker appeared on the tactical map.

"That's one of the sites my scouts flagged," Hayden said, his wings snapping open with agitation. "Fresh activity, recent occupation."

"Ground team is eight minutes out," Cassimir reported. "Do we wait for them or –"

"No." Ilya was already moving toward the door. "I'm going. Now. Scott, get Ryan Price and meet me at the location. Hayden, aerial support. Everyone else, continue coordinating from here."

"Ilya –" Aurelion started, but Ilya cut him off.

"Every second we wait is another second they have him. Another second they're hurting him." His voice cracked on the last word, the ice finally breaking completely. "I can't – I won't stand here while they –"

He couldn't finish. Couldn't articulate the images flooding his mind, the terrible possibilities of what *revelation* might mean.

Aurelion studied him for a long moment, ancient amber eyes seeing far too much. Then the King nodded slowly.

"Go," he said, quietly. "Bring my son home. I will stand in your place here."

Ilya stared at his father, surprised by the King's words. Yes, Aurelion would consider Shane his son, as one of his own. He bowed, acknowledging Aurelion's claim on Shane.

The permission released something in Ilya, the careful restraint he'd been maintaining, the strategic patience, the controlled response. None of it mattered anymore. Not when Shane was somewhere being hurt, being used, being reduced to nothing more than a source of blood for propaganda.

Ilya was done being strategic. Done being patient. Done being *civilized*.

The Ice Prince was gone. What remained was six hundred years of deadly skill and absolute fury, focused on a single objective: finding Shane and destroying anyone who stood in his way.

"Scott, you're with me," Ilya said, his voice hard as steel. "Everyone else, continue coordinating the response. If they find him before I get there, I want to know immediately."

Scott turned and pressed a kiss to Kip's forehead, a quick exchange of whispered words. Kip gave Ilya a nod of his head and Ilya watched them as they said their goodbyes.

He strode toward the door, Scott falling into step beside him with the seamless efficiency of a werewolf predator.

King Aurelion remained at the head of the war room table, his expression carved from stone, ancient and terrible in his stillness. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and Ilya saw not just permission but understanding in his father's gaze. Aurelion knew what Ilya was about to become, what he would do to recover Shane.

And he approved.

"Son," his father called as he reached the door.

Ilya paused, looking back.

"Whatever you need to do," Aurelion said, his voice carrying across the room with quiet authority. "Whoever you need to kill. However far you need to go. You have my full support. Let your monster out and we will bring you back."

The words were both a blessing and an unleashing to become the monster he'd spent centuries learning to control and hide.

Ilya nodded once, then turned and strode into the corridor, Scott matching his pace as they moved through the palace with predatory speed.

The palace corridors blurred past as Ilya moved with supernatural velocity, staff pressing themselves against walls to let him pass. They could see it in his face, the cold fury, the barely leashed violence, the transformation from Crown Prince to apex predator.

Scott kept pace beside him, already coordinating logistics through his phone with an efficiency that made him invaluable as Ilya's right hand.

"Vehicle waiting in the north courtyard, fully fueled and ready for immediate deployment. Captain Marlow's second-in-command is assembling a tactical team to follow us. Ryan Price arrived twenty minutes ago and is being briefed on Shane's last known location."

"Tell Price we'll meet him at the abduction site in twenty minutes," Ilya said, his mind calculating routes and timing with military precision. "He'll have Shane's scent from there."

"Already being arranged." Scott listened to his phone. "Harris coordinated with St. Catherine's Hospital. They're prepared for your visit with the wounded guards. Dr. Sommers has cleared the intensive care unit of all non-essential personnel."

Ilya had to see them first, had to look his people in the eye and acknowledge what they'd sacrificed protecting Shane. It would take precious minutes, but it was necessary. They'd gotten hurt for his Consort. They deserved his direct attention before he disappeared into the hunt.

He knew when he found Shane, Shane would ask Ilya about the condition of Marlow and his guards. He would be disappointed with Ilya if he didn't make the time to check on them.

They reached the north courtyard where a sleek black SUV idled, its engine already running. Two vampire guards stood at attention beside it, both armed and wearing the grim expressions of warriors preparing for combat.

"Your Highness," they said in unison, bowing sharply.

Ilya acknowledged them with a curt nod and slid into the back seat. Scott followed, settling beside him. The vehicle was moving before the door fully closed, the driver accelerating smoothly through the palace gates.

"St. Catherine's first," Ilya confirmed. "Then the abduction site."

"Understood, Your Highness."

Scott checked his phone. "Hayden's scouts are in the air."

The drive to the hospital took eight minutes that felt like eight hours. Ilya sat rigid in his seat, watching the city slide past outside tinted windows, his hands clenched into fists that left bloody half-moons where his nails bit into his palms.

Shane had been out there somewhere, in his city, being taken through these same streets while Ilya was drinking blood wine. The guilt was a physical weight, crushing and relentless.

I should have seen this coming. Should have increased security after the State dinner attack. Should have kept Shane at the palace instead of allowing him to go to the hospital. Should have gone with him, stood between him and any threat, used my own body as a shield if necessary.

"Ilya." Scott's quiet voice interrupted the spiral of self-recrimination. "This is not your fault."

Ilya's laugh was harsh and humorless. "He was taken on my watch. Under my protection. How is that not my fault?"

"Because you're not omnipotent, despite what six hundred years of experience might suggest." Scott's tone was gentle but firm, the voice of someone who'd known Ilya long enough to speak hard truths. "You implemented every reasonable security protocol. The attack was sophisticated, well-funded, and executed with military precision. They used a weapon we'd never encountered, designed specifically to neutralize our defenses. No one could have predicted that."

"I should have predicted it anyway." Ilya turned to meet the werewolf's eyes. "That's my job, Scott. To see threats before they materialize. To protect what's mine. And I failed."

"Then learn from the failure and use it," Scott growled, his voice hardening slightly. "Use the guilt, the rage, the fear – channel it all into finding him. But don't let it paralyze you. Shane needs the Crown Prince who conquered kingdoms, not the man who's drowning in what-ifs."

The words landed with brutal clarity. Scott was right, as he usually was. There would be time for guilt and self-recrimination *after* Shane was safe. Right now, every ounce of his energy needed to focus on the hunt.

Let us out! Let us out!

"You've become annoyingly wise," Ilya muttered, but there was gratitude beneath the complaint.

"I'm with you, brother," Scott said, with the ghost of a smile.

The SUV pulled into St. Catherine's emergency entrance, where Dr. Petra Sommers waited with two security guards. The Chief Medical Officer was a human in her fifties, with iron-

gray hair pulled into a severe bun and the kind of competent, no-nonsense demeanor that inspired confidence even in crisis situations.

She bowed as Ilya emerged from the vehicle. "Your Highness. Your guards are stable for the moment, but I won't lie, Captain Marlow's condition is critical. Whatever that chemical compound was, it's wreaking havoc on his cardiovascular system."

"Can I see them?" Ilya said, already moving toward the entrance.

"Of course. This way."

Dr. Sommers led them through sterile corridors that smelled of antiseptic and human anxiety. Hospital sounds echoed around them, beeping monitors, hushed voices, the squeak of shoes on linoleum. Ilya had always hated hospitals, the reminder of mortality and fragility hitting differently when you'd watched centuries of people sicken and die.

The intensive care unit had been cleared as Harris had promised. Six beds, six guards, all of them hooked to machines that monitored failing systems and tried to counteract poison no one understood.

Ilya moved to the first bed where a young vampire named Marco lay unconscious, his skin ashen, dark veins visible beneath the surface in spiderweb patterns that spoke to systemic corruption. He was the youngest vampire guard on Shane's team; just twenty-five when he was Turned two years ago.

"He was in the lead vehicle," Dr. Sommers said, quietly. "Took the first exposure. We've been running every test we can think of, trying to identify the compound and develop a counteragent. So far, nothing's working."

Ilya rested a hand briefly on Marco's shoulder, feeling the coolness of vampiric flesh that should have been animated by consumed blood but instead felt inert and wrong.

"You protected him," Ilya said quietly, even though Marco couldn't hear. "You did your duty with honor. I won't forget that."

He moved to each bed in turn, acknowledging each fallen guard, speaking words of gratitude and recognition. These vampires had served him faithfully, had stood between Shane and harm, had collapsed still trying to protect the Consort they'd been charged with keeping safe.

They deserved more than orders and tactical deployment. They deserved to be valued and to know their sacrifice mattered.

The last bed held Captain Marlow.

Cliff Marlow had served as head of Ilya's security detail for two centuries. He was a skilled tactician, a fierce warrior, and one of the few vampires Ilya trusted absolutely with sensitive assignments. He'd overseen countless diplomatic trips, managed security for state functions, and never once failed in his duty.

He looked small in the hospital bed, diminished in a way that was difficult to witness. His face was drawn, skin gray-tinged, the same dark veins spreading across his exposed arms where IV lines pumped clean blood and fluids and medications that weren't helping nearly enough.

"Captain Marlow is fighting hard, Your Highness," Dr. Sommers said, consulting her tablet. Ilya knew that Cassimir had sent her all of their surveillance videos so that she could see the vampires in the order of their attack with the chemical. "According to the surveillance footage and witness reports, he positioned himself between Consort Hollander and the attackers even as the chemical weapon took effect. He took the highest concentration of exposure. By rights, he should already be dead."

"But he's not," Ilya said, studying Marlow's face for any sign of consciousness.

"No. The stubborn bastard won't let go." There was grudging admiration in the doctor's voice. "His body is failing, but his will is...remarkable."

Ilya reached out and clasped Marlow's hand, the skin cool and papery beneath his fingers. "Cliff. I don't know if you can hear me, but I need you to keep fighting. Shane's been taken. I'm going to get him back, but when I do, he's going to need his friends around him. People he loves. You're one of those people."

Marlow's eyelids flickered, almost imperceptibly.

"That's it," Ilya encouraged, squeezing his hand gently. "Stay with us. I need you, Marlow. Shane needs you. Don't you dare give up now."

Dr. Sommers moved closer, checking the monitors with professional interest. "His vitals just improved slightly. Heart rate increased, brain activity showing more response. He heard you, Your Highness."

"Good." Ilya leaned closer to Marlow's ear, lowering his voice. "I swear to you, Cliff. I will find him. I will bring Shane home. And when I do, you'll be there to see it. That's an order, Captain."

The faintest pressure against his hand, Marlow trying to squeeze back, an acknowledgment that he'd heard and understood.

"We'll keep fighting the poison," Dr. Sommers promised. "I've got my best researchers working with your vampire doctors on identification and counteragents. If there's a way to save them, we'll find it."

"Spare no expense," Ilya said, straightening. "Whatever equipment you need, whatever specialists you want to consult, whatever resources are required, you have unlimited budget and complete authority to requisition anything from the royal medical reserves."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Dr. Sommers bowed. "We won't let them go without a fight."

Ilya took one last look at his fallen guards, memorizing their faces, adding this debt to the growing ledger of what the Ashen Cross would answer for.

"They hurt my people," he said quietly, more to himself than to anyone else. "They took my Consort. And they will pay for both in ways that make them wish I'd simply killed them quickly."

Dr. Sommers paled slightly, recognizing the predatory promise in those words.

Scott merely nodded. "The vehicle is waiting, Your Highness. Price is there."

"Yes." Ilya turned from the ICU, his resolve hardening into something diamond-sharp and unbreakable. "It's time to start hunting."

The abduction site was three blocks from St. Catherine's Hospital, an intersection that normally handled moderate traffic but was currently cordoned off with police barriers and yellow crime scene tape. The area had been locked down within minutes of the attack, preserved for forensic analysis.

Ilya's SUV pulled up to the perimeter where a massive figure waited, drawing attention even among the assembled law enforcement and security personnel.

Ryan Price looked exactly like what he was: a werewolf alpha in his prime, built like a tank with muscle layered over muscle, standing at least six-foot-eight with shoulders that seemed capable of supporting the weight of the world. His dark hair was pulled back in a thick braid, his beard was neatly trimmed, and his eyes, currently shifted to red with his wolf riding close to the surface, tracked Ilya's approach with predatory focus.

"Your Highness," Ryan Price said, his voice a deep rumble as he executed a precise bow. "Scott's told me what we're dealing with. I'm ready to track."

Ilya assessed the werewolf alpha with approval. Ryan Price's reputation as a tracker was legendary in supernatural circles; he could follow a scent trail days old through running water, could distinguish individual humans in a crowded city, and once he locked onto a target, he was relentless.

If anyone could find Shane through the chaos of the city, it was this werewolf.

"Thank you for coming," Ilya said, his voice rough with controlled urgency. "Shane's scent would be in the vehicle here --" He gestured toward the Consort's car, which still sat where it had been forced to stop, doors torn off the frame and hanging open, interior visible through crime scene markers. "-- and in the van they transferred him to. We lost the van's trail three blocks east of here."

Ryan's nostrils flared as he approached the scene, his enhanced senses already working. He moved around the perimeter of the Consort's vehicle, head tilted, completely focused on information only he could perceive.

"I've got him," Ryan said after a moment, his voice carrying absolute certainty. "The Consort's scent is clear. So is the chemical weapon – toxic, synthetic, unlike anything I've encountered before. And there are..." He paused, sniffing more deeply. "Six distinct attackers. All vampires. They masked their individual scents with some kind of neutralizing agent, but I can still separate them."

"Vampires," Scott growled, sniffing the air.

"Professional operation," Ryan confirmed. "Military discipline in their movements. I can smell stress sweat, adrenaline, but no panic. They knew exactly what they were doing."

Ilya's hands clenched at his sides. "And Shane? Can you track where they took him?"

"Give me a minute." Ryan moved toward the spot where the van had been, kneeling on the pavement, his head lowered. To an outside observer, it might have looked like prayer. To those who understood werewolf tracking, it was something closer to magic.

The alpha's breathing deepened, his body going absolutely still as he sorted through the thousands of overlapping scents that filled any city intersection, exhaust fumes, garbage, rain residue, human sweat, and food from nearby restaurants, all of it layering over the specific trail he was searching for.

"Northeast," Ryan said finally, rising to his full height.

"Can you follow it?" Ilya demanded.

"I can try. Urban tracking is challenging – too many competing scents, too much contamination. But the Consort's *Sanguis Resonans* blood has a distinctive signature. Even with vehicle transfers, I should be able to follow the general direction." Ryan met Ilya's eyes directly, alpha to alpha. "I'll find him, Your Highness. That's a promise."

The absolute conviction in Ryan's voice was the first spark of real hope Ilya had felt since learning of Shane's abduction.

"Then let's move," Ilya said. "Scott, coordinate with Cassimir. I want real-time updates on the warehouse raid and any new intelligence. Price, lead the way."

Ryan's transformation was instantaneous and breathtaking. One moment he was human, the next he'd dropped to all fours as bones restructured, muscle mass redistributed, and thick dark fur rippled across his skin. The werewolf that emerged was enormous – easily the size of a small car, with blood red eyes that glowed with predatory intelligence.

He lifted his muzzle, scenting the air, then took off at a loping run that covered ground with deceptive speed.

Scott shifted as well, his transformation equally fluid, becoming a massive gray-brown wolf with Scott's intelligent eyes. He glanced at Ilya once with a harsh growl and a jerk of his head, a clear invitation to follow, then raced after Ryan.

Ilya didn't bother with the SUV. He simply ran.

Six hundred years of vampiric speed meant he could keep pace with the werewolves, his supernatural velocity turning the city into a blur around him. He followed the massive shapes of Ryan and Scott as they wove through traffic, leapt over obstacles, and navigated the urban landscape with the efficiency of born predators.

The chase led them deeper into the industrial district, past abandoned factories and shuttered warehouses, through neighborhoods that looked forgotten by prosperity and progress. Ryan's path wavered occasionally, picking up the scent, losing it to vehicle exhaust, and finding it again on a street corner or unpaved road.

They'd covered over sixty miles when Ryan suddenly stopped, his massive head swinging toward a particular warehouse building.

The structure was five stories of red brick and broken windows, a remnant of the city's manufacturing past. Rusted fire escapes clung to its walls like metal vines, and most of the ground-floor entrances had been boarded over or sealed with corrugated metal.

Ryan shifted back to human form, completely naked, his furred chest heaving slightly despite his alpha stamina. "The scent strengthens here. The Consort was definitely in this building, probably within the last couple of hours. But..." He frowned, scenting again. "It's wrong."

"Wrong how?" Ilya demanded, his predatory instincts screaming alert.

"Too easy to find. Too obvious. The scent trail leads directly to the front entrance like they wanted us to follow it." Ryan's red eyes narrowed. "This could be a trap, Your Highness."

"Or it could be where they're holding him," Ilya countered, already moving toward the building.

Scott transformed back to human, his expression worried. "Ilya, wait. Ryan's right, this feels off. We should scout it properly, bring in tactical support —"

"There's no time!" Ilya's voice cracked with frustrated fury. "Every second we waste planning is another second Shane is in their hands. If he's in there, I'm getting him out. Now."

"Then at least let me go in first," Ryan said, his voice calm but firm. "I'm harder to kill than you are, and I can scent ambushes before they trigger. You charging in blind helps no one, especially not the Consort."

The logic penetrated through Ilya's desperation. He forced himself to breathe, to think tactically rather than emotionally.

"Fine," he said, through gritted teeth. "You scout. And if you find him, you signal immediately."

"Deal." Ryan shifted back to wolf form and approached the warehouse with predatory caution, his movements silent despite his size.

Ilya watched, every muscle tensed, as the alpha werewolf disappeared through a partially boarded entrance. Seconds ticked by like hours. Scott stood beside Ilya, equally tense, his

own wolf probably demanding they follow Ryan into whatever danger waited inside.

A howl split the air – sharp and urgent.

Ryan came bursting back through the entrance at full speed, and Ilya saw what was chasing him:

Nothing.

The werewolf wasn't fleeing an enemy. He was fleeing the building itself.

"Run!" Scott barked, grabbing Ilya and carrying them away from the warehouse just as the building erupted.

Not an explosion, but worse. Some kind of chemical dispersal system triggered throughout the structure, flooding it with the same toxic compound that had taken down Marlow and the guards. Ilya caught just a whiff of the acidic scent as they retreated, feeling his body instantly recoil from the poison designed specifically to destroy his supernatural physiology.

They made it a hundred yards before the dispersal stopped, the warehouse now billowing with toxic fumes that would incapacitate any vampire or werewolf who entered.

Ryan shifted back to human, coughing despite his alpha constitution. "Fucking booby trapped. The whole building was rigged with that chemical weapon. If I'd gone deeper..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

"They knew we'd track here," Scott said, his expression grim. "They wanted to take out the search teams. This whole thing was bait."

Ilya stared at the poisoned building, rage and despair warring in his chest. Shane's scent had been there, which meant he'd been there recently. But now the building was inaccessible, and even if they could somehow safely enter, Shane was clearly already gone.

The Ashen Cross was fucking *playing* with them. Leading them on false trails while Shane remained hidden somewhere else.

His phone buzzed. Harris's name on the screen.

"Report," Ilya said, his voice emerging as a growl.

"Your Highness, Hayden's scouts have spotted something. Warehouse beyond the eastern sector, eighty-three miles outside the city limits, the coordinates we got from the Ashen Cross manifesto posting. There's fresh activity. Vehicles arriving and departing within the past twenty minutes. He's requesting permission to investigate."

"Do it."

Fresh activity. Twenty minutes. Right when Ilya had been chasing a false trail to a booby-trapped building.

"And get tactical teams to that location now. If Shane's there, I want an overwhelming force ready to extract him and capture everyone there."

"Cassimir is already coordinating with your military commanders, Your Highness."

Ilya looked at Ryan and Scott. "Can you track them?"

Ryan's expression was determined despite the fatigue in his eyes. "Give me the coordinates. If the Consort's scent is anywhere near there, I'll find it."

Ilya showed Ryan and Scott the screen on his phone, the tactical map highlighting the location.

"Then let's move. And this time, we're not going in alone."

He called Cassimir. "Track my location on my phone. Send in the teams to follow us. We're going dark."

"Yes, Your Highness."

They ran through the city streets with renewed purpose, Ilya's mind calculating tactics and contingencies.

Arrogance. They thought themselves safe enough to broadcast their location, confident they could hold their position against any response.

They were about to learn what happened when you threatened House Rozanov.

Hold on, Shane, Ilya thought as the city blurred around him. I'm coming. Just hold on a little longer.

The warehouse loomed against the early night sky like a monument to industrial decay, three stories of corrugated metal and concrete, surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with rusted barbed wire. Sodium lights flickered in the parking lot, casting sickly yellow pools across cracked pavement where several vans sat in haphazard arrangement, their engines still ticking with recent heat.

Ilya crouched on the rooftop of an adjacent building, his enhanced vision tracking movement through the warehouse's grimy windows. Beside him, Scott and Ryan maintained similar positions, both werewolves scenting the air with focused intensity.

"Four guards on the perimeter," Ilya murmured, counting the figures making lazy circuits around the building's exterior. "Sloppy. They're not expecting an immediate response."

"Fucking amateurs," Scott growled, his eyes flashing red.

Ryan's nostrils flared as he tested the wind. "The Consort's scent is definitely here. Fresh. Within the last thirty minutes." The alpha's voice dropped lower, something dangerous

entering his tone. "And blood. I smell his blood."

The words hit Ilya like a physical blow. His vision narrowed to a single point of red-tinged focus, the careful tactical assessment he'd been maintaining fracturing under the weight of that simple statement.

Shane's blood.

They'd hurt him. Not just taken him, not just frightened him, but actively caused him pain, drew his blood, and violated the person Ilya had sworn to protect.

The ice in his chest didn't just crack, it shattered completely.

"Your Highness." Cassimir's voice crackled through his phone, urgent and steady. "Tactical teams are ten minutes out. Recommend you wait for support before —"

"No." Ilya's voice emerged flat and cold, stripped of everything except lethal intent. "They've hurt him. I'm not waiting another ten seconds, let alone ten minutes."

"Ilya, please —" Scott started, but Ilya tossed his phone to the werewolf, feeling the monster inside demanding to be let loose.

Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! The monster in him screamed in his mind. *Our Consort!*

The monster that he'd spent six hundred years learning to control, the ancient predator that existed beneath every layer of his civilized behavior, surged forward with overwhelming force. His rational mind, the part that calculated and strategized and maintained diplomatic facades, simply went silent. What rose up to replace it was pure, focused violence.

The rational part of Ilya's mind was still there, somewhere deep beneath the monster's control, but it was drowned out by centuries of predatory instinct. He could feel his body changing, responding to the overwhelming rage and fear and possessive violence. His skin grew even paler, taking on that corpse-like quality that truly old vampires acquired when they stopped pretending to be human. His fangs extended fully, longer than they ever grew during feeding, designed for combat rather than sustenance.

His fingernails had elongated into claws, black and wickedly sharp, designed to tear through flesh and bone with equal ease. Ancient weapons that had served vampires since before civilization, when they were still simple apex predators ruling through fear and violence.

His eyes. He couldn't see them, but he knew they'd gone completely black, pupils and irises consumed by darkness that reflected no light, no humanity. Just the endless void of a predator that had existed for centuries and would exist for centuries more.

"Jesus Christ," Scott said, under his breath. "Your eyes are black."

Ilya turned and looked at him, scenting him: *Werewolf. Friend. Ally. Loyal.*

Brother.

He scented Price and growled his approval. The monster recognized the tracker: *Werewolf. Ally. Not brother but pack.*

“Find Consort,” Ilya said, his voice ancient and guttural.

He dropped from the rooftop three stories down, landing in a crouch that should have shattered concrete but instead made almost no sound. Six hundred years of combat experience guided his movements as he flowed across the open ground like liquid death, a shadow given predatory purpose.

Kill. The word echoed through Ilya's mind like a drumbeat. *Kill him. Tear him apart.*

The first perimeter guard died without ever knowing Ilya was there, one moment standing bored watch, the next crumpling as Ilya's hand crushed his windpipe. No fangs, no dramatic violence. Just efficient, silent termination.

The second guard managed to register movement before Ilya's fist connected with his temple hard enough to cave in bone. The body dropped like a puppet with cut strings.

Behind him, Ilya *sensed* rather than saw Scott and Ryan taking down the remaining perimeter guards with similar brutal efficiency. The werewolves had abandoned any pretense of waiting for tactical support, following Ilya's lead into immediate action.

The warehouse's side entrance had been sealed with a padlock that Ilya ripped free with one hand, metal shrieking as it gave way. He yanked the door open and stepped into darkness that his vampiric vision rendered in perfect grayscale clarity.

The interior was exactly what he'd expected: open floor plan, old manufacturing equipment pushed against walls, steel support pillars marching in regular intervals toward the back of the space. And there, in the center of the warehouse floor beneath a single hanging work light —

Consort.

Ilya roared with the monster, surfacing for a moment as he stared at his mate. *Protect him!*

Shane was naked, his body exposed under the harsh lights in a violation that went beyond physical harm. He was bound to some kind of medical contraption, a tilted board angled to keep his heart positioned above the rest of his body, ensuring optimal blood flow while preventing total circulatory collapse. His arms were spread wide, wrists secured with leather restraints to extended supports. His ankles were tied, legs slightly apart for stability.

Medical equipment surrounded him like instruments of torture dressed up as science. Heart monitor leads attached to his chest. An oxygen saturation clip on one finger. Blood pressure cuff around his upper arm. And worst of all — THE needles. Large-gauge IV needles inserted into the crook of each elbow, connected to tubing that ran to medical collection pouches hanging on stands beside the contraption.

The pouches were nearly full. Dark red blood, Shane's precious *Sanguis Resonans*, filled both bags, collected with clinical efficiency.

They weren't just draining him. They were farming him. Keeping him alive at the minimum threshold necessary to continue producing the blood they wanted, treating him like livestock rather than a person.

Shane's head lolled to one side, his dark hair matted with sweat. His skin was ashen, lips bloodless, chest rising and falling in shallow breaths that the monitors tracked with steady beeping. Dried tear tracks marked his face, evidence of crying that had exhausted itself into unconsciousness or near-unconsciousness.

A vampire stood beside the contraption, tall, male, AND wearing tactical gear and a balaclava that obscured his features. He was adjusting one of the IV lines, checking the flow rate with professional detachment, like Shane was nothing more than an experiment to be optimized.

"-- regeneration rate is remarkable," the vampire was speaking into a recording device. "We've extracted approximately two pints over the past ninety minutes and the subject's vitals remain stable. Recommend a feeding tube, high in protein and iron. Heart rate elevated but within acceptable parameters. Blood pressure holding at --"

The monster moved.

He crossed the warehouse floor faster than thought, pure vampiric speed turning him into something beyond human perception. His hand locked around the man's throat before the terrorist could even register danger, lifting him off the ground with strength that could have snapped his spine like kindling.

"How many?" Ilya's voice emerged as something barely recognizable, cold and deadly and absolutely devoid of mercy.

The man's eyes went wide behind the balaclava, hands scrabbling uselessly at Ilya's iron grip. "I – I don't –"

Ilya slammed him against the nearest support pillar hard enough to crack bones. "How many!"

"F-four!" The man gasped, his face purpling. "Four others! Upstairs! Second floor office! Please –"

Ilya grabbed his hair, jerked back his head, and drove his fangs into the vampire's throat, tearing his flesh open and drinking his vampire blood. It was sweet, meatier than human blood. He pressed his fangs and teeth against the muscle, tearing through it for *more*. He slurped noisily, humming in pleasure at the feast. He dropped the body and turned to where Scott and Ryan had entered behind him.

"Shane!" Scott ran to him, looking frantically at everything that was connected to him. "Jesus, what the fuck is all this –"

“Fuck!” Ryan hissed, staring at Ilya in horror. “Ilya, did you just drink vampire blood!”

The monster smirked, blood covering his face and neck. Vampires didn’t drink vampire blood, but the *monster* wanted to indulge.

How did Ilya push the monster back down when every instinct screamed for blood and violence and absolute dominance? How did he find his humanity when it felt so distant, so irrelevant compared to the primal need to protect what was his?

Shane. Think about Shane. Help Shane.

The rational part of Ilya's mind, that tiny voice that refused to be completely silenced, latched onto that thought. Shane wouldn't want this. Shane would be horrified if he woke up and saw Ilya like this, more monster than man, lost to bloodlust and rage.

Shane needed *Ilya*. Not the monster.

"Clear the rest," Ilya ordered, his voice cold and controlled despite the maelstrom raging inside him. "Alive for interrogation."

Ryan flowed past him toward the interior staircase without question, already shifting mid-motion.

The Consort!

Ilya moved to Shane, pushing Scott aside.

“Cassimir!”

“Fuck, I need a phone –” Scott ran to the bloodless vampire, patting through his clothes, looking for a phone. He stood up, tapping in a phone number.

“Cassimir! It’s Scott! Send tactical and paramedics now to the warehouse! Full medical team for Shane. Bring transfusion equipment and be prepared for severe blood loss. The Consort is near death.”

"Deploying the team in your zone. ETA three minutes."

“Fuck! Something’s wrong with Ilya. He’s...he’s feral!”

Shane! I need to check on Shane!

The monster snarled, resisting, but Ilya pushed. He focused on Shane's face, on his laugh, on the way he'd looked at Ilya with such trust and affection. On their secret codes and shared moments and the future they were supposed to have together. On everything that made Shane precious and irreplaceable and worth fighting for.

Including fighting the monster inside himself.

Ilya stood there, his body still transformed, still caught between human and monster. His skin remained corpse-pale. His fangs stayed fully extended. His eyes were still that bottomless black, and his hands still bore those wicked claws. But the violent haze was receding slowly.

First priority: stop the draining.

Ilya's hands steadied as he reached for the IV line in Shane's right arm. He clamped the tubing to stop flow, then carefully withdrew the needle, his battlefield experience with wounds making the action smooth despite his emotional state. He licked the wound, using his saliva to close it. Shane's skin was cold and clammy beneath his touch.

Shane didn't react. Didn't flinch, didn't open his eyes, gave no indication he'd felt anything.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice rough as he moved to the second IV line. "Shane, can you hear me? I'm here. I've got you."

No response.

Ilya repeated the process with the left arm, clamp, withdraw, and lick. Shane's blood seeped sluggishly from the puncture wound, his body too depleted to clot properly.

"Clothes!"

Scott looked around the warehouse space, finally finding a drop cloth in the corner. He ran back towards Ilya, throwing it to him.

Ilya covered Shane's naked body, tucking the dirty fabric over his body, giving him as much dignity as he could.

"Wake up, Shane. Please wake up."

"Ilya! The team is here," Scott said, keeping his distance as he stood watch.

One of the tactical team medics rushed into the warehouse with a first aid kit. Ilya covered Shane with his body, hissing at him.

"Fuck's sake, Ilya, he needs to check on Shane. Back off!" Scott yelled at him.

Ilya sniffed at the vampire, recognizing that his scent was familiar. He was regaining control, piece by piece. The blackness in his eyes started to recede, just slightly, allowing hints of his normal icy blue to show through the darkness. His breathing, which had been rapid and aggressive, began to slow.

"Safe," he told the monster, forcing the word past fangs that didn't want to retract. "Shane safe. We made him safe. Can let go now."

Ours!

"Ours," Ilya said again, but this time the word was softer, less aggressive. More...protective. Caring. The monster's possessiveness transformed into something that started to resemble

actual human emotion again.

He wanted to touch Shane, to reassure himself that his Consort was truly alive, but his hands were still tipped with those black claws. Too dangerous. He could hurt Shane accidentally, could cut him with claws meant for violence.

Need. You need control. Help?

The request surprised him. The monster rarely asked for help, rarely admitted any kind of weakness. But Shane needed Ilya to be himself again. Not the monster. Not the ancient predator. The person Shane trusted. The person Shane loved.

Love? Love monster?

Ilya had no idea if Shane loved him – them – but he hoped it was true.

The medic, clearly trained in dealing with vampires in crisis, spoke in a calm, measured tone. "Your Highness, focus on your breathing. Deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Your Consort needs you. He needs you, Your Highness. Come back for him."

Come back for him.

Ilya followed the instruction, forcing himself to breathe deeply despite how unnecessary it was for his vampiric body. But the mechanical action helped, gave him something to focus on besides the violence still singing through his veins. In through his nose. Out through his mouth. Slower. More controlled.

The monster quieted, giving over more control to Ilya.

His skin began to regain some of its normal coloring, though it would never be truly warm, never be human. But at least it was moving away from that white corpse-like pallor. His fangs were more difficult, they wanted to stay extended, ready for any threat. But gradually, with conscious effort, he forced them to retract, shortening back to their normal length.

He could feel the blackness receding, could feel his normal vision returning as the predatory focus loosened its grip. The world became less about threats and prey and more about...everything else. Color. Detail.

The claws lingered, resistant to retracting, ancient weapons that had served Ilya's kind since before civilization. But he concentrated, imagined his normal hands, human-appearing hands that Shane wouldn't fear. Slowly, painfully slowly, the claws receded, his fingernails returning to their normal length and color.

Ilya looked at his hands, now appearing fully human again if you didn't look too closely at the coldness of his skin or the strength in his fingers. Not dangerous anymore. Safe to touch Shane.

"Your Highness, please, let me help him. I won't hurt him."

Ilya narrowed his eyes, moving off of Shane's prone body, and beckoned him closer. He watched everything the medic did, quick and effective as he looked at the monitors, applying gauze and medical tape to the wounds.

Next: the restraints.

The leather straps around Shane's wrists were industrial grade, designed to prevent any possibility of escape. Ilya ripped through them with bare hands, the material tearing like paper under his vampiric strength. Shane's arms dropped limply to his sides, no strength left to control the movement.

Ilya caught them carefully, lowering them to rest against Shane's body rather than letting them fall. The red friction burns on Shane's wrists where he'd obviously struggled against his bonds made Ilya's vision go red for a moment before he forced the rage down.

Later. Rage later. Punish later!

The ankle restraints came off just as easily, and then Shane was free but still unconscious, still exposed under the harsh light, and still in a position of terrible vulnerability.

The medic continued to check Shane's vitals. He listened to his radio. "Ambulance ETA is five minutes, Your Highness."

"Shane," Ilya said, cradling Shane's face between his palms, careful not to hurt him with his long claws. "Come on, love. Open your eyes. Let me see those eyes."

Shane's eyelids fluttered. It was the smallest movement, but it sent relief flooding through Ilya's chest so intensely it felt like drowning.

"That's it," Ilya encouraged, one thumb stroking carefully across Shane's cheek. Now that he could focus, he saw the bruises on his face where he had been struck. "Come back to me. I'm here. You're safe now."

Shane's eyes opened slowly, the movement clearly taking enormous effort. His pupils were dilated, unfocused, and struggling to track. When his gaze finally found Ilya's face, there was a moment of blank confusion before recognition flickered through the haze.

"*Lya?*" The name came out barely audible, more breath than sound.

"Yes. I'm here." Ilya kept his voice low and soothing, trying to project calm he didn't feel. "You're safe. I found you."

Shane's eyes drifted closed again, then forced themselves open with visible effort. Fresh tears gathered at the corners, spilling down his temples to mix with the dried tracks already there.

"You didn't come," Shane whispered, the words slurred and confused. "Waited...you didn't come."

The accusation, however unfounded, however much a product of trauma and blood loss, hit Ilya like a knife between the ribs.

"I came as fast as I could," Ilya said, his voice breaking despite his best efforts. "The moment I knew you were taken, I mobilized everything. Every resource, every person. I've been searching for you from the second I found out. I never stopped, Shane. Not for a moment."

"He said..." Shane's unfocused eyes tried to find Ilya's face again. "Said you wouldn't. That you didn't care. Just...just politics. Tribute Consort. Not real."

"He lied. They lied." Ilya leaned closer, making sure Shane could see him clearly despite his compromised vision. "Shane, listen to me. Everything between us is real. You are real. What I feel for you is the most real thing I've experienced in six hundred years. I love you. Do you understand?"

"...love you..."

And then Shane's eyes were already drifting again, consciousness slipping away like water through cupped hands.

"Cold," Shane mumbled, the words emerging without awareness. "So cold. Dying."

"Shane, please let me help you. I can —"

"Don't Turn me," Shane said, his voice fading.

"Please, Shane!"

No response. Shane's face had gone slack, consciousness fleeing entirely.

Ilya pressed two fingers to Shane's throat, feeling for his pulse. It was there, slow and thready, but there. His heart was still beating, still fighting, even if Shane himself had stopped being aware of the battle.

"Where are the fucking paramedics?"

"Here!" A team of four burst through the entrance at a run, hauling equipment cases and a gurney. "Your Highness, we're here!"

They swarmed the contraption with professional efficiency, assessing Shane's condition with rapid-fire questions as the medic answered.

"Severe blood loss, approximately two pints extracted. He was talking and just lost consciousness. Pulse is thready, breathing shallow. IV sites bandaged but may need additional attention."

The lead paramedic, a woman in her forties with competent hands and calm eyes, began attaching new monitoring equipment while her team prepared the gurney.

"Blood pressure is dangerously low. Heart rate elevated. He's in hypovolemic shock. We need to get fluids into him immediately and transport to the hospital for transfusion."

Ilya moved back to give them room to work, his hands clenching into fists as he watched them start an IV line in Shane's hand, pushing fluids, transferring him carefully from the contraption to the gurney.

Shane looked impossibly small on the stretcher, his body swallowed by the clean white sheets they'd wrapped around him. His face was colorless, lips bloodless, looking more like a corpse than a living person.

"He needs blood," the paramedic said as they prepared to move. "His type is AB-positive, yes?"

"Yes." Ilya's mind raced through logistics. "His mother, Yuna Hollander, has the same blood type. She's at a secure location with her husband. Vasily can coordinate bringing her to the hospital. She'd want to help. She'd give him anything."

"We'll arrange it. But we need to move now, Your Highness. Every minute counts."

They lifted the gurney, beginning the careful navigation toward the exit. Ilya moved with them, unwilling to be separated from Shane for even a moment.

"I'm riding with him," Ilya said, his tone making it clear this was not negotiable.

"Of course, Your Highness."

As they emerged from the warehouse into the cool evening air, Ilya saw the full scope of the response his father had mobilized. Dozens of vehicles surrounded the building – tactical units, police, intelligence operatives, medical personnel, all coordinated into an overwhelming show of force.

And standing near the command vehicle, watching with ancient amber eyes that reflected both relief and barely controlled fury, was King Aurelion.

Their gazes met across the chaos. Ilya saw the question in his father's expression, saw the terrible fear that maybe they'd been too late. He ran towards them.

"Alive," Ilya said, his voice rough. "Barely. But alive."

Aurelion's shoulders dropped slightly, relief penetrating even his regal composure. He nodded once, sharp and acknowledging, then turned to begin coordinating whatever support was needed.

"Go with him. I am right behind you."

The paramedics loaded Shane into the ambulance with practiced efficiency. Ilya climbed in behind them, taking the small fold-down seat near Shane's head as the medical team continued their work.

"Starting a second IV line for additional fluid volume," one paramedic announced. "Oxygen saturation is low, increasing oxygen flow."

"Blood pressure still dropping. We need to move."

The ambulance lurched into motion, sirens wailing as it accelerated through the city streets. Inside, the paramedics worked with controlled urgency, adjusting medications, monitoring vitals, doing everything possible to stabilize Shane's failing systems.

Ilya reached out and took Shane's hand, the one not occupied with an IV line, lacing their fingers together carefully. His hand was so cold.

"Don't give up," Ilya whispered, leaning close to Shane's ear. "Please, Shane. Don't give up. Your parents need you. Your friends need you. I need you. I love you so much. More than I knew I could love anyone. You have to fight. You have to stay with me."

Shane's fingers didn't squeeze back. Didn't move at all. He lay utterly still except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, his body fighting a battle his consciousness wasn't present for.

"Heart rate dropping. Systolic pressure under 80. He's crashing."

"How far to the hospital?" Ilya demanded.

"Four minutes."

Four minutes. An eternity. A lifetime. The distance between Shane surviving and dying, measured in seconds that felt like centuries.

"Stay with me," Ilya repeated, his voice breaking completely now that there was no one to hear it but Shane and medical professionals too busy to care about a prince's emotional collapse. "Please stay with me. I just found you. I just figured out what you mean to me. You can't leave now. I won't let you leave."

The monitors continued their steady beeping, tracking a life that hung by threads getting thinner with each passing moment.

"Almost there," the paramedic said, though whether she was reassuring Ilya or herself was unclear. "Just hold on, Consort Hollander. We're almost there."

The ambulance screamed through the city, racing against time and blood loss and the terrifying possibility that Ilya had found Shane only to watch him slip away.

Ilya held Shane's hand and prayed to gods he'd stopped believing in six hundred years ago.

Please. Please let him live. Take anything else. Take everything else. Just let him live.

The ambulance lurched to a stop outside the royal medical facility's emergency entrance. Doors burst open. Medical staff swarmed the gurney as it was extracted, wheeling Shane toward the trauma bay at a run.

"Human male, 26, severe blood loss from forced extraction, hypovolemic shock, pressure dropping, heart rate unstable —"

The medical terminology washed over Ilya as he followed the gurney through automatic doors, down corridors that blurred together, into a trauma bay where even more personnel waited with equipment and desperate determination.

"Your Highness, you need to wait outside," a nurse said gently but firmly, positioning herself between Ilya and the trauma bay entrance.

"No." Ilya's voice emerged as a growl. "I am not leaving him."

"Your Highness, please. Let us work. We'll update you the moment we can, but right now you being in there will only slow us down. Let us save him."

The logic penetrated through Ilya's desperation. He wanted to refuse, wanted to stand beside Shane and demand the universe not dare take him. But the nurse was right, his presence would interfere with the medical team's ability to work.

"Save him," Ilya said, the words emerging as both plea and command. "Whatever it takes. Whatever resources you need. Just save him."

"We will," the nurse promised. "I swear we will do everything possible."

The trauma bay doors swung closed, blocking Ilya's view of Shane being swarmed by medical personnel, monitors beeping urgently, voices calling out vital signs and medications in rapid succession.

Ilya stood in the hallway, covered in blood, his hands shaking with suppressed violence and terror and helplessness. Six hundred years of life. Countless battles fought and won. Kingdoms conquered. Enemies destroyed.

And he'd never felt more powerless than in this moment, standing outside a trauma bay, praying that the person he loved would survive long enough to hear him say it properly.

Behind him, footsteps approached. Ilya turned to see Gregor, the Seneschal's professional mask firmly in place despite the concern in his eyes.

"His Majesty is on his way," Gregor said, quietly. "Vasily has just returned with Consort Hollander's parents. Mrs. Hollander is already en route to the hospital to donate blood. The tactical teams have secured all four terrorists from the warehouse, they're being transferred to the black site for interrogation. We have a total of forty-seven vampires in custody. Director Cassimir is coordinating the broader response to ensure every other *Sanguis Resonans* carrier is protected."

Ilya absorbed the information mechanically, his attention still fixed on the closed trauma bay doors.

King Aurelion entered, walking towards him, his amber eyes bright with fury.

"Father —"

"Why haven't you Turned him yet!"

Chapter 13: Recovery

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: This is the Shane POV of his abduction. It's not graphic, but there is violence, assault, and there is a lot of psychological terror. I'll update the tags just to be on the safe side. This section was supposed to be spread over two chapters, but I didn't want readers to wait to read about Shane's rescue and recovery.

Author's Note 2: Chapter 14 is done and I'm working through editing. Then there is one chapter remaining.

Author's Note 3: Thank you for your kudos and lovely comments! I am still so behind responding, but I will get to them (probably after I finish writing this fic HEHE)!

Shane settled into the middle seat of the convoy vehicle, the leather cool against his back through his suit jacket and dress shirt. Captain Marlow sat to his right, Harris to his left, with two guards positioned across from them. The vehicle smelled of a new car and faintly of coffee from the to-go cup one of the guards clutched.

He should have felt tired: three hours in the pediatric ward instead of the scheduled ninety minutes; three hours of sitting with sick children, listening to their stories, playing games, holding their hands, laughing together, and trying to make each one feel seen and valued rather than just another stop on a royal publicity tour.

Instead, Shane felt energized in a way he hadn't expected. Fulfilled.

"That was incredible," Harris said, with warmth in his voice as he checked something on his tablet. "The hospital administrator already sent preliminary reports. She said the children were talking about you non-stop, and the staff...Shane, they said you were the most genuine royal visitor they've ever hosted."

Heat crept up Shane's neck. He ducked his head, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I just listened to them. Asked about their interests, what they liked, what made them happy. It wasn't hard."

"It's harder than you think," Captain Marlow said from his other side. The security chief's normally stern expression had softened into something almost paternal. "Most dignitaries breeze through, shake a few hands, take photos, and leave. You sat with every single child and their families."

Shane thought about Emma, seven years old with leukemia, who'd shown him her collection of pressed flowers with such pride. About Thomas, struggling with his anger, who laughed

with Shane while playing Exploding Kittens. About Kyra and how she lit up with the biggest smile when Shane used his simple ASL to greet her.

"They're just kids," Shane said, softly. "They're scared and sick and stuck in hospital beds. If I can make even one of them smile for a few minutes, that's the least I could do."

Harris squeezed his shoulder briefly. "His Highness is going to be so proud of you. And the foundation board is already discussing ways to make St. Catherine's one of your regular stops, if you're interested."

Shane's heart did a small flip at the mention of Ilya being proud, but he tried to focus on the rest of Harris's words. "Regular stops?"

"If you want," Harris clarified quickly. "No pressure. But after today's response, the hospital would love to have you back to visit with more children. And the foundation board mentioned they'd welcome you taking a more active role in selecting initiatives, maybe even championing specific programs that interest you."

Shane sat up straighter, his mind already racing with possibilities. "Really? I could actually help shape the foundation's direction?"

"Within reason, of course," Harris said, with a smile. "As Tribute Consort and the namesake of Prince Ilya's mother? Your voice would carry significant weight. Especially after today, proving you have genuine passion for the work."

The convoy vehicle merged smoothly into traffic, the late afternoon sunlight slanting through the tinted windows. Shane watched the city slide past, his thoughts already spinning ahead to future visits, potential programs, ways he could make a real difference.

"I'd like that," he said, trying to keep the eagerness from his voice and failing completely. "I'd like to be more involved. Maybe focus on pediatric care? Or programs for kids with chronic illnesses? Something where I could actually build relationships, not just show up for photo ops."

"That's perfect," Harris said, making notes on his tablet. "The board will love it. And honestly, Shane, you're a natural at this. I've been coordinating foundation events for seven years, and I've never seen anyone connect with patients the way you did today."

Shane felt his chest swell with something that felt dangerously close to pride. Real pride, earned pride. This was different. This was him actually doing something meaningful.

"Six weeks until the bonding ceremony," Marlow said, his tone turning teasing. "And here you are, already taking on royal duties. His Highness better watch out, or you'll outshine him."

Shane laughed, the sound bright in the comfortable interior of the vehicle. "I don't think that's possible. Ilya's been doing this for six hundred years. I'm just the guy who talks to kids about video games and unicorns."

"Nothing against His Highness, but that's exactly what makes you effective," Harris countered. "You don't approach it like a duty. You approach it like you actually care."

"Yeah, I do care."

The words came out more forcefully than Shane intended, but they were true. He thought about Ilya's mother, the woman who was King Aurelion's Consort, Irina Rozanov, who had wanted to dedicate her immortal life to helping humans before her mortal life was taken away so violently.

Shane would never meet her, but he felt connected to her somehow. Through Ilya's stories, through the foundation's work, through the legacy she'd left behind that Shane was now part of.

"I hope Ilya's proud of me," Shane said quietly, almost to himself. "I want to honor his mother's legacy. I want to do right by what he built."

"He's going to be unbearably proud," Marlow said with certainty. "Probably tell everyone he knows to brag about you. Vasily will never hear the end of it."

God, Shane couldn't wait to see him tonight.

The bonding ceremony was six weeks away.

Two months ago, that thought would have terrified him. The weight of expectation, the permanence, the knowledge that his life was being decided by other people for political purposes.

Now? Now Shane found himself counting down the days with something that felt uncomfortably close to anticipation.

He thought about Ilya reading to him in the library, his voice low and melodic as he brought centuries-old poetry to life. About their breakfasts together, stealing quiet moments before the demands of the day pulled them in different directions. About the secret code they'd developed, the foot nudges under tables.

Shane found himself tapping his foot three times against the floor of the vehicle, the gesture unconscious and utterly pointless since Ilya was nowhere near him.

"Excited to see His Highness?" Harris asked, clearly having caught the movement.

Shane didn't bother denying it. "We're having dinner tonight. Sometimes we just read in the library, or watch movies, or talk about nothing important. It's nice."

"That's good," Marlow said, his expression approving. "The bonding ceremony will be easier if you two actually *like* each other."

Shane huffed a laugh. "We *definitely* like each other."

More than like, if Shane was being honest with himself. But that felt too big, too real, to say out loud in the back of a convoy vehicle surrounded by staff and guards.

The feelings were there though, growing stronger every day. The way his heart did a stupid little flip when Ilya smiled at him. The warmth that spread through his chest when Ilya looked at him with those ice-blue eyes that somehow managed to be both ancient and young at the same time. The bone-deep contentment he felt curled up in Ilya's arms, reading together in comfortable silence.

Six weeks.

He could do this. Not just the bonding ceremony, but everything that came with it. The public appearances, the foundation work, the expectations of being Ilya's Consort. He could make a difference. He could honor Irina's legacy. He could be someone Ilya was genuinely proud to call his.

The convoy turned onto the main boulevard leading back toward the palace district, the late afternoon sun painting everything in warm golden tones. Shane watched the city pass by, this city that was becoming his home, and felt something settle in his chest.

Purpose. That's what it was. He'd found purpose.

"Thank you," Shane said suddenly, looking at Harris. "For today. For believing I could do this, for giving me the chance to actually help instead of just showing up for photos."

Harris smiled. "Thank you for caring enough to make it matter. The foundation is lucky to have you, Shane. And if I may speak candidly, so is His Highness."

Shane felt heat flood his face, but he couldn't stop the smile that spread across his features. Yeah. Maybe they were lucky to have each other.

He'd tell Ilya everything about today. About Lily and Donald, about drawing and dinosaurs. About the programs he wanted to champion; and how he'd finally found something that felt like his own contribution to this strange new life he'd been thrust into.

And Ilya would listen with that focused attention he gave when Shane talked about things that mattered, his ice-blue eyes warm with interest and pride and something else that Shane was only just beginning to recognize as affection that ran deeper than their arrangement required.

Three foot taps. *I'm thinking about you.*

The convoy had barely traveled three blocks from St. Catherine's when Shane noticed the traffic beginning to slow.

Not unusual for this time of day. The city was always busy in the late afternoon, people heading home from work, running errands, living their ordinary lives. Shane watched pedestrians on the sidewalks, couples walking hand in hand, a woman with a stroller, a man on his phone.

Normal. Everything was normal.

Except Captain Marlow's posture had changed.

Shane couldn't have said exactly what was different. The security chief sat in the same position, hands resting casually in his lap, his expression neutral. But something in the set of his shoulders, the way his eyes tracked movement outside the vehicle, the subtle shift forward in his seat.

Marlow was on alert.

Shane's stomach did a small, uneasy flip. "What is it? Did something happen?"

Two civilian vehicles converged on the intersection ahead. A dark blue sedan and a van, both moving with deliberate precision that felt wrong somehow. Not the casual meandering of normal traffic, but something more purposeful.

The convoy slowed further, forced to navigate around the blocking vehicles.

"Captain?" Harris said quietly, having noticed the same thing Shane had.

Marlow's hand moved to his earpiece, his voice low and controlled. "Possible situation developing. Lead vehicle, confirm visual on blocking pattern at intersection ahead."

Static crackled. A voice responded, tense. "Confirmed. Two vehicles, non-standard positioning. Running plates now."

Shane's heart began to beat faster. His mouth went dry.

This was fine. This was probably nothing. The city was full of bad drivers, people who didn't pay attention, vehicles that broke down at inconvenient moments. There was no reason to think anything was actually wrong.

Marlow pressed his earpiece again, speaking with quiet urgency. "Palace security, this is Captain Marlow. Activating emergency beacon. Possible threat to Consort Hollander. Current position transmitted. Requesting immediate backup and tactical response."

The words cut through Shane's rationalizations like a knife through paper.

Emergency beacon. Threat. Tactical response.

"Shane. Harris." Marlow's voice was still controlled, but there was steel underneath now. "Stay inside this vehicle. Lock the doors the moment I exit. Do not come out for any reason. Do you understand? No matter what you see, no matter what happens, you stay inside until palace security arrives."

"What's going on?" Shane's voice came out smaller than he intended, fear creeping up his throat.

"Probably nothing," Marlow said, but his hand was already on the door handle, his body coiled and ready. "But if it's something, you need to stay protected. The vehicle is armored. You're safe inside."

He opened the door and stepped out into the intersection, his movements smooth and professional despite the tension radiating from every line of his body.

Shane watched through the tinted window as Marlow positioned himself between their vehicle and the blocking cars. The two guards from their vehicle followed, flanking Marlow's position, hands near their concealed weapons.

From the lead vehicle, Shane could see their security detail doing the same, creating a protective formation around the convoy.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Traffic continued to flow around them in confused patterns. Horns honked. A cyclist swerved past, shouting something irritated about blocking the bike lane. Normal city chaos, except for the taut line of Marlow's shoulders and the way the guards' hands hovered near their weapons.

Then the doors of the blocking vehicles opened.

Six figures emerged, moving with synchronized precision that made Shane's blood run cold. They wore tactical gear, sealed helmets, black masks that obscured their faces completely. Professional. Military. Nothing like ordinary civilians caught in traffic.

"Oh fuck," Harris breathed beside Shane. "Shane, get down!"

One of the figures raised something small and metallic. Shane couldn't see what it was from this distance, couldn't identify the device before the figure activated it.

A hissing sound filled the air.

Aerosol. Some kind of spray released from canisters the attackers held, spreading in a white cloud that expanded with terrifying speed.

The guards from the lead vehicle were closest. Shane watched in horror as they stumbled, hands going to their throats, bodies convulsing. They hit the ground within seconds, choking, gasping, completely incapacitated.

The chemical weapon spread on the wind, reaching toward Marlow and the guards from Shane's vehicle.

"No," Shane heard himself say. "No, no, no."

His automatic reaction was to open the door and to help, but Harris grabbed him by the arms, pulling him back.

Marlow lasted longer than the others, fighting to stay upright even as his body betrayed him. He tried to position himself between the attackers and Shane's vehicle even as he fell, his commitment to protecting Shane absolute even in his final conscious moments.

The two guards from Shane's vehicle dropped next, their bodies hitting the pavement with sickening thuds.

He was the target. The realization hit Shane like a physical blow. This wasn't random. This wasn't some opportunistic attack on a royal convoy. They'd used a chemical weapon specifically designed to incapacitate vampires while leaving humans unharmed.

The attackers approached with methodical efficiency, moving past the fallen guards without hesitation. They didn't check to see if anyone was alive, didn't pause to secure the incapacitated vampires. They had one objective, and they moved toward it with single-minded focus.

Shane's vehicle.

He pressed back against his seat, his breath coming in short, panicked gasps. His mind raced through options. Stay in the vehicle. Marlow said to stay in the vehicle. It was armored. They couldn't get in. Palace security was coming. He just had to wait.

One of the attackers raised their rifle and smashed the butt against the window.

The first impact cracked the glass. The second shattered it completely.

So much for armored protection.

Shane scrambled backward against Harris as gloved hands reached through the broken window, unlocking the door from the inside. The door opened. The attackers grabbed him.

"No!" Shane tried to fight, kicking, thrashing, but there were too many of them and they were too strong. They hauled him out of the vehicle, his feet barely touching the ground as they dragged him.

"Shane! Shane!" Harris shouted, grabbing his arm and pulling him back.

One of the attackers moved toward Harris with casual efficiency. Harris tried to put himself between Shane and the attackers, pressing Shane back against the vehicle, using his own body as a shield.

"Please," Shane said, gripping Harris's sleeve and looking at the attackers. "Please, you don't have to do this. Whatever you want, we can talk about it. Please."

"Move away from him, Hollander, and he won't be hurt. But if you don't come forward, we'll kill him."

"This is a bad idea," Harris said, holding his hands out. "You can still walk away. No one has to die. Just walk away and we'll forget this happened."

The attacker leveled his weapon at Harris's head. "Hollander, you have five seconds."

Cold. Professional. The kind of stance that said this person had done this before and wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

The weapon didn't waver.

They would do it. They would shoot Harris without blinking, without remorse, and Shane would have to watch his friend die because of him.

"Okay," Shane shouted, holding up his hands. "Please, don't kill him."

The attacker's hand moved, a simple gesture. Come here. Come voluntarily or watch us kill him.

Harris's fingers dug into Shane's arm, pulling him back. "Don't you fucking dare," Harris said, his voice desperate. "Shane, no."

But Shane could see it in the attacker's stance, in the steady hold of that weapon. They would go through Harris. They would kill him without hesitation. And then they would take Shane anyway.

Harris would die for nothing.

Shane made his decision.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to Harris. "Tell Ilya...I'm sorry."

He pulled free from Harris's grip and stepped forward, hands raised, surrendering himself to save Harris's life.

"No!" Harris lunged for him, grabbing at Shane's shirt, his jacket, anything to pull him back. "No, don't go, Shane, no!"

The attacker who'd held the weapon on Harris moved with brutal efficiency. They swung the rifle, smashing the butt against Harris's head with a sickening crack. Harris went down hard. Blood bloomed across his temple, shocking and red against his pale skin. He hit the ground and didn't move.

"Harris!" Shane screamed, trying to pull away from the hands that grabbed him, fighting with every ounce of strength he had. "No, you said you wouldn't, you said if I came with you, you said..."

They hadn't said anything. Shane had made assumptions based on desperate hope, and now Harris lay bleeding on the pavement because Shane had been stupid enough to believe kidnappers would keep their word.

Strong hands grabbed Shane, lifting him off his feet when he tried to fight toward Harris's fallen body. They dragged him backward toward the waiting vehicle, and Shane fought them every step, kicking, screaming, twisting in their grip.

"Harris! Harris, please, please get up!"

But Harris didn't move. Didn't respond. Just lay there in a growing pool of blood while Shane was carried away.

They threw Shane into the back of the van. The interior was cold, metallic, stripped of anything comfortable or humane. Shane scrambled for the opposite door, thinking maybe he could escape, maybe he could run, but hands grabbed him again.

The door slammed shut. The engine roared to life.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I tried to be brave. I tried to do the right thing. I'm sorry I won't make it to the bonding ceremony. I'm sorry I won't get to tell you how much you mean to me. I'm sorry for everything.

I love you, Ilya.

Someone pulled a black knitted hat over his head, down to his neck. Rough hands grabbed his arms, jerking them back, a zip tie circled his wrists, the hard plastic digging into his skin. They pushed him down on his side on the cold metal floor, rigid and unforgiving. His body sliding, bouncing, every bump in the road jarring through his bones. His shoulders screamed in protest from the unnatural angle.

He blinked, trying to orient himself, trying to see through the holes of the hood.

Shane tried to control his breathing, tried to think past the terror clawing at his chest. Hyperventilating wouldn't help. Panicking wouldn't help. He needed to stay calm, stay aware, and figure out what was happening.

The vehicle took another sharp turn. Shane's body slid across the metal floor, his shoulder slamming into what felt like a wall.

Shane tried to listen past his own harsh breathing, past the thunder of his heartbeat in his ears. The voices of his captors filtered through, muffled by the hood and the engine noise but just barely audible.

"...on schedule..."

"...switch point ahead..."

"...no complications..."

Professional. They sounded professional. Not panicked or excited or angry. Just calm and efficient, like this was a routine operation they'd practiced.

That should have been reassuring somehow. Instead, it made everything worse. These weren't desperate criminals making impulsive decisions. These were trained operatives executing a plan.

A plan that involved taking Shane.

The vehicle accelerated. Shane felt the increase in speed through his body, through the way the floor beneath him vibrated. They were moving fast now, probably through the city, weaving through traffic.

Shane tried to track their route, tried to pay attention to the turns and stops and changes in speed. If he could remember the pattern, maybe he could figure out where they were taking him.

Ilya would find him. Shane had to believe that. He would move heaven and earth to find Shane. He would mobilize every resource at his disposal.

Ilya would come for him.

The thought was a lifeline in the darkness, something to cling to when everything else felt like it was spinning out of control.

But what if Harris hadn't survived? What if no one knew what happened, what vehicle they'd used, where they'd gone? What if Ilya didn't know where to start looking?

Shane's breath caught. Harris. God, Harris had been bleeding so much. The way his body had just crumpled when they hit him, the way he'd lain there so still.

Was he alive? Were the guards alive? Marlow had fallen so hard, and the chemical weapon had affected them all so quickly.

Please let them be alive.

The vehicle slowed. Shane felt it in his stomach, that sinking sensation of deceleration. Were they stopping? Had they reached their destination?

His heartbeat kicked up again, fear flooding through him. What would happen when they stopped? What did they want with him?

The vehicle came to a complete stop. The engine cut off. Sudden silence except for the ringing in Shane's ears and his own ragged breathing.

Doors opened. Cool air rushed in, making Shane shiver through his dress shirt. Hands grabbed him, rough and impersonal, hauling him upright. His legs didn't want to cooperate. Shane stumbled as they pulled him out of the vehicle. His feet hit pavement, but he couldn't get his balance with his hands bound behind him and the hood blocking his vision. He pitched forward, certain he was about to fall face-first onto the ground.

Someone caught him. Not gently. Just a hand fisting in his jacket, keeping him upright through pure functional necessity. Like Shane was cargo they couldn't afford to damage.

"Move," a voice said. Male, mechanically distorted. The same kind of voice distortion the attackers had used during the ambush.

Shane tried. His legs shook but he managed to walk, guided by hands on his arms, unable to see where he was going or what obstacles might be in his path. Every step felt like a gamble.

Every breath felt like it might be his last.

Different hands grabbed him. The grip changed, new people taking over. Shane was passed between captors like a package being transferred.

New vehicle. Shane could tell from the sound, from the way they lifted him up rather than just pushing him forward. A truck maybe. Something larger than the first vehicle. The floor was higher, the interior space more open.

They shoved him down. Shane's knees hit metal, the impact shooting pain through his legs. He bit back a cry, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of knowing they'd hurt him.

Footsteps. Movement around him. Then another door slamming shut and the engine starting up.

Moving again.

Shane tried to focus on his breathing, tried to use the meditation techniques his college roommate had taught him during finals week. *Breathe in for four counts. Hold for four. Breathe out for four. Hold for four.*

It barely helped. The terror was too big, too immediate. The hood over his head made every breath feel insufficient, made him feel like he was suffocating even though he knew logically that he was getting enough air.

He tried to track the route again. Left turn. Straight for what felt like several minutes. Another left. Stop. Go. Right turn this time.

But it was impossible. The hood blocked all visual cues. He couldn't see landmarks or street signs or anything that would help him orient himself. The city could have been going by outside, or they could have been in the middle of nowhere. Shane had no way to know.

Time became meaningless. Minutes? Hours? Shane couldn't tell. The fear and disorientation stretched each moment into an eternity.

His wrists ached where the zip ties cut into them. His shoulders burned from being pulled back. His body hurt from bouncing against the metal floor, new bruises forming on top of old ones.

What did they want from him?

Shane knew it had to be about his blood. About the *Sanguis Resonans* marker that made him valuable to vampires. That had to be it. Nothing else made sense. Random kidnappers didn't use chemical weapons specifically designed to incapacitate vampires.

Was that what they planned to do now? Drain him? Kill him for his blood?

But if they wanted him dead, why go through all this trouble?

Which meant they wanted him alive. For now, at least. Because it meant whatever they had planned for him involved keeping him conscious. It meant they needed him for something. Shane's mind conjured terrible possibilities. Medical experiments. Repeated blood extraction. Being used as a living blood bank for vampires who wanted the enhanced feeding experience *Sanguis Resonans* provided.

Stop. Stop thinking like that. It's not helping.

But he couldn't stop. The fear fed on itself, growing bigger and darker with each passing moment.

Would he ever see his parents again? His mom would be devastated. His dad would probably blame himself.

Would he ever see Ilya again?

The thought of Ilya made Shane's chest ache in a way that had nothing to do with his physical injuries. Shane had been so happy in the convoy on the way back to the palace from the hospital. So proud of his work with the children, so excited to tell Ilya about it. So stupidly, naively confident about his new life and his future and the bonding ceremony that was only six weeks away.

He'd been counting down the days, looking forward to it. Now, he might never make it to the ceremony at all.

The vehicle slowed again. Shane's stomach dropped. Another transfer? Another vehicle?

The engine cut off. Doors opened. Those same rough hands grabbed him, hauling him out into cold air.

Shane tried to listen, tried to gather any information about his surroundings. He heard other vehicles, maybe. The distant sound of traffic. Or maybe he was imagining it, his mind desperately trying to find some connection to the normal world.

Someone shoved him forward. Shane stumbled but kept his feet this time. Walked where they directed him, feeling pavement beneath his shoes.

Another vehicle. He could tell from the sound, from the way the space felt around him. Different from the last two. Colder somehow. More industrial.

They pushed him inside. Shane's shin hit something hard. He gasped, pain shooting up his leg, but before he could even process it they were shoving him down onto what felt like a bench.

Metal. Everything was metal. The floor, the walls, the bench he sat on. It felt like the inside of a cargo truck. Utilitarian and cold and completely impersonal.

The door slammed shut with a finality that made Shane flinch.

The engine started. The vehicle began to move.

Shane sat in the darkness behind his hood, hands still bound, body aching, mind racing with fear and possibilities and desperate hope that somehow, somewhere, Ilya was looking for him.

Please find me. Please, Ilya. Please find me before it's too late.

The vehicle drove on into the unknown, carrying Shane further and further from everything he knew, from everyone who might save him. He had no idea where he was going. He had no idea what they would do to him when they arrived. All he had was fear and hope warring in his chest, and the fading warmth of memories from a life that already felt impossibly distant.

Shane closed his eyes behind the hood and tried to be brave.

He tried to believe that Ilya would find him.

He tried not to think about what would happen if Ilya didn't.

The vehicle stopped.

Shane lost all sense of time and all sense of direction. He could have been transported for twenty minutes or two hours. They could be anywhere in the city or miles outside it. He had no way to know.

The engine cut off. Silence rushed in, broken only by Shane's harsh breathing under the hood.

Shane tried to steady himself, tried to find that core of courage that had carried him through the ambush, that had made him surrender himself to save Harris's life. He could be brave. He just had to hold onto that, had to remember that fear and courage weren't opposites. You could be terrified and still choose to face what was coming.

The door opened. Hands grabbed him. Always hands grabbing him, rough and impersonal, treating him like cargo. They hauled him out of the vehicle, his legs nearly buckling beneath him. His legs felt like they belonged to someone else, weak and shaky and threatening to give out completely.

He tried to lock his knees, tried to stay upright through sheer force of will. He wouldn't let them drag him. Wouldn't let them see how scared he was. If he was going to face whatever came next, he would do it standing.

"Walk," someone said. That same mechanically distorted voice from before.

They pushed him forward. Shane walked, unable to see where he was going, trusting his captors to not let him walk into a wall or fall down stairs. The trust was forced, unwilling, but what choice did he have?

His feet hit different ground. Not pavement anymore. Concrete, he thought. Rough and uneven beneath his shoes. Interior concrete, the kind you found in warehouses or industrial buildings.

And the sounds changed. Footsteps echoing, bouncing off walls and high ceilings. The acoustics of a large indoor space, empty and cavernous.

A warehouse. They'd brought him to a warehouse.

Shane's mind raced through implications. Warehouses meant isolation. Meant no witnesses. Meant whatever they planned to do to him, no one would hear him scream.

Stop thinking like that. Focus on the moment. Focus on staying upright, staying calm, staying brave.

But the fear was growing, spiraling up from his chest into his throat, making it hard to breathe. The hood felt like it was suffocating him. His bound hands behind his back made him feel utterly defenseless. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to fight, to do something other than walk docilely toward whatever horror waited for him.

Shane fought down the panic. *Breathe. Just breathe. Ilya would come.* Palace security would be searching for him. They had resources and technology. They would find this place. They would find him.

He just had to survive until they did.

The footsteps stopped. Shane stopped with them, swaying slightly, his legs still unsteady.

A voice cut through the warehouse. Male, clear and cultured, with the kind of casual authority that came from being obeyed without question. Vampire, Shane realized immediately. There was something in the timbre, in the way the voice carried, that marked the speaker as inhuman.

"Bring the human."

Those three words hit Shane like a physical blow. Not "bring Shane" or "bring the Consort" or even "bring the prisoner." Just "the human." Like Shane was a thing, an object, something less than a person.

The hands on his arms tightened, propelling him forward. Shane walked, counting steps, trying to maintain some sense of control even as everything spun further out of his grasp.

Then, without warning, someone grabbed the hood. Shane barely had time to register the touch before the fabric was ripped off his head.

Light exploded against his eyes. Harsh, overhead, fluorescent brightness after hours of darkness. Shane gasped, his eyes slamming shut against the assault, tears streaming down his face from the sudden intensity. He forced his eyes open, squinting against the glare, desperate to see where he was despite the pain.

The warehouse swam into focus in fragments. High ceilings, industrial fixtures, walls of corrugated metal. Open space, largely empty except for what looked like a staging area near the center.

Shane's blood turned to ice.

Medical equipment. Monitors, IV stands, tables. But not the clean, sterile equipment from hospitals. This looked makeshift, cobbled together, the kind of setup you'd see in a horror movie. Functional but wrong, missing all the safety and care that should surround medical procedures.

And in the center of it all, there was a contraption that made Shane's stomach lurch. Metal framework, restraints, and collection tubes. It took him a moment to understand what he was looking at, and when comprehension hit, the fear he'd been fighting threatened to pull him under completely.

They were going to drain him.

Not quickly, not mercifully. Slowly. Systematically. That's what all this equipment was for.

Shane's breath came faster, his vision starting to tunnel. No. No, he couldn't panic. Not now. He had to stay present, stay aware, look for opportunities to escape or ways to survive or anything that might help him.

"Hello, Shane Hollander."

The voice drew Shane's attention. He looked up, forcing himself to focus on the speaker.

A vampire stood before him. Tall, commanding presence, dressed in fashionable clothes. His appearance was perfect, styled and groomed like he was attending a society event rather than standing in a warehouse surrounded by soldiers and torture equipment.

But his eyes. His eyes were dark and cold and looked at Shane with the kind of detached interest you might give a lab specimen. Not a person. Not someone with thoughts and feelings and people who loved him.

Just an object.

"My name is Sasha Nikitin." The vampire smiled, showing fangs, the expression holding no warmth whatsoever. "You have been a very big pain in my ass."

Shane's throat felt tight, his mouth dry. He tried to speak, tried to find words, but nothing came out. His mind was screaming at him to run, to fight, to do something, but his body seemed frozen in place.

No, he couldn't freeze. He had to be brave. Had to show this vampire that he wasn't just some helpless victim to be used and discarded.

Shane lifted his chin, forcing himself to meet Sasha's cold gaze directly.

"Ilya will find me." His voice shook but held. "You can't just take the Tribute Consort and expect there to be no consequences. The entire kingdom will be looking for me. Every vampire in the city, every human with any connection to the palace. You can't hide from that. You can't win against the Crown Prince."

For a moment, silence hung in the warehouse.

Then Sasha moved. Fast. Inhumanly fast. Shane barely registered the motion before Sasha's hand connected with his face in a vicious backhand that snapped his head to the side.

Pain exploded across Shane's cheek, bright and shocking. His vision went white, then dark, stars bursting behind his eyes. The metallic taste of blood flooded his mouth, sharp and immediate.

Shane's legs gave out.

Hands caught him before he could hit the concrete. The guards who'd been standing beside him grabbed his arms, holding him upright while his vision swam and his head rang like a bell.

He couldn't focus. Everything hurt and spun and he thought he might be sick, thought the world might tilt completely sideways and dump him into unconsciousness.

Stay awake. Stay present.

Shane blinked hard, trying to clear the stars from his vision. His cheek throbbed, hot and swollen. He could feel blood on his lip where his teeth had cut the inside of his mouth. The taste was overwhelming, making his stomach turn.

"Ilya," Sasha said, his voice perfectly calm, as if he hadn't just struck Shane hard enough to nearly knock him out. "Will find exactly what I allow him to find. When I allow him to find it. You are under the impression that you matter, Shane Hollander. That your safety is the most important concern in the kingdom. Let me disabuse you of that notion."

Sasha stepped closer, close enough that Shane could see the absolute lack of humanity in those dark eyes. Close enough that Shane could smell the vampire's cologne, expensive and cloying.

"You are just blood," Sasha continued, looking Shane up and down. "A very valuable blood, certainly. But still just blood. And now you belong to me."

Shane's head was still spinning, his thoughts scattered by the blow. He tried to form words, tried to voice the defiance still burning in his chest, but nothing would come out right.

He'd been so stupid. Thinking he could be brave, thinking he could stand up to a vampire who clearly had no compunctions about violence. Thinking he could protect himself through sheer force of will.

But he wasn't strong enough. He was just a human, restrained and helpless, at the mercy of supernatural beings who could kill him without effort.

The fear he'd been fighting rushed back in, threatening to drown him. His breathing went shallow and rapid, panic clawing at his chest, his vision starting to tunnel again.

No. No, he couldn't spiral. He couldn't fall apart. Shane forced himself to breathe, forced himself to focus on something, anything that would keep him anchored.

Ilya. Think about Ilya.

Ilya would come. Ilya was smart and resourceful and he cared about Shane. Ilya would move heaven and earth to find him. Shane just had to stay alive until he did. He just had to be brave for a little while longer.

Even if his face throbbed and his wrists ached and his whole body shook with fear.

Even if Sasha was looking at him like he was nothing.

Even if the equipment behind Sasha promised pain and terror.

Shane lifted his head again, meeting Sasha's cold gaze with as much courage as he could gather.

"He'll find me," Shane said again, his voice barely above a whisper, blood on his lips. "And when he does, you'll regret this."

Sasha smiled. It was the most terrifying expression Shane had ever seen.

"We'll see about that." Sasha gestured to the guards. "Prepare him."

The words didn't fully register until hands grabbed Shane again, this time with different intent. They weren't just holding him upright anymore. They were moving him, dragging him toward that horrible contraption with its restraints and collection tubes.

"No." Shane tried to pull back, his feet scraping against the concrete. "No, don't, please don't."

They ignored him completely. One of them reached for his jacket. Grabbed the lapels. Started pulling it off his shoulders.

Something inside Shane snapped.

Anger flooded through him, hot and furious, burning through the fear that had been paralyzing him. They'd kidnapped him, transported him like cargo, hit him hard enough to make him taste blood. And now they were going to strip him?

No. Absolutely not.

"Don't touch me!" Shane twisted violently, trying to wrench himself free from their grip. "Get your hands off me!"

His jacket tore. The sound of fabric ripping filled the warehouse, sharp and final. They pulled the jacket away, tossing it aside like garbage.

Shane fought harder. He kicked, thrashed, used every ounce of strength he had even though he knew it was futile. His hands were still zip-tied behind his back, his body already exhausted and injured. But he couldn't just let this happen. He couldn't just go docile while they violated him like this.

More hands grabbed him. How many were there? Four? Five? Too many. Strong vampire hands that held him immobile no matter how hard he struggled.

Someone grabbed his shirt. Started pulling.

"No! Get off me!" Shane's voice cracked, desperation bleeding through the anger.

They didn't stop.

His shirt ripped away in pieces. Buttons scattered across the concrete floor, the sound of them hitting and bouncing away almost comical if anything about this situation could be remotely funny.

The cold warehouse air hit Shane's bare chest and he felt exposed in a way that made his skin crawl. But it was about to get so much worse.

Hands reached for his belt.

"Stop!" Shane bucked against their hold, panic replacing the anger now. "Don't fucking touch me, you fucking asshole!"

But there were too many of them and they were too strong. They held him effortlessly while his belt was unbuckled, while his pants were unfastened, while everything was pulled away until Shane was completely, utterly naked under the harsh fluorescent lights.

The vulnerability hit him like a physical blow.

He was naked, stripped bare in front of strangers who looked at him like he was meat. Exposed and helpless and unable to even cover himself with his hands still bound behind his back.

Shane's breath came in short, sharp gasps. He tried to turn, tried to curl in on himself, some instinctive attempt to preserve some shred of dignity. But they held him straight, hands on his arms and shoulders, keeping him upright and visible.

His whole body shook. Not from cold, though the warehouse air was frigid against his bare skin. But from anger and humiliation, from the profound violation of having every choice, every bit of control, stripped away along with his clothes.

Sasha stepped closer, circling Shane slowly, examining him with that same cold, detached interest.

"This is what the Crown Prince chose?" Sasha's voice dripped with mocking disdain. "I don't see the appeal. Attractive enough, I suppose, in that bland human way. But nothing special. Nothing that justifies the trouble you've caused."

Sasha reached out, one finger trailing across Shane's collarbone. The touch was casual, impersonal, not sexual but somehow worse than if it had been. It was pure dominance. Pure power over Shane's body, over his boundaries, over his ability to say no.

Shane flinched violently, trying to pull away. But the hands holding him kept him in place, keeping him available for Sasha's inspection.

"Please," Shane heard himself whisper, the word slipping out before he could stop it. "Please don't."

But Sasha just smiled and continued his examination. His hand traced down Shane's sternum, across his ribs, clinical and cruel. Testing Shane's reactions. Enjoying the fear and revulsion that was on Shane's face.

Tears burned in Shane's eyes. He blinked hard, trying to keep them from falling, trying to maintain some scrap of dignity. But it was too much. Too overwhelming. The assault, the helplessness, the absolute lack of control over what was happening to his own body.

The tears spilled over, hot tracks down his cheeks.

He'd never felt so vulnerable in his entire life. Never felt so exposed, so utterly at someone else's mercy. This was worse than the pain, worse than the fear of dying. This was being reduced to nothing, to an object these vampires could touch and hurt and use however they wanted.

And Shane couldn't stop them. He couldn't protect himself. He couldn't do anything but cry silently while Sasha traced patterns across his skin like he was mapping territory he now owned.

"You are very pretty when you cry, though. Perhaps you shed these tears for Ilya. He used to enjoy causing suffering." Sasha finally said, stepping back. "Put him on the board."

The guards dragged Shane toward the contraption.

"No!" Shane found his voice again, the anger surging back through the tears and humiliation. "No, fuck, don't, please don't!"

But they were already lifting him, four vampires working in coordination to maneuver Shane's fighting body toward the tilted board. It was angled at about thirty degrees, designed to keep Shane's head elevated while the rest of his body sloped downward.

For optimal blood drainage, Shane realized with sickening clarity. They'd designed this specifically to drain him as efficiently as possible.

He fought anyway. Kicked and twisted and made himself as difficult to handle as he could even though he knew it wouldn't make a difference. Even though he knew they would get him onto that board eventually. Another vampire smacked him across the face, knocking his head to the side and banging against the board. He pressed his trembling lips together, not giving them his moan of pain.

They forced him down.

The surface was cold against his back, metal covered with some kind of vinyl that did nothing to warm the chill. Shane's bare skin stuck to it slightly, uncomfortable and wrong.

They grabbed his right arm first, pulling it toward the extended arm support. Shane tried to keep his arm bent, tried to resist, but vampire strength was impossible to fight against. They straightened his arm completely, stretching it out to the side.

The leather strap went around his wrist, buckling tight. Too tight. The leather bit into his skin right over where the zip ties had already cut. Someone cut the zip ties away, but before Shane could even think about trying to use his free hand, they were strapping down his left wrist too.

His arms were spread wide now, extended on either side of his body like he was being crucified. Shane pulled against the restraints immediately, desperately, trying to find any weakness in the leather or the buckles.

Pain flared bright and immediate. The leather rubbed against his already damaged wrists, friction burns beginning instantly. But Shane couldn't stop pulling. Couldn't stop fighting even though it hurt, even though it was useless.

They moved to his ankles. Shane tried to kick, tried to keep his legs bent, but again it was pointless. They forced his legs straight, ankles secured to the bottom of the board with more leather straps. His legs were spread slightly apart, positioned for stability.

The vulnerability was so overwhelming Shane thought he might pass out from it. He was completely naked, completely restrained, spread out and exposed under harsh lights with strangers surrounding him.

He was going to be tortured. That's what this was. They were going to hurt him in ways he couldn't defend against, couldn't prevent, and couldn't escape from.

The tears came faster now, sliding down his cheeks and into his hair at his temples. Shane couldn't even wipe them away, couldn't bring his hands to his face. He could only lie there crying while they prepared to torture him.

"Please," he whispered again, the word barely audible. "Please don't do this. Please."

No one responded.

One of the vampires approached with medical equipment. Heart monitor leads, sticky pads attached to wires. They pressed them onto Shane's chest, the gel cold and invasive. Three of them, positioned precisely to track his heart rate.

Shane flinched at each touch, his body jerking against the restraints even though he had nowhere to go.

Another lead. This one clipped to his finger. An oxygen saturation monitor, the kind that glowed red and measured how much oxygen was in his blood. Another invasion, another

piece of equipment attached to his body without his consent.

A blood pressure cuff went around his upper arm, the velcro loud in the warehouse. They inflated it briefly, testing, and Shane felt the squeeze of pressure all the way around his bicep. It released with a hiss, then settled into a looser fit, ready to take readings throughout whatever they were about to do to him.

Each sensor was another violation. Another piece of his bodily autonomy stripped away. They were turning him into a medical specimen, something to be monitored and measured and drained.

The machines around him beeped to life. His heart rate displayed on a monitor, the numbers climbing higher and higher as his panic increased. *142. 156. 168.* Racing toward dangerous territory, his body responding to the terror flooding his system.

Shane pulled against the wrist restraints again, unable to stop himself even though the leather was already rubbing his skin raw. He needed to move, needed to fight, needed to do something other than just lie here helpless.

But the restraints held. The leather didn't give. His wrists burned and bled and it didn't matter at all.

He was completely trapped and completely at their mercy.

And from the cold efficiency with which they'd strapped him down, from the practiced way they'd attached the monitoring equipment, Shane knew with sickening certainty that he wasn't the first person they'd done this to.

How many others had lain on this board? How many other people had been restrained here, violated here, tortured here?

Shane's breathing went ragged, his chest heaving against the heart monitor leads. The numbers on the screen climbed higher. *175. 183.* His vision started to tunnel at the edges, his body deciding that if it couldn't fight and couldn't flee, it would just shut down entirely.

"Stay with us, Shane." Sasha's voice cut through the descending darkness. "We need you conscious for this part."

Someone adjusted something on the equipment. A mask came down over Shane's face, oxygen flowing directly into his nose and mouth. Forcing him to breathe more slowly, preventing him from hyperventilating into unconsciousness.

They weren't going to let him escape, not even into the mercy of passing out. They were going to keep him awake and aware for everything that came next.

Shane closed his eyes, fresh tears leaking out from beneath his lids. He thought of Ilya. Tried to hold onto the memory of Ilya's arms around him, Ilya's voice reading poetry, Ilya's smile when Shane made him laugh.

Please find me. Please find me soon. Please, Ilya. I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. I'm not brave enough.

But there was no answer except the beeping of the heart monitor and the cold air of the warehouse and the sound of Sasha's footsteps approaching with whatever horror came next.

“Begin the first procedure.”

Shane heard footsteps approaching but couldn't see who it was. His vision was blurred with tears, his head tilted back against the board, the oxygen mask making it hard to turn and look.

Then someone moved into his line of sight carrying a tray of medical supplies.

IV equipment. Needles. Large ones. The kind used for blood donations, designed to extract volume quickly.

Shane's already racing heart kicked into overdrive. The monitor screamed its alarm, numbers flashing red. 189. 195. The vampire ignored him completely. Professional. Clinical. Just another day at work, preparing to drain blood from a restrained victim. He moved to Shane's right side, selecting a needle from the tray.

“I would like a tasting,” Sasha said, his mouth curved into a smile as he looked at Shane. “To ensure the quality of the merchandise.”

Shane tried to pull his arm away even though he knew it was impossible. The leather restraint held firm, his wrist already bleeding from earlier struggles. All he accomplished was hurting himself more as the friction burn deepened.

"Don't do this."

The vampire swabbed the inside of Shane's elbow with something cold and antiseptic. The scent cut through the warehouse smells, sharp and medicinal and terrifying because it meant this was really happening.

Shane couldn't look away. Couldn't close his eyes. Some horrible compulsion kept his gaze fixed on that needle as it approached his skin. The pain was sharp and immediate. The needle pierced through skin and muscle, searching for the vein beneath. Shane gasped, his whole body jerking against the restraints. But the vampire's hand was steady, practiced, and found the vein with brutal efficiency.

Then came the burn. The catheter threading into his vein, foreign and wrong and invasive in a way that made Shane want to scream. He could feel it inside him, could feel it being pushed into his body where it didn't belong.

The vampire secured the IV in place with tape, then connected the tubing. Shane watched in horror as his blood began to flow. Dark red, almost black in the harsh warehouse light, traveling through clear plastic tubing toward a glass on a low table.

His blood. Leaving his body. Being taken without his consent for purposes he could barely comprehend.

The vampire moved to his left side.

"No," Shane said again, the word barely audible. "Not another one. Please, not another one."

But they were already swabbing his other elbow, already selecting another large-gauge needle from the tray.

Shane tried to brace himself, trying to prepare for the pain. It didn't help. The needle pierced just as sharp, the catheter burned just as much. The vampire clamped it closed before attaching the tubing from a collection pouch.

His vision swam. The warehouse ceiling blurred and doubled, then came back into focus, then blurred again. His head felt light, disconnected from his body. Like he was floating somehow, even though he was strapped down and going nowhere.

The heart monitor's numbers kept climbing. 203. 207. His heart working overtime, trying to pump blood that was rapidly leaving his system. Trying to keep his brain oxygenated with fewer and fewer red blood cells available to carry oxygen.

Shane tried to retreat inside his own head. He tried to go somewhere else mentally, anywhere else. This wasn't happening to him. This was happening to someone else, some other version of Shane who existed in this warehouse while the real Shane was somewhere safe.

But he couldn't do it. The pain kept pulling him back. The cold kept pulling him back. The sight of his own blood flowing through those tubes kept pulling him back to the horrible reality of what was being done to him.

The vampire clamped shut the other tube, removing it from the glass that was filled with his blood. Sasha picked up the glass and held it up to the light, turning it slowly, studying the color and consistency.

Shane's stomach lurched.

But Sasha met Shane's eyes and raised the glass to his lips and drank.

Shane watched in revulsion and terror as the vampire consumed his blood. Not feeding from him directly, not with fangs and intimacy, but drinking it like it was wine. Casual. Deliberate. Making Shane watch.

Sasha's expression as he tasted was considering. Analytical. Like a sommelier evaluating a vintage.

Then dismissive.

"*Hmm.*" Sasha set the glass down with a small, cruel smile. "I am a little disappointed, but my palate is far more sophisticated than the average vampire. Everyone speaks of *Sanguis Resonans* as the most sought after human blood, but I've had better."

The words cut deeper than they should have. Shane knew it was just another form of torture, another way to wound him psychologically when his body was already being destroyed

physically. But it still hurt and made him feel worthless, inadequate, like nothing.

Sasha's smile widened, clearly seeing the effect his words had.

"No doubt Ilya's had better too. I imagine he only keeps you around because it's politically convenient. Because you're available and compliant and make him look progressive. But special?" Sasha laughed, the sound echoing in the warehouse. "You're nothing special, Shane Hollander."

Shane closed his eyes. He tried to go inside his head. He tried to remember Ilya's voice while reading poetry. He tried to remember the warmth of Ilya's arms around him, the safety he'd felt curled up together in the reading nook.

But Sasha's voice cut through everything, relentless and poisonous.

"Do you know what you represent?" Sasha began to pace around the contraption, his footsteps deliberate. "The ultimate degradation of our kind. Vampires begging humans for scraps. Pretending we're equals. Pretending that thousands of years of existence and immortal power somehow makes us the same as creatures who barely live long enough to understand the world they inhabit."

Shane kept his eyes closed. Focused on breathing. On staying conscious. On getting through this moment and then the next moment and then the one after that.

"My Ilya is too romantic. It's his only weakness. I've tried very hard to cure him of it, but he is an incurable romantic." Sasha continued, his voice dripping with contempt. "Binding himself to a human. *Pathetic*. Six centuries of existence and he's reduced himself to playing house with something that will be dust before he's even noticed the passage of time."

Don't listen. Don't let him in. His words don't matter. They're just words.

But Shane could feel the words anyway, feel them settling into the cracks in his armor, finding the fears he'd tried to bury. Was he really nothing special? Was Ilya only with him because of politics?

No. No, that wasn't true. Ilya cared about him. Ilya had been genuinely happy with him, genuinely interested in him as a person.

Hadn't he?

"But you're going to help us fix that," Sasha said, his tone shifting to something almost cheerful. "Your blood will prove what we've always known. That vampires don't need human cooperation. Don't need donations and foundations and pretend equality. We're predators. And you're going to help us remember that."

Shane's eyes opened despite himself. Sasha stood directly in his line of sight now, looking down at him with absolute certainty.

"Do you want to know what we're going to do with your blood, Shane?" Sasha didn't wait for an answer. "We're going to distribute it to Ashen Cross members across the city. Across the

kingdom. Proof that we can take what we need rather than ask for it. Proof that *Sanguis Resonans* blood is ours by right, not by human permission."

"Fuck you," Shane murmured, his voice muffled by the oxygen mask.

"And you," Sasha continued, leaning closer, ignoring Shane. "You're not a person anymore. You're just a living blood bag. Every vampire who tastes your blood will know that we don't need King Aurelion's progressive policies. We don't need the Crown Prince's human Consort. We don't need to pretend that humans matter beyond what they can provide us."

Shane tried to speak, tried to find words to argue, to defend himself, to say something that would make this stop. But his mouth was so dry, his thoughts so scattered by blood loss and fear. Nothing came out but a weak croak.

"Useful propaganda that proves vampires are superior and humans are resources to be used. And when we're done with you, when you've served your purpose, what do you think Ilya will find? Nothing."

The words hit like physical blows. Shane's heart rate spiked again, the monitor screaming. 215. 218.

"Ilya will find me!"

"Ilya isn't coming for you," Sasha said, his voice poisonously sweet. Almost gentle. Like he was sharing a secret between friends.

Don't listen. Don't let him in.

"Oh, they'll mount a search," Sasha continued, his tone conversational. "For appearances. For optics. The Crown Prince's Consort goes missing, of course there has to be a response. Palace security will mobilize. King Aurelion will make concerned statements. It will all look very impressive."

Shane tried to close his eyes, tried to block out the words, but his eyelids felt too heavy. Everything felt too heavy.

"Did you really think the Crown Prince of House Rozanov loved you?" Sasha's voice was almost pitying now, which somehow made it worse. "Six hundred years old. Six centuries of lovers and relationships and people who meant something to him. And you thought what? That you were special? That your *Sanguis Resonans* blood made you different from all the others?"

Shane's thoughts felt fuzzy, scattered. The blood loss was making it hard to think clearly, hard to hold onto his certainty about anything.

"You're so naive," Sasha continued, straightening up, looking down at Shane with something that might have been genuine pity if it wasn't so cruel. "So human. You actually believed you mattered. That you were anything more than a warm body with useful blood. It's almost touching, really. Your complete inability to see reality."

Shane tried to hold onto his memories. He tried to remember the way Ilya looked at him over breakfast, the genuine warmth in those ice-blue eyes. The way Ilya's fingers would trace patterns on Shane's skin, gentle and careful.

That had been real. All of it had been real.

"Ilya's had centuries of lovers," Sasha said, and each word felt like a knife sliding between Shane's ribs. "Vampires and Fae, mostly. Some werewolves. All of them were beautiful, many of them more interesting than you. What makes you think you're special? What makes you think you're anything but the latest in a very long line of bodies warming his bed?"

The rational part of Shane's mind knew Sasha was deliberately trying to break him, trying to destroy whatever hope or strength Shane had left. But the terrified part, the part that was cold and weak, couldn't stop the doubts from creeping in.

Maybe Ilya had just been kind. Maybe the connection Shane felt had been one-sided. Maybe he'd been projecting his own desperate need for this arrangement to mean something onto a vampire who was just doing his duty.

"Your *Sanguis Resonans* makes you useful," Sasha said, his tone turning matter-of-fact. "Nothing more. You could be anyone. As long as you had that bloodline, Ilya would have agreed to bind himself to you. It wasn't about you as a person. It was never about you."

Shane tried to speak, tried to defend himself, tried to say something. But his mouth was so dry, his throat so tight, his lungs so tired.

"You know what the saddest part is?" Sasha said, his voice almost conversational now. "You actually believed in the fairy tale. The Crown Prince and his human Consort, living happily ever after. You actually thought that was possible."

Fuck you. Fuck you! Fuck you!

"Start the procedure."

Someone adjusted something on the oxygen delivery. Increased the flow. They needed him conscious, needed him aware, needed him to feel and hear and understand everything they were doing to him.

Shane retreated again. He tried to disappear into some quiet place in his mind where Sasha's words couldn't reach him. Where the cold spreading through his body didn't exist. Where the blood flowing out of his veins was just a nightmare he'd wake up from eventually.

But he couldn't find that place. He could only lie there restrained and naked and being drained while this vampire told him exactly how meaningless he was.

Think of Ilya.

But Sasha's poison had done its work. Shane couldn't help but wonder if there was truth in it. If he really was just convenient. Just available. Just a political tool that Ilya would discard once Shane stopped being useful.

The blood was flowing. The collection pouches filling. Shane's consciousness started to fragment, thoughts scattering like leaves in the wind.

How much blood did a body hold? How much could they take before he died?

Was that the plan? Drain him completely? Use every last drop?

Or would they keep him alive somehow, keep him available for more extractions until his body gave out from the repeated trauma?

Shane didn't know which option terrified him more.

The cold had reached his chest now. His core temperature dropped as his body struggled to maintain function with diminishing resources. He was shaking, small tremors running through his muscles that he couldn't control.

Shane thought about his parents. He hoped they were safe, protected somewhere by palace security. He hoped his mother wouldn't blame herself for signing that contract. Hoped his father would understand that Shane had made the choice to surrender himself to save Harris.

He thought about Harris. About whether Harris was alive, whether the blow to his head had killed him or just knocked him out. Whether Marlow and the guards had survived the chemical weapon.

He thought about the children at St. Catherine's Hospital. About how happy he'd been just hours ago, planning to make the foundation work part of his regular duties.

Was it just a few hours ago? It felt like a lifetime.

And he thought about Ilya. About ice-blue eyes that could look ancient and young at the same time. About long fingers turning pages of poetry. About the secret code they'd developed, three foot taps that meant *I'm thinking about you*.

Shane tried to tap his foot three times against the board.

His legs were too weak. Too numb. He couldn't make them move.

The tears came again, sliding down his face, and Shane didn't have the strength left to even be ashamed of them.

I'm sorry, Ilya. I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough. I'm sorry I let myself be taken. I'm sorry I'm not going to make it to the bonding ceremony.

The warehouse sounds faded. The beeping of the monitors became distant. Shane's vision tunneled, darkness creeping in from the edges.

But before unconsciousness could take him, before he could escape into the mercy of oblivion, someone adjusted the oxygen again.

Consciousness slammed back into him, cruel and unwanted.

They weren't done with him yet.

And Shane had nowhere left to hide.

Voices. People were talking. The vampires probably, discussing something important maybe. But Shane couldn't parse the words anymore. Couldn't hold onto them long enough to understand what they meant.

His hands were gone.

Not literally gone. Shane knew objectively that they were still there, still attached to his arms, still restrained in the leather straps. But he couldn't feel them. Couldn't sense them at all. They'd gone from numb to completely absent, like his consciousness had abandoned them entirely.

His feet, too. His legs. Everything below his waist might as well not exist.

Shane's world had shrunk to just his chest. Just his heart struggling to beat. Just his lungs fighting to breathe. Everything else had been surrendered, given up by a body that no longer had the resources to maintain sensation in its extremities.

The heart monitor changed its rhythm. The steady rapid beeping slowed, became irregular. Alarm tones joined it, different pitches, warning of something.

More voices. Closer this time. Urgent.

"His heart rate is dropping. Systolic pressure under 60. We need to stop."

"Sasha, we need to stop now. He's not going to survive this."

Footsteps. Sasha's voice cutting through, cold and authoritative.

"We can only take a pint at a time or else he will die."

"Then he'll die and we'll take it all!."

Shane processed the words without emotion. Without fear. Without anything really. They were talking about him dying like it was a logistical problem to be managed, a timing issue to be optimized.

He tried to care. Tried to feel something about the fact that he was dying right now, in this moment, while they argued about blood volumes and collection capacity.

But there was nothing left inside him to feel with. All of his fear was used up. All of his anger was spent. All of his hope was exhausted.

There was just emptiness. Cold and hollow and spreading.

Tears slid down Shane's face. He didn't know when he'd started crying again. Didn't remember deciding to cry. But moisture tracked from the corners of his eyes, sliding past his temples into his hair. Silent tears. He didn't have the energy to sob. Just tears, quiet and steady, mourning a life that was ending too soon.

I waited for you, he whispered, or tried to whisper, or maybe just thought very loudly. *I waited.*

The words were for Ilya. For the vampire who wasn't there. Who maybe was looking for Shane but wouldn't find him in time. Who maybe wasn't looking at all but Shane needed to believe otherwise.

I tried to be brave. I tried to wait for you.

But bravery didn't matter when your body was giving out. When you'd lost too much blood to sustain consciousness. When your heart was slowing and your blood pressure was dropping and your organs were shutting down one by one.

Brave couldn't save you from biology.

The circle of Shane's vision narrowed further. Just a pinpoint of light now, surrounded by encroaching darkness that felt almost welcoming. Almost peaceful after so much pain and fear and violation.

Maybe the darkness would be better. Maybe whatever came after would be easier than this.

Shane thought about Ilya one more time. The image wouldn't quite solidify. Kept slipping away like water through fingers.

But the feeling was still there. Warm somewhere deep inside the cold and emptiness. A small flame that refused to quite go out.

Love.

He loved Ilya. Despite everything Sasha had said. Despite all the doubts and fears and uncertainty. Despite not knowing if Ilya loved him back.

Shane loved him anyway.

It was the last real thing Shane had left. The last piece of himself that the vampires hadn't taken or violated or destroyed.

They could drain his blood, strip his dignity, and break his body. But they couldn't take this. They couldn't touch what Shane felt in his heart, in that small warm place that still belonged to him alone.

I love you.

The words formed clearly in Shane's mind even as everything else became confused and scattered.

I love you, Ilya. I'm sorry I didn't get to tell you. Sorry I waited too long. Sorry I was scared it might not be mutual. Sorry I never got the chance to say it out loud and hear your response, whatever that response might have been. I love you.

The pinpoint of vision closed completely. Darkness rushed in to fill the space where light and awareness had been.

Shane felt his heart stutter. Skip a beat. Try to keep going and fail. Try again.

The monitors screamed. Multiple alarms, overlapping, urgent, panicked.

But Shane couldn't hear them anymore. Couldn't hear anything. The underwater sounds had faded into complete silence.

The pain stopped.

All of it. The aching in his wrists. The burn of the IVs. The terrible thirst. The cold that had spread through his limbs. Everything that had hurt, everything that had been uncomfortable or frightening or agonizing.

Gone.

The fear stopped, too.

No more terror about dying. No more panic about being alone. No more desperate hoping that Ilya would arrive in time. All of it released, let go, surrendered to the darkness that had finally claimed him completely.

Shane felt himself floating. Not in the warehouse anymore. Not in his body anymore. Just floating in darkness that felt warm now instead of cold. Peaceful instead of frightening.

He let himself drift. Let go of the last threads connecting him to his body, to the warehouse, to the world where vampires drained blood and humans suffered and love existed but sometimes came too late.

He thought one more time about Ilya. Not clearly. Not with words. Just a feeling. A warmth. A wish that things had been different. Shane was already somewhere else.

"Shane. Shane, can you hear me? I'm here. You're safe now."

Ilya?

Shane tried to open his eyes. The effort felt impossible, enormous, like trying to lift a weight that was crushing him. His eyelids were so heavy, his body so weak, everything requiring more energy than he had available.

His eyes fluttered. Light stabbed through, harsh and painful even though it probably wasn't that bright. Shane's pupils couldn't adjust, couldn't handle even normal light levels after the darkness.

Ilya was here.

Relief crashed through Shane with such intensity it hurt. Made his chest ache. Made tears well up in eyes that he didn't think could produce any more moisture.

Ilya came. Ilya found him.

"That's it. Come back to me. I'm here. You're safe now."

Safe. The word felt foreign. Shane didn't feel safe. He was violated and broken and dying. But Ilya was here, and maybe that was close enough to safe.

Shane tried again to speak. Managed to force air through his throat, shaped his mouth around the letters even though they came out barely above a whisper.

"Lya?"

The sound of his own voice shocked him. Rough. Weak. Nothing like how he normally sounded. Like someone had taken sandpaper to his throat.

But Ilya heard it. Relief flooded his face, though the terror didn't leave his eyes.

"Yes, I'm here. You're safe. I found you."

It felt like he'd been waiting forever for Ilya to find him.

"You didn't come." The words slipped out before Shane could stop them. Not an accusation. Just confusion. Just a statement of fact that didn't quite make sense anymore. "Waited. You didn't come."

Ilya's face crumpled. The devastation in his expression was so complete, so raw, that Shane wanted to take the words back immediately. Wanted to explain that he didn't mean it like that, that he was just confused, that time had gotten strange.

"I came as fast as I could. The moment I knew you were taken, I mobilized everything. Every resource, every person. I've been searching for you from the second I found out. I never stopped, Shane. Not for a moment."

Shane tried to nod, but his head wouldn't move properly, and wouldn't respond to the signals his brain was sending.

Sasha's words flooded back. The poison that had been dripped into Shane's mind for hours, corroding his certainty, undermining everything he'd believed about his relationship with Ilya.

"He said..." Shane's voice was barely audible. "Said you wouldn't. That you didn't care. Just...just politics. Tribute Consort. Not real."

Shane watched Ilya's face as he spoke. Watched emotions flash across it too fast to fully identify. Pain. Rage. Devastation. Guilt.

"He lied. They lied. Shane, listen to me. Everything between us is real. You are real. What I feel for you is the most real thing I've experienced in six hundred years. I love you. Do you understand?"

Shane wanted to believe it. He wanted to let the certainty in Ilya's voice wash away Sasha's poison. But his thoughts were so scattered, his mind so foggy, everything filtered through layers of trauma and blood loss that made it hard to hold onto anything solid.

His chest ached. His eyes burned with tears that spilled over, tracking down his face the same way they had in the warehouse. But these were different tears. Relief and pain and something that might have been joy if he'd had the energy for it.

He tried to respond. He tried to say the words back, to tell Ilya what he'd thought in those final moments before consciousness left him completely.

"...love you..."

The words came out fragmented, incomplete. Not the full confession Shane wanted to make. But maybe Ilya understood anyway, because his grip on Shane's hand tightened and his expression shifted into something that looked like it might break him entirely.

"Cold," Shane managed. "So cold. Dying."

His mind was drifting again. The fog was getting thicker. He knew with strange clarity what was happening. His body shutting down.

"Shane, please let me help you. I can –"

"Don't Turn me."

"Please, Shane!"

I'm sorry, Ilya. I'm not ready to be a vampire. Not like this.

"Where are the fucking paramedics!"

Relief washed through Shane. Warm and immediate. *Thank you. Thank you for understanding. Thank you for letting me choose.*

The darkness was coming back. Shane could feel it at the edges of his consciousness, pulling at him, trying to drag him back under. He tried to fight it. Tried to stay present, stay with Ilya, keep his eyes open and focused on that beloved face. But his body had nothing left. No reserves. No strength. No ability to resist the shutdown that was happening to all his systems.

“Don’t give up. Please, Shane. Don’t give up. Your parents need you. Your friends need you. I need you. I love you so much. More than I knew I could love anyone. You have to fight. You have to stay with me.”

Shane wanted to answer. He wanted to tell Ilya it would be okay. He wanted to say so many things.

But the darkness was too strong. Too complete. His eyes didn’t want to open. Just because they were too heavy to open anymore. The last sensation was Ilya's hand gripping his. Cold and desperate and holding on like Ilya could physically keep Shane tethered to life through sheer force of will.

Maybe he could. Maybe Ilya's six hundred years of experience and vampire strength could somehow be enough.

But Shane didn't think so. The darkness swallowed him whole. And this time, Shane wasn't sure he was coming back.

So warm.

That was the first thing Shane became aware of. Not thought, not sensation exactly, just the simple fact of warmth where before there had been only cold.

Warmth surrounding him. Soft and gentle and pervasive. Not the harsh overhead lights from the warehouse. Not the cold metal of the restraint board. Just warmth, like being wrapped in something safe.

Weight came next. Blankets, Shane's mind supplied eventually. Heavy but comfortable. The kind of weight that felt protective rather than oppressive.

And beneath him, softness. An actual bed. Not concrete. Not metal. Not the hard surface of a medical contraption designed for blood drainage. An actual mattress with give and comfort and the promise of rest.

Beeping. Regular. Rhythmic. Close by. Medical monitors, Shane realized slowly, his thoughts moving through molasses. Heart rate monitors probably. Oxygen saturation. The familiar sounds of hospital equipment.

But different from the warehouse. These beeps were steady, calm, monitoring a body that was stable rather than failing.

Smells filtered in. Antiseptic, sharp but not unpleasant. Clean linens, the kind that came from proper laundry with fabric softener. Something floral, faint and delicate, maybe from flowers in the room.

No smell of rust or old metal or industrial chemicals. No scent of fear-sweat or blood or violation.

Just clean and safe. And warm.

Shane's awareness of his body returned gradually, piece by piece. He felt heavy, exhausted in a way that went bone-deep. But it was different from before. Not the terrible weakness of dying, of blood loss and organ failure and systems shutting down.

This was a recuperating weakness. The exhaustion of a body that had been through trauma and was now resting, healing, and rebuilding.

He ached everywhere. His arms especially, a deep soreness that radiated from the crooks of his elbows where the IVs had been. His wrists throbbed, the friction burns from the restraints making themselves known with every heartbeat.

His face hurt, too. The side where Sasha had backhanded him, his cheek swollen and tender.

But it was a living pain. Pain that meant his nerves were working, his body was responding, his systems were functioning the way they should.

Not dying pain. Alive pain.

Shane tried to move. Started small. Just his fingers, attempting to curl them slightly. They responded. Sluggish and weak, but they moved. His brain sent the signal and his fingers obeyed.

Relief flooded through him, warmer than the blankets.

His toes. He tried those next. Same result. Movement. Response. Connection between his brain and his extremities that he'd lost in the warehouse.

His eyelids felt impossibly heavy. Shane tried to open them, tried to force them apart so he could see where he was, who might be in the room with him.

They barely fluttered. Light filtered through his closed lids, bright even dimmed. His eyes weren't ready yet, still too sensitive, still recovering.

Shane tried again. Managed to get his lids to part slightly, just enough for shapes and colors to blur together without resolving into anything recognizable.

Too bright. Too much. He let them close again, needing a moment to gather strength.

Sounds were becoming clearer. The monitors beeping steadily. Something else, softer. A low murmur of voices, too quiet for Shane to make out words.

And crying. Someone was crying quietly, trying to muffle the sound but not quite succeeding.

A female voice. Familiar. So familiar it made Shane's chest ache.

His mother.

His mother was crying.

The realization cut through Shane's exhaustion like a blade. His mother was here, was crying, was probably terrified and worried and blamed herself. He needed to open his eyes. He needed to let her know he was okay, that he was awake, that he'd survived.

Shane gathered what little energy he had and tried again. He forced his eyelids to part, to stay open despite the brightness, despite the effort it required. Everything was blurry at first. Just shapes and light, colors bleeding into each other without clear boundaries.

White ceiling. Fluorescent lights, dimmed thankfully, not the harsh warehouse brightness. Medical equipment surrounding the bed, the kind you saw in expensive private facilities.

Gradually, slowly, Shane's vision focused. The shapes resolved into recognizable objects.

A private hospital room. Clearly high-end, nothing like the public facilities Shane had visited before. Everything was modern and clean and designed for comfort as much as function.

Medical equipment everywhere. Monitors showing his vitals, numbers that Shane couldn't quite read but that seemed stable, steady, not the critical alarms from before.

An IV stand beside the bed. Shane's eyes tracked up to the bag hanging from it. Blood. A transfusion bag with familiar dark red liquid, nearly empty now. His blood type was marked clearly: AB-positive.

They'd given him blood. Replaced what had been taken. They were helping his body rebuild what the vampires had drained.

Another IV with clear fluid.

Oxygen cannula in his nose. Shane could feel it now that he was aware, the gentle flow of oxygen helping his recovering body get what it needed.

His gaze moved beyond the equipment.

His mother was in a chair beside the bed, her hand wrapped around Shane's left hand. Her face was tear-stained, exhausted, the kind of weariness that came from hours or days of fear and vigil. But she was beautiful still, her features drawn with worry but unmistakably his mother.

She was leaning forward, eyes closed, her head tilted down like she'd been watching Shane sleep and had dozed off from exhaustion.

His father stood behind her, one hand on her shoulder in a gesture that looked both supportive and like he was holding himself upright. David looked equally worn, stubble covering his usually clean-shaven jaw, his clothes rumpled like he'd been wearing them for far too long.

Both of them looked like they hadn't slept. Like they'd been here the entire time, watching and waiting and praying Shane would wake up.

Shane tried to speak. Tried to let them know he was awake, that he was okay, that they didn't need to worry anymore.

"Mom? Dad."

The words came out as barely a whisper. His voice was destroyed, rough and raw like he'd been screaming. Which he had been, Shane remembered distantly. In the warehouse. Fighting against the restraints, against the violation, screaming for help that didn't come.

His throat was agony. Even that single word felt like swallowing glass.

His mother's eyes snapped open. For a moment she just stared at him, like she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. Then comprehension hit and her expression crumpled into relief so profound it looked like pain.

"Shane!" Her hand tightened on his, too hard, but Shane didn't care. "Oh God, Shane, you're awake!"

She hugged him, hands holding the back of his head. He could feel her tears against his face, not the quiet crying from before but full sobs of relief and joy and residual terror all mixed together.

His father moved immediately, coming around to Shane's other side, bending down to wrap his arms around Shane and his mom. He kissed the side of Shane's head.

"Hey, buddy." David's voice was thick, emotion making it rough. "Hey, it's good to see you awake. We're here. We're right here."

His dad was trying not to cry. Shane could see it in the way his jaw clenched, in the way his eyes went bright with unshed tears. His father, who always prided himself on reserved control, was barely holding it together.

Shane looked at them both. His mother was still crying, her hand gripping his like she was afraid he'd disappear if she let go. His father's usually composed face broken open with relief and barely contained emotion. They'd been terrified. They had probably thought Shane was going to die alone.

Guilt twisted in Shane's chest. He'd put them through this. His presence in the vampire kingdom, his *Sanguis Resonans* blood, his life had caused this fear and pain.

"How..." Shane's voice cracked. He swallowed, wincing at the pain, and tried again. "How long?"

The words were difficult, each one requiring more effort than it should. But his mother understood immediately.

"About twenty-four hours." Yuna's hand came up to brush hair off Shane's forehead, her touch gentle and careful. "You were taken Thursday afternoon. They brought you here last night around seven."

Twenty-four hours.

It felt like days. Time had lost all meaning in the warehouse, had become elastic and strange, measured only in pain and fear and the slow drainage of blood from his veins.

“I was scared,” he said, closing his eyes and breathing slowly. He thought that he must be on some pain medication because he wasn’t panicking or in any real pain. “I missed you. I wish you could stay. Did you meet Ilya?”

Yuna sniffled, meeting his eyes. “I slapped that bastard in the face for what he did to you.”

Shane frowned. “You slapped Ilya?”

“She really did. I think everyone was too shocked to do anything,” David said, his blue eyes wet and crinkled at the corners. “I didn’t think she had the gumption to do something like that.”

“Dad, did you just say *gumption*?” Shane said, letting out a soft laugh.

“Oh, Shane, we’re not going to let you out of our sight again,” Yuna said, fiercely.

“Does that mean you’ll move here to the kingdom?”

“Yes. If that vampire King and the little prince think that they’re going to keep us away from you again, they have another think coming!”

Someone cleared his voice at the door and they turned to see King Aurelion step inside the hospital room. Shane smiled at him, happy to see the ancient vampire. He looked beautiful and calm, but his eyes were worried as he examined Shane.

“Your Majesty,” he said, trying to sit up so that he could bow.

David turned and gave a short, polite bow, and then looked at Yuna when she made a low, angry scoff at him. Shane wanted to laugh: Yuna Hollander bowed to no one.

“We came to check on Shane,” Aurelion said, pulling the door open wider so that Ilya could step inside behind him. “Please, Shane, David, you do not need to bow to me. We are family.”

Yuna gently pushed Shane back on the bed, patting his shoulder, as she glared at Aurelion with her lips pressed tight.

“Mom, cut it out,” Shane whispered to her, patting her hand.

“Hello,” Ilya said, subdued and a little shy.

Shane's breath caught. His gaze stayed on Ilya even as his parents surrounded him with comfort and relief. He couldn't look away. He couldn't stop cataloging every detail of how Ilya looked, how he was standing, what his expression revealed.

Ilya looked terrible.

His curly hair was disheveled, falling across his forehead in a way that would normally be immediately corrected. Ilya was always so composed, so perfectly put together, every hair in place and every detail of his appearance carefully managed.

His clothes were rumpled. Ilya's eyes were red-rimmed. Shane hadn't known vampires could cry, hadn't seen it before. But the evidence was there in the redness, in the slightly swollen quality to Ilya's eyelids, in the brightness that suggested tears either recently shed or barely held back.

And his expression. God, his expression.

Devastated guilt. Relief. That was the only way to describe it. Like Ilya had been convinced Shane was dead, had prepared himself for that reality, and now was struggling to process that Shane was actually alive.

Their eyes met across the room. Held. Neither of them looked away.

"Ilya."

Ilya moved. Slowly, carefully, like he was afraid sudden movement might shatter whatever fragile moment this was. He walked to the foot of Shane's bed, his hands coming up to grip the bed rail. His knuckles went white with the pressure. Shane could see the tension in every line of Ilya's body, the way he was holding himself together through sheer force of will.

"Shane."

Just his name. One word. But it contained everything. Relief and pain and love and guilt and terror and joy all compressed into his name.

Shane felt something break open in his chest. Ilya had come. All of Sasha's poison words had been lies. Every single one. Ilya cared about him. Loved him. He had come as fast as he could. And Shane was safe now. Really, truly safe, because of him.

The tears came before Shane could stop them. Not the quiet silent tears from before. These were overwhelming, all-consuming, his entire body shaking with sobs that he couldn't control and didn't have the energy for.

Relief. Terror. Trauma. Love. All of it pouring out at once, too big to contain, too much to process.

Shane tried to stop, tried to get himself under control. But his body had other ideas, crying with the kind of intensity that came from surviving something that should have killed him.

"I'm sorry." The words came out broken, interspersed with sobs. "I'm sorry, I can't, I'm sorry."

He didn't even know what he was apologizing for. For getting taken in the first place. For not fighting harder. For doubting Ilya even briefly when Sasha was poisoning his mind. For being weak. For crying now when his parents and Ilya had already been through so much.

For all of it. For everything.

His mother's hand immediately went to his hair, stroking gently. "*Shh*, baby, it's okay. You're safe now. You're safe."

Her voice was thick with tears, too, but steady. Trying to ground him, to bring him back from the edge of the panic spiral he could feel building.

His father squeezed his hand carefully. "You don't need to apologize, son. For nothing. You hear me? This wasn't your fault."

David's voice was fierce, leaving no room for argument. But Shane couldn't quite believe them. He couldn't quite accept that he bore no responsibility for what had happened.

His eyes found Ilya again through the tears. He needed to see him and needed to say what he'd tried to say in the warehouse but couldn't manage then.

"Ilya." Shane's voice broke on the name. "I...I..."

The words wouldn't come right. His throat was too damaged, his emotions too overwhelming, his thoughts too scattered by exhaustion and trauma.

Ilya moved from the end of his hospital bed and slid past David until he had his arms wrapped around Shane, holding him tight.

"Shane. I'm sorry, forgive me, forgive me. I love you," he whispered against Shane's ear, kissing the side of his head, hands curled around the back of his neck.

"I love you."

The confession came out wrong. Broken and rough and barely above a whisper. But the meaning was clear. Shane loved him. Had loved him before the warehouse. Had tried to tell him when consciousness briefly returned during the rescue. Needed him to know now with absolute certainty.

"I tried to...at the warehouse..." Shane struggled to continue, to make Ilya understand. "When you found me. I tried to tell you but...couldn't say it right."

He'd been so weak then. So close to death. The words had come out fragmented and incomplete, love stripped down to its barest form because that was all Shane had energy for.

But he'd meant it then. Meant it now. Would mean it always.

Ilya's expression crumpled. Whatever control he'd been maintaining shattered completely. Tears spilled down his pale cheeks, tracking through the exhaustion that marked his face.

"I know," Ilya said, his voice rough and broken. "I know. I heard you. I understood."

Relief flooded through Shane. Ilya had understood. Even with the incomplete words, the fragmented confession, Ilya had known what Shane was trying to say.

But there was something else. Something more important that Shane needed to make absolutely clear while he had the clarity and courage to say it. Shane's eyes locked onto Ilya's, holding his gaze with all the intensity he could manage.

"Thank you for not Turning me."

The words came out stronger than anything else Shane had said since waking. Clear. Definite. No room for misunderstanding.

Pain flashed across Ilya's face. Visible and immediate and deep. But he didn't look away. Didn't try to argue or convince Shane otherwise.

He'd seen the desperation in Ilya's face in the warehouse. He had understood that Ilya wanted to Turn him, maybe had been on the verge of doing it to save Shane's life. And maybe Ilya was still considering it now, looking at Shane hooked up to IVs and monitors and thinking how much easier it would be if Shane was a vampire, immortal and impossible to kill.

But Shane didn't want it, not now. Not after spending hours being treated as less than human, being violated and drained and reduced to a resource. He needed to stay human, needed to maintain that piece of himself that the vampires had tried so hard to destroy.

When Ilya finally spoke, his voice was rough with suppressed feeling. "I promised. Only when you choose, yes."

The words were quiet but absolute. A vow, not just an agreement.

That meant everything.

Relief washed over Shane so intensely it made him dizzy. Or maybe that was just the exhaustion and blood loss. Hard to tell.

But Ilya understood. Truly understood. And wouldn't force the Turn even if Shane's life was in danger. Even if it was the only way to save him. Ilya would let Shane die as a human, rather than Turn him against his will.

The thought should have been terrifying. Instead, it felt like freedom. Like being seen and heard and respected as a person who could make his own choices about his own body. After hours of having every choice stripped away, having every bit of autonomy violated, this was exactly what Shane needed.

"Thank you," Shane whispered, smiling up at him. The words were inadequate but sincere.

Ilya's expression shifted again. Still pained, still clearly struggling with the promise he'd been tested to keep, but also something that looked like pride. Like he respected Shane more for making this choice, for standing firm on what he wanted even when the easier path would be to let Ilya Turn him.

"You're so brave, Shane," Ilya said, quietly. "Braver than I think I could be in your position."

The words settled into Shane's chest, warm and affirming. He didn't feel brave. He felt broken and traumatized and barely holding together. But maybe Ilya saw something in him that Shane couldn't see in himself yet.

King Aurelion stepped forward slightly, drawing attention for the first time since Shane had woken. His amber eyes were warm, concerned, and lacking their usual calculation.

"Shane," Aurelion said, his voice formal but genuine. "I am profoundly sorry for what was done to you. The kingdom failed in its duty to protect you. I take full responsibility for that failure."

Shane wanted to argue. He wanted to say it wasn't Aurelion's fault, it wasn't anyone's fault except the vampires who'd taken him. But he didn't have the energy for it and could barely keep his eyes open anymore. He kind of wanted to have a more private talk with Aurelion, without his mother's anger and without Ilya's emotions. Aurelion saw something on his face, so he simply gave Shane an acknowledging nod of his head and said no more.

His mother seemed to sense that Shane was exhausted; the crying sapped all of his energy.

"Shane needs to rest," Yuna said firmly, maternal protectiveness overriding any deference to vampire royalty. "All of you can talk more later. Right now, my son needs sleep."

No one argued. Even the King of Vampires nodded his acceptance of Yuna's command.

"I'll be right outside," Ilya said, looking at Shane. "I'm not leaving. I'll be here when you wake up again."

The promise settled something anxious in Shane's chest. They could talk more then, when he could process what had happened, and they could figure out what came next.

"Kiss," Shane said, smiling playfully.

His eyes widened, seeing Ilya's pale cheeks becoming rosy with a blush. He smiled into the gentle kiss that Ilya gave him. In front of both of their parents, it would have to do.

"Rest."

"Okay."

But for now, Shane just needed to sleep. To let his body continue healing. To trust that he was safe and protected and surrounded by people who loved him.

His eyes closed. Not fighting it this time. Just letting the exhaustion take him back under into sleep was restorative rather than dark.

The last thing he felt was his mother's hand still holding his, warm and steady and real.

Ilya loved him.

And Shane had made his choice about his humanity and been respected for it.

Shane woke gently at the sound of the door opening quietly and a woman in a white coat entered.

He smiled when he recognized her. "Dr. Sommers."

She approached Shane's bed, checking the monitors with clear satisfaction. Her expression was professional but he could see that she was exhausted and worried.

"Welcome back, Consort Hollander." Her voice was gentle but clear. "You gave us quite a scare."

"You can call me Shane."

Shane tried to sit up slightly, wanting to be more present for this conversation. His mother helped him, adjusting the pillows behind his back so he could lean against them without straining.

"Where's dad?"

Yuna gave him a small smile. "He just went to the cafeteria to get some food. He'll be right back."

"Okay."

Dr. Sommers pulled up a chair, sitting so she was at eye level with Shane rather than standing over him. The gesture felt deliberate, respectful, treating Shane as a person rather than a patient to be managed.

"Do you prefer to have a private conversation first? Or would you be okay with having your mother present?"

Shane grinned, grateful for the choice. "It's okay, she can stay. Thank you for asking."

"Very good. I want to give you a clear picture of what happened and what to expect," she said, meeting his eyes. "You lost over two pints of blood. For reference, the human body contains about ten pints total, and losing more than two is considered life-threatening."

Two pints out of ten. Twenty percent of his total blood volume was taken.

"You were in hypovolemic shock when you arrived," Dr. Sommers continued, her tone matter-of-fact, but not unkind. "Your blood pressure was dangerously low. Your heart was struggling to pump effectively with so little volume to work with. We got you stabilized, and started transfusions immediately."

She glanced at Yuna with a warm smile. "Your mother donated one unit. We got another from the blood bank, matching your type exactly. AB-positive is relatively rare, so we're fortunate we had units available."

Shane's eyes moved to his mother. She'd donated blood. Had literally given part of herself to save him while he'd been unconscious and unable to thank her.

"Mom." His voice cracked with emotion. "Thank you."

The words felt inadequate. How did you thank someone for something like that? For giving their blood, for sitting vigil, for holding his hand while he fought to survive?

Yuna's eyes filled with fresh tears. "Always, baby. Always. I'd give you all of it if you needed it."

Her hand tightened on his, warm and solid and real.

Dr. Sommers gave them a moment before continuing. "You're remarkably lucky, Shane. Another twenty minutes of blood loss and we likely wouldn't be having this conversation."

Twenty minutes.

The words hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Shane had been close to dying in that warehouse, strapped to that contraption, drained like livestock. If Ilya had taken twenty minutes longer to find the location, to breach the building, to reach him, Shane would be dead.

He thought about those final moments before consciousness left completely. The monitors flatlining. The feeling of floating away into darkness. How peaceful it had seemed, how welcoming. He'd been dying. Really, actually dying. And he hadn't even known how close the edge was.

Shane swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

"Your prognosis is good," Dr. Sommers said, drawing Shane's attention back. "You're going to be tired for several days, but your body will replace plasma in 48 hours. Your body needs about four to six weeks to fully replenish the red blood cells that were taken. We're keeping the IVs in to maintain hydration and deliver nutrients while your system rebuilds. I do want to keep you here for a couple of days to make sure that you're rebuilding hemoglobin. I suggest eating a lot of iron-rich foods. You'll want to limit any strenuous exercise or heavy lifting."

"Okay, that sounds good."

"It is. You were in great health before your abduction. Once we stabilize you, you'll make a full recovery." She gestured to his wrists, still bandaged from the friction burns. "The IV sites will heal. The friction burns on your wrists and ankles will heal. The bruises will fade."

Her tone shifted slightly, becoming more careful. "Physically, you'll make a full recovery in just a couple of weeks."

The implication was clear. Physically yes. But psychological recovery would take longer. Trauma didn't heal on the same timeline as friction burns and bruises.

Shane understood. He had already been feeling it, the way his mind kept returning to the warehouse, to Sasha's voice, to the sensation of blood flowing out of his veins. Even here, safe in a hospital bed surrounded by people who loved him, part of him still felt restrained and exposed and helpless.

He'd need therapy. Probably. Someone to help him process what had been done to him. Someone who understood trauma and violation and the specific horror of having your autonomy completely stripped away. But that was for later. For when he had the energy to think about recovery beyond just surviving the day.

Shane's thoughts turned to the other people who'd been hurt. The guards who'd fallen protecting him. Harris who'd tried to shield him. Marlow who'd positioned himself between Shane and the attackers even as the chemical weapon was killing him.

"My guards." Shane's voice was still rough, every word taking effort. "Harris. Captain Marlow. Are they...?"

He couldn't finish the question. He couldn't ask if they were alive or dead, if his decision to surrender himself had actually saved anyone or if they'd all died anyway.

"Harris had minor injuries, but he wasn't dosed with the chemicals. He's made a full recovery. Captain Marlow is in intensive care," Dr. Sommers said, her voice reassuring. "His condition is still critical but we've stabilized him. He took the worst of the chemical exposure. The weapon was designed to incapacitate vampires, and in high concentrations like what Marlow experienced, it caused significant damage to his respiratory system."

Relief flooded through Shane, making him dizzy.

"The other guards are also in ICU," she continued. "All of them are expected to survive, though their recovery will be longer than yours. The chemical weapon had lasting effects that we're still treating. But they'll live, Shane. All of them will live."

They were alive. All of them. The vampires who'd fallen protecting him, who'd been caught in that aerosol cloud, who Shane had watched collapse and thought might be dead.

They were fighting. They were recovering. They would survive.

His bottom lip trembled and the tears came again. Shane was getting tired of crying, tired of the emotional overload that kept breaking through his exhausted defenses. But he couldn't stop them. They were alive. All of them. His decision to give himself up, his choice to walk toward those attackers with his hands raised, it hadn't been for nothing.

"It's okay," his mother murmured, stroking his hair like she had when he was a child. "It's okay to cry. You've been through something terrible. Crying is how your body processes it."

"They're alive," Shane managed between sobs. "I thought they might be dead. Thought Harris was dead. Saw him fall and there was so much blood."

"He's alive and he's been trying to visit you. That stubborn vampire won't even properly rest until he can see you. That's how okay he is." Dr. Sommer said, smiling gently at him.

Shane laughed through the tears, the sound wet and broken but genuine. Of course Harris was being stubborn. Of course he was refusing to rest properly. That sounded exactly like him.

Dr. Sommers stood, giving Shane's hand a gentle squeeze. "I'll leave you with your family. But I'll be checking on you regularly. If you need anything, anything at all, the nurses know to contact me immediately."

She looked at Yuna. "He needs to rest more than anything else right now. His body has been through significant trauma and it needs time to heal. Don't let him overdo it, even if he feels like he has the energy. And make sure that he eats – meats, beans, greens, almonds, dried fruits like raisins and figs."

"Thank you, Dr. Sommers," Yuna promised. "We'll make sure he eats and rests."

Dr. Sommers nodded, satisfied, and left the room with the quiet competence she'd shown throughout. The door closed softly behind her.

Silence settled over the hospital room. Not uncomfortable. Just quiet.

"Twenty minutes, mom," Shane said, quietly. "She said twenty more minutes and I'd be dead."

Yuna's expression crumpled. "I know. I heard. Shane, I..."

"Ilya found me and got to me in time. And everyone's going to be okay," he said, looking at her. "Don't blame him and Aurelion for what happened, okay? I love him and he loves me. We're going to be bonded."

"Are you sure that's what you want?" She said, meeting his eyes.

He took a deep breath and then nodded. "Yes. I want to be with him and stay. Don't be mad at him, okay?"

Yuna stared at him for a long moment, her dark brown eyes looking at his face. Then she sighed and closed her eyes, nodding.

"I'll try very hard not to blame him," she said, squeezing his hand with both of hers. "But that doesn't mean he's not responsible for what happened."

"Mom," Shane protested, closing his eyes and pressing his head against the pillow. "Okay, I get it. But you have to promise to try very hard."

"Fine."

Shane turned his head and opened his eyes, giving her a long look. He held up his hand, fingers folded down except his pinky.

“Pinky promise.”

Yuna tried to keep her expression serious, but she grinned, her eyes watering. She wrapped her pinky around his, and then pulled his hand towards her, pressing her lips against the back of his hand.

“I love you, Shane.”

“I love you, too, mom.” He smiled and closed his eyes, relaxing his body. “I’m just going to close my eyes for a little bit until dad gets back with food.”

“Okay, baby, I’ll be right here.”

His eyes closed. Not fighting it anymore. Just letting the exhaustion take him back under.

Safe. He was safe. Everyone was alive. Ilya loved him. His parents were here. He could rest now. And maybe, eventually, he could begin to heal.

Chapter 14: The Monster Sleeps

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: OK friends, almost all of you knew the identity of the baddie! It was not that big of a surprise. HAHA! But now, we get to see if Ilya figures it out. There's also some violence. And there's also some really sappy romance. Hehe!

Author's Note 2: Shane + consensual biting. There's going to be a lot of consensual biting from now on. Should I tag for that? Yeah, let me see if I can tag that.

Author's Note 3: OMG this story is almost finished. I've got the outline and the first draft for chapter 15 done today. Will need to do some editing this week. YAY! Thanks for coming on this wild writing journey with me! It's been great fun! I have like a dozen more fic ideas for this pairing, but I haven't allowed myself to start something new! Not until this is finished and the other HR fic "The Erotic Awakening of Shane Hollander" is finished. Heh. Self-marketing my other story. (Winky face) ;)

Even after the last guest departed, after the King's embrace, after Shane's parents' tearful relief, after the careful joy of friends who had fought for Shane's rescue, the walls still seemed to hum with echoes. Laughter. Crying. Gratitude spoken too many times to count. *You're home. You're safe. We love you. Thank you for helping me get home.* The words had layered over one another until they became something almost unbearable in their sincerity, and Ilya had stood at Shane's side, watching him receive what he deserved, and felt something crack open beneath his ribs that he did not yet have a name for.

He closed the door to Shane's apartment with deliberate care, turning the lock until it clicked. The sound sealed them into quiet. Into privacy. Into the first real silence Ilya had allowed himself since before Shane was taken.

Shane stood just inside the threshold of the bedroom, wearing loose sleep clothes. His brown eyes were still bright with emotion, the kind of brightness that came after crying, raw and clean, but not yet settled.

He had cried openly in the sitting room earlier, overwhelmed by the sight of everyone gathered there for him, by the sheer volume of love directed at a man who had, for a few hours, believed he might never be alive to be loved. Ilya had let him cry. He stayed close without crowding, a steady presence at his periphery, one hand resting lightly at the small of Shane's back whenever Shane leaned into him, which was often, and withdrawing without comment when Shane needed space to breathe.

Now, it was just the two of them.

Ilya moved first, unhurried. He shrugged out of his jacket and set it aside on the back of a chair. The bedroom lights were low and warm. He had instructed the household staff to adjust them before Shane's arrival, choosing a temperature and intensity that mimicked candlelight without the flicker. Nothing clinical. Nothing that would remind Shane of harsh white lights and monitors and the hands that had taken too much from him without his permission.

Ilya had thought of very little else while Shane was gone.

"Do you want to sit?" Ilya said, softly. Just guidance, the kind of quiet direction that gave Shane's body something to do when his mind was still catching up to the fact that he was here, in this room, loved and safe.

Shane obeyed, perching on the edge of the bed with the careful posture of someone who had spent too long lying still. His hands folded and unfolded in his lap, restless but not afraid. Ilya noted the distinction. It mattered. Fear would have made Shane rigid, and would have drawn him inward. What he was instead was *unsettled*, like a man trying to remember how to occupy his own body.

Ilya knelt in front of him. He reached for Shane's shoes, his simple and worn sneakers and began unlacing them with precise, unhurried fingers. The act grounded him. Gave his hands something careful to do. Gave the fury somewhere to coil without striking.

The fury was always there now. It lived in the space between his thoughts, curled tight and patient, waiting. It had not diminished since the black site. It had only learned to be quieter.

"You don't need to be anywhere tomorrow," Ilya said, working the laces loose with the same care he might give to something sacred. "Or the day after. My intelligence team will want to speak with you eventually, they have questions. But we all agree that your recovery comes first."

Shane let out a quiet breath. Something like a laugh, but lighter. Relieved.

"I know. Vasily gave me a head's up that they'd like to question me. He made it very clear it would be straightforward. Not scary. Not an interrogation or anything like that."

Ilya's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. He set Shane's shoes aside, neatly, aligned, and allowed himself one slow exhale through his nose.

He would have words with his Seneschal about the appropriate way to approach his Consort. Vasily was efficient, thorough, and possessed an almost preternatural ability to anticipate what needed doing before Ilya had finished thinking it. But there were moments, small, well-intentioned moments, where Vasily's pragmatism brushed too close to the edges of something Shane was still healing from. The casual reassurance. The preemptive framing. It came from a good place, Ilya understood that. But Shane did not need to be managed. He needed to be *held*.

"I know everyone is coddling me right now," Shane continued, pulling Ilya's attention back. "And usually that would drive me a little crazy..."

Ilya glanced up, studying Shane's face with the kind of attention he had spent centuries perfecting, reading micro-expressions the way a scholar reads text, parsing the slight downturn at the corner of Shane's mouth, the way his gaze drifted sideways when he was about to say something he hadn't fully committed to yet.

"And how do you feel about that?"

Shane shrugged, sheepish in a way that made him look younger than he was.

"Honestly? I kind of like it. The attention. The fussing. Everyone checking on me." He hesitated. His fingers stilled in his lap, not restless now, but searching for the right words, turning them over the way someone might turn over a stone to see what lived beneath it. "It feels...*nice*. To be cared for." A beat. "I know it's probably because of my trauma and I probably need therapy, but...I like it."

Ilya's chest tightened.

Not with pity. Not with the protective ferocity that had driven him through interrogation chambers and black site corridors. This was something quieter and more devastating, the simple ache of watching someone you loved discover, as if for the first time, that they were worth caring about.

"I would never take that from you," Ilya said immediately. The words came without calculation, pulled from somewhere below thought. "Not ever."

Shane looked at him then, really looked, with the searching, deliberate attention of someone who had learned not to trust easy reassurances. He studied Ilya's face for a long moment, reading whatever he found there, and then smiled. A real one. Tired, bruised at the edges, but genuine in a way that made Ilya's ancient heart do something embarrassingly close to stumbling.

"I know," Shane said quietly. "I do need to find a therapist, though."

"I can give you recommendations," he said, smiling at Shane. "We can find the right doctor for you."

"Okay."

Ilya finished with the shoes, set them neatly beside the bed, and rose. He sat beside Shane on the mattress. Close enough that their shoulders brushed, close enough to feel Shane's warmth seeping through the thin fabric of his shirt, to hear the slight hitch in his breathing when the silence stretched between them like something physical.

The silence was not uncomfortable. It was the kind that existed between two people who did not need to fill every moment with meaningless talk. But beneath it, Ilya could feel Shane gathering himself. Turning something over internally, working up to it.

"There's something that I remember," Shane said, carefully.

Ilya did not move and did not interrupt. He had learned, painfully, through trial and error and one memorable incident where he had pushed too hard and Shane had shut down entirely for an afternoon. He learned that he needed to wait patiently for Shane to arrive at whatever he needed to say in his own time, at his own pace, without the pressure of a question or a prompt.

"I don't remember everything and I'll tell the intelligence guys everything I can," Shane continued. His voice had shifted, quieter now, more careful, as if he were picking his way across uneven ground in the dark. "A lot of it is...gone. Or blurred. Like trying to read through frosted glass." His fingers twisted together in his lap, a slow, rhythmic movement that Ilya recognized as a self-soothing gesture. "But there was one vampire. The one who seemed to be in charge of the blood draining."

The room dimmed.

Not literally; the warm, low light held steady and unchanged, giving them a cozy peace. But the monster inside Ilya awakened. Something old and predatory, buried deep beneath centuries of civilization and restraint, stirred in recognition. Not at Shane's words. At the shape of what they were pointing toward.

Shane kept going, unaware of how close the monster had crept to the surface.

"He knew my name. Knew I was the Tribute Consort." A pause, during which Shane's brow creased, the expression of someone trying to pull a detail from the wreckage of memory. "He knew *you*. Said things about you. About...your weaknesses." Another pause. Longer this time. "He called you a romantic."

Ilya's vision darkened.

Sasha.

The name detonated in his mind, silent, contained, and devastating. Black crept in at the edges of his sight, swallowing the blue of his eyes as fury surged upward like something rising from deep water. Controlled only by centuries of discipline and the ironclad promise he had made to himself in a black site interrogation room, kneeling on cold stone with blood still drying on his hands:

Shane will never see this part of me.

Shane would never know what had screamed for mercy beneath his claws and fangs. What had broken, and begged, and offered everything in exchange for one more day of existence.

"I think his name was Sasha. He said he knew you intimately," Shane added, voice quieter now. Careful. The way someone spoke when they were delivering information they suspected might be wounding. "He was...angry. Jealous."

Ilya's jaw locked so tightly he felt the ancient bones of his skull creak with the pressure.

The name coiled in his mind like a venomous thing, sharp-edged and unmistakable.
Aleksandr Nikitin.

The monster surged, furious and eager and *hungry*, remembering blood on concrete and confessions torn from unrepentant mouths.

Ilya forced it back.

Forced *himself* back.

It was harder than it should have been. The monster was stronger now, fed and sated in ways it had never been before the black site, and that satiation made it bolder, more willing to press against the boundaries Ilya set. He contained it with the same discipline he had used for six hundred years: breath, intention, the conscious choice to remain himself rather than what lived inside him.

Shane shifted, finally noticing. The movement was small, a slight drawing-back, an instinctive recalibration, and his gaze lifted to Ilya's face.

It stilled.

"Ilya," he whispered. "Your eyes..."

"No, Shane, don't look at me."

"What's happening to you?"

"My monster...there is something primal inside of me," Ilya tried to explain, not wanting to scare Shane. "It has always been a part of me, when I was Turned. Something ancient and full of anger."

Shane touched his face, trying to turn it so that he could see.

"No, Shane, it is very close to the surface and could hurt you!"

The words came sharper than Ilya intended, not angry, but urgent. A warning. An instinct born of centuries of keeping the monster hidden from every person he had ever allowed close to him.

The monster growled, offended. *Never hurt Consort!*

But brave Shane did not flinch and did not pull away.

"Hey."

He reached out, fingers brushing Ilya's wrist with a gentleness that had no business existing after everything Shane had endured. The touch was grounding and deliberate. It felt *anchoring*, the gesture of someone who understood, on an instinctive level, that Ilya was teetering on an edge and needed something solid to hold onto.

"Did I do something wrong?" Shane asked, quietly.

The question landed like a blade between Ilya's ribs, clean and precise and devastating in its innocence. Because of course Shane would ask that. Of course the first thought in Shane's mind, confronted with something dark and frightening in the person he loved, would be that *he* had caused it. That *he* was responsible.

Ilya turned fully toward him. He cupped Shane's face with both hands, thumbs settling warm and steady against his cheeks, and held Shane's gaze with an intensity that left no room for doubt.

"No," he said, firmly. "Never. You did *nothing* wrong. Not a single thing."

Shane searched his face, studying the darkness still lingering at the edges of Ilya's eyes with an openness that bordered on recklessness. But he wasn't flinching or looking away. He was just...looking. Curious.

"Does the, uh, monster know who I am to you?"

"Yes," Ilya said, softly. "The monster has always known you. It wants to protect you. Avenge you. Love you."

"Oh," Shane said, a little smile on his lips. "So it won't hurt me then."

"Shane..."

"You know who he is, the vampire who hurt me. Sasha?" Shane said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

Shane absorbed that for a moment, turning it over. Then, with the careful precision of someone navigating a minefield: "And...he was someone you loved."

"No." Ilya said it clearly, without hesitation, without the hedging that might have been warranted in another context. "I was never in love with him. But yes. We were lovers. A long time ago."

The silence that followed was heavy, thick with implication, with history, with the weight of things that could not be undone. But it was not frightening. Shane did not recoil from the admission. He simply received it, the way he received most difficult truths, with a stillness that suggested he was thinking, not reacting.

Shane exhaled slowly and leaned back on his hands, gaze drifting toward the ceiling as if the answer to something complicated might be written in the shadows between the light fixtures.

"I thought so," he murmured, nodding to himself. "He hated me like I took you from him."

Ilya swallowed. The motion felt like dragging something rough across his throat. "You did not."

"But he *thought* I did." Shane's mouth curved into something sad but steady, not bitter, not wounded, but the expression of someone arriving at an uncomfortable understanding and choosing to sit with it rather than look away. "Enough to kidnap me. Drain me. Almost started a war."

Ilya watched him closely. Studied every line of Shane's face for the tremor he expected to see, the crack in the composure, the fear breaking through. The moment where the reality of what had been done to him, and *why*, finally became too heavy to carry with this kind of grace.

It didn't come.

Instead, Shane looked back at him, tired, bruised beneath the eyes, alive in a way that still made Ilya's chest ache every time he registered it, and said quietly, "I guess I always knew loving you would be dangerous."

Something in Ilya cracked.

Not the monster. The monster was still, coiled and silent, waiting for a threat that was not in this room.

The *man* cracked. The part of him that had spent centuries building walls high enough to keep the world from seeing what lived behind them. The part that had learned, through loss and loneliness and the particular grief of immortality, that vulnerability was a luxury he could not afford.

Shane had just dismantled it with a single sentence. Without trying. Without even realizing what he had done.

Ilya drew Shane gently back against him, one arm wrapped securely around Shane's shoulders, the other hand coming to rest against Shane's hip, holding him there with a firmness that was equal parts tenderness and the bone-deep need to feel Shane's warmth, Shane's solidity, Shane's continued existence pressing against him like proof of something miraculous.

Shane went willingly, relaxing in Ilya's hold as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if fitting himself against Ilya's body were something his muscles remembered even when his mind was still catching up to safety.

"But I've never been afraid of you, Ilya."

"I am so sorry," Ilya said. The words were torn from somewhere deep and aching, dragged up from a place he rarely let anything reach. "That my past hurt you. That my mistakes put you in danger."

Shane's hand curled into the front of Ilya's shirt, not pulling, not clutching, just *holding*. An anchor as much as an embrace. "You still came for me."

"Yes," Ilya said fiercely. The word carried the weight of everything he could not say in this moment, every hour spent hunting, every interrogation, every choice made in darkness that Shane would never need to know about. "Always."

And whatever darkness waited in his past, whatever monsters still remembered his name, whatever sins still lived in the black site's stone and silence, none of them would ever touch Shane again.

Not while Ilya still existed in this life.

The lights were dimmed further, the palace settling into its deepest hours. Outside the tall windows, the city glowed softly in the distance, amber and silver, muted by the height and the glass, distant and unreal, as if it belonged to another lifetime entirely.

Shane lay on his side beneath the blankets, hands tucked under his pillow, shoulders drawn in, breathing shallow but steady. He had not said he could not sleep. He had not needed to. Ilya could feel it in the tension that never quite left Shane's body, a low, persistent hum of alertness that lived in his muscles even when his conscious mind had surrendered to exhaustion. It lived in the way his fingers kept worrying the edge of the sheet, pulling and releasing in a rhythm that matched no heartbeat Ilya could identify. It lived in the careful stillness of someone who had learned, in a place where stillness was the only autonomy available, that movement could invite memory.

Ilya sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, fully dressed except for his jacket, one hand resting lightly against Shane's spine. Not holding him down. Not restraining. Not even pressing, but just there. A constant point of contact. Warmth against warmth. Proof that the space Shane occupied was shared, that he was not alone in the dark.

Minutes passed. Then more. Ilya counted Shane's breaths the way he had counted them in the hours after Shane's rescue, obsessively, precisely, each one a small confirmation that the worst had not happened.

Shane shifted. A small sound escaped him before he could stop it, not a cry, not even close, but a breath pulled too sharp, yanked inward as if something had snagged it on the way out. The sound of someone whose body had not yet fully accepted that the danger had passed.

"Ilya," he whispered.

"I'm here."

"I know." A pause. "I keep thinking if I fall asleep, I'll wake up there again."

Ilya closed his eyes. Briefly. A single, controlled contraction of will, containing the surge of rage that answered Shane's confession the way a dam contains a river, holding it back, holding it *in*, refusing to let it surface where it might frighten the person he was trying to protect.

When he opened his eyes, his voice was steady.

"Then don't sleep yet," he said, stroking Shane's head gently. "We will sit together until your body remembers where it is."

Shane turned his head slightly, just enough to look at Ilya over his shoulder. In the low light his eyes were dark, reflective, catching what little illumination the room offered and holding it. There was something searching in his expression. Not afraid. Checking.

"You're not going to leave."

"No."

Not later. Not when you fall asleep. Not when the palace demands my attention or the war room summons me or the weight of everything I have done in the last five days presses down hard enough to crush. Not ever again.

Shane nodded. The tension in his shoulders eased by a fraction, not gone, but loosened, like a knot that had been pulled slightly less tight. He rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling as if counting shadows, mapping the unfamiliar architecture of safety the way a traveler maps new terrain.

Ilya adjusted without comment, stretching his legs out along the mattress so that Shane could rest more fully against his side. The movement was subtle, a small recalibration, an accommodation made without drawing attention to itself. Shane settled into it instinctively, his body finding the solidity of Ilya's frame and gravitating toward it the way a compass needle finds north.

Vampiric patience met human fragility and yielded without question. Without impatience. Without the faintest suggestion that Ilya's time was anything other than exactly where it needed to be.

Eventually Shane spoke again. His voice was quieter now, not subdued, but thoughtful. Reflective in the way that sometimes preceded a confession, or an observation Shane had been sitting with for longer than he let on.

"In the hospital, when I woke up at night, there was always someone watching the monitors or checking my vitals. A nurse, my parents, or one of your people. I didn't like it. The feeling of being watched while I was trying to recover. Like I wasn't trusted to just...*be*." A pause. "But now it's too quiet and I don't know what to do with that."

Ilya considered this. He turned the information over carefully, not the surface of it, the shape beneath. Shane was not complaining about the silence. He was describing a gap. A space where something used to exist, even something he had resented, and the absence of it left him unmoored.

He needed *something* in the quiet. Not more attention. Not Ilya's surveillance. Something gentler. Something that filled the space without demanding anything from him in return.

Ilya reached for the book on the bedside table. A thin volume of poetry, well worn, the spine soft with age, the pages slightly foxed at the edges. Ilya had placed it there deliberately, choosing it from among the dozens of volumes in the library with the same care he brought to everything that touched Shane's life. He opened to a familiar page. A poem he had read aloud before, in another context, on another evening when Shane had wanted closeness.

"I'm going to read. You don't have to listen. Just let the sound exist."

Shane's fingers curled into the fabric of Ilya's shirt, a small, instinctive movement, like reaching for something solid in uncertain water. "Okay."

Ilya began.

His voice was low and even, each word shaped with care, not performed, not projected, but offered. He chose a rhythm meant to soothe rather than impress, something grounded and unhurried, the cadence of it closer to breathing than to speech. He read as he had before when Shane had first discovered that Ilya's voice could do this, could reach past the noise in Shane's mind and settle something that nothing else quite touched. But slower now. Leaving space between lines so Shane could breathe. So the words could land without crowding.

Gradually, Shane's body responded. The change was incremental, so slight that only someone paying the kind of attention Ilya was paying would have noticed it at all. The tightness in Shane's limbs relaxed by degrees. His breathing deepened, syncing unconsciously with the cadence of Ilya's voice the way a tide syncs with the moon, not by choice, but by some deeper, older mechanism. His fingers loosened their grip on Ilya's shirt without letting go entirely.

He did not sleep. Not yet. But he stopped bracing. Stopped holding himself rigid against the possibility of something terrible happening. The vigilance did not disappear, it was still there, humming beneath the surface like a wire under tension, but it quieted. Enough.

Halfway through the poem, Shane's eyes closed.

Ilya kept reading anyway. He finished the poem in full, giving each line the weight it deserved, letting the final words settle into the room like dust after a storm. Then he closed the book quietly and set it aside.

He did not move, did not shift the hand at Shane's back or adjust the blanket or change the position of his body. He simply stayed, listening to the steady thrum of Shane's heartbeat beneath his palm, alive, present, and continuing its rhythm with the quiet persistence of something that had survived and intended to go on surviving.

After a long while, long enough that the shadows outside the window had shifted perceptibly, long enough that the palace's deepest hours began their slow retreat toward dawn, Shane stirred again. His eyes fluttered open, unfocused, blinking against the low light as if he had surfaced from deep water.

"Ilya?"

"Yes."

Shane was quiet for a moment. "Are you angry?"

The question was quiet. Careful. Stripped of context in the way that questions sometimes are when they come from the edge of sleep, raw, unguarded, asking something that Shane might not have asked if he had been fully awake and conscious of how it sounded.

Ilya answered without hesitation. "I am furious about what was done to you. I am not angry with you."

Shane absorbed that. The distinction mattered, Ilya could see it register in the slight easing of something around Shane's eyes, the way his shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch.

"Okay," Shane said, accepting Ilya at his word.

Silence returned. This one softer than the ones before, less weighted, less full of unasked questions. The kind of silence that could hold two people without pressing down on either of them.

Eventually Shane's breathing changed again. Deeper this time. Less guarded. The rhythm of someone whose body had begun, tentatively, to trust that the dark was safe. His grip on Ilya's shirt loosened but did not release entirely, maintaining the connection even in sleep, as if some part of Shane's mind understood that the thread between them was the thing keeping him tethered to this room, this moment, this life that was still his.

He slept in pieces at first. Drifting in and out, each time resurfacing with a small, disoriented whimper, his eyes flying open, searching the room, finding Ilya exactly where he had been. Each time, the search took less time. Each time, the whimper was quieter.

Each time, Ilya answered with presence alone. No words. No movement. Just *there*.

Hours later, when Shane finally slipped into a more lasting rest, breathing deep and even, body slack against Ilya's side, the tension finally, fully gone from his frame, Ilya remained awake.

He watched the slow rise and fall of Shane's chest. Memorized the rhythm of it. Let it anchor him the way Shane's touch had anchored him earlier, not as a cage, but as a fixed point. Something to orient himself around in the vast, dark landscape of everything he had done and everything he had become in the weeks since Shane was taken.

The monster slept too, coiled and contained somewhere deep in Ilya's core, because tonight it was not needed. Tonight there was no prey to hunt, no confession to extract, no darkness to wade into. Tonight there was only this: Shane's human heart beating steadily against his side, a promise kept, and a quiet vigil that would last as long as it had to.

Morning came gently, filtered through tall windows and gauzy curtains that softened the light before it reached Shane, diffusing it, warming it, and turning the harsh clarity of dawn into

something closer to honey. Ilya had not slept. He had not needed to. He had simply shifted when necessary, careful, precise movements, each one calibrated to disturb Shane as little as possible, and spent the remaining hours of darkness counting breaths and watching the light change and letting the slow passage of time do what time did: made the promise of safety feel marginally more believable.

By the time Shane woke, the room was gold-edged, and Ilya had already spoken quietly to the household staff about breakfast.

Breakfast was quiet. Toast, oatmeal, fruit, coffee, simple things, chosen for their familiarity, their ability to anchor Shane to the texture of a normal morning. Nothing elaborate. Nothing that would require decisions or performances or the kind of social energy Shane did not yet have to spare. Sophie had arranged it on the small table by the window, where the light was soft and the view of the city stretched far enough to feel open without feeling exposed.

Shane ate slowly, methodically, as if proving something to himself with each bite, that his body still obeyed him, that the mechanics of appetite and digestion and the simple act of nourishing himself were still available, still functional, still *his*. Ilya stayed close without hovering, occupying the chair across from him, answering questions when they came and accepting silence when that was all Shane could manage. He did not fill the gaps. He did not offer unnecessary reassurances or cheerful observations. He simply existed in Shane's presence, steady and unhurried, and let Shane set the rhythm of the morning. Ilya drank his warmed blood slowly, keeping pace with Shane so that they could finish together.

When Shane's parents arrived, the atmosphere shifted the way weather shifts before a storm, not darker, exactly, but denser. More charged. Relief layered over exhaustion, gratitude over grief, the complicated tangle of emotions that came from loving someone who had been lost and then found again.

Yuna held Shane too tightly. Ilya saw the way Shane's breath caught, not from pain, but from the force of being *held*, really held, by someone who believed she might never hold him again. She released him after a moment, tears already streaking her face, and apologized through them in a voice that cracked on every other word. Shane smiled and held her hands in his, and the gesture was so simple and so genuine that Ilya felt something tighten in his own chest in response.

"I know this is ridiculous, crying all the time," Yuna said, sniffing. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, centering herself. "Okay. Enough. I'm done."

Shane chuckled softly. "I know. Sometimes it just happens. But I really am getting better."

David simply settled for keeping one hand on Shane's shoulder. A talisman. A claim. *I am here. You are real. I have not lost you.* Shane leaned into the touch without comment, and his father's jaw trembled only once before he steadied himself.

"His Majesty has offered us a place in the palace. There's good work that we can do here, so we're not just hanging around," David said, clearing his throat.

"Do you really want to stay? I mean, I'll understand if you want to go home and —"

“Shane, there’s nowhere else we want to be than here with you,” Yuna said, stroking his head with her hand. “Even if we do have to suck it up under Aurelion’s generosity.”

“Mom,” Shane said, chiding her gently. “King Aurelion has been nothing but kind to me. Be nice to him. He’s going to be like my, uh, future father-in-law or something like that.”

He glanced up at Ilya and Ilya couldn’t help but smile, nodding his head in confirmation. Aurelion would love nothing more than to be Shane’s father-in-law. Aurelion had already claimed Shane as his son. No doubt that Shane would probably end up as his favorite.

“Fine,” she said, sighing deeply. “He has been extremely kind to us as well. I just don’t want to be indebted to *them*.”

“Mom!” He groaned, shaking his head. “Ilya, my mom is really not this mean.”

Ilya grinned at him. “She is your mother. I expect nothing less.”

Yuna gave Ilya a long and assessing look. “Are you doing everything that you can to make sure that my son is safe from those Ashen Cross assholes?”

He bowed his head. “Yes. We have dismantled the cells and we will continue to monitor any threats to Shane.”

That seemed to appease her for the moment. Ilya could see the curiosity in Shane’s face, but Ilya did not want Shane to be involved in any of the nasty work of taking down the terrorists.

He got to his feet, walking to Shane at the couch. “I must go and attend to my duties. I will return in time for dinner.”

“Okay,” Shane said, tilting his face up for his goodbye kiss. “See you tonight.”

Ilya kissed him, affectionate and chaste. “Tonight.” He stood and smiled at Shane’s parents. “Yuna. David. My Seneschal, Vasily, is at your disposal. For whatever assistance you need to handle your property and business in the Commonwealth and setting up your residence here in the palace.”

“Thank you, Ilya,” David said, his hand on Ilya’s shoulder, walking him to the door.

Shane caught Ilya's eye as he moved toward the door. The smile Shane gave him was warm, unguarded, and carrying none of the desperate brightness that had characterized the night before. Something that said: *I see you. I know what you did. Thank you.*

Ilya inclined his head in return, a small, deliberate gesture, formal enough to acknowledge the moment without drawing attention to it, and left the apartment.

The war room was already sealed when he arrived. No guards inside. No aides. Only crown and blood, the ancient phrase for the innermost circle of vampire rulers, the gathering that existed beyond protocol and ceremony, where truth was the only currency that mattered.

King Aurelion stood at the head of the table, hands clasped behind his back in a posture Ilya recognized from centuries of observing him, the stance his father adopted when he was thinking carefully about something and did not want anyone to see the calculation happening behind his eyes. Cassimir leaned against the far wall with his arms folded, the casual posture at odds with the sharpness of his attention. Gregor sat rigidly in his chair, spine straight, eyes fixed on the door with the kind of alert stillness that suggested he had been waiting. Vasily occupied his usual place at Ilya's right, deferential, alert, and positioned exactly where Ilya expected him to be without having to look.

The war room sealed behind Ilya with a muted thrum, a vibration felt more than heard, the sound of ancient wards engaging, layers of Fae magic and stone and enchantment clicking into place like tumblers in a lock. The air pressure changed subtly, the way it did whenever this room was sealed for a private council. This was a place built for truth. Not comfort. Not diplomacy. Truth, and the decisions that followed from it.

Ilya did not sit.

"I asked for this meeting because we have confirmation," he said, his voice carried the particular quality it always did in this room, stripped of warmth, stripped of the gentleness he used with Shane, and only the weight and precision of someone who had spent centuries learning how to command a room simply by speaking in it. "Shane remembered a name. Sasha."

Cassimir's eyes sharpened. The change was subtle, a slight narrowing, a recalibration of focus, but Ilya caught it. Cassimir knew the name. Of course he did.

"Sasha Nikitin?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "Aleksandr Nikitin."

Gregor exhaled slowly, a controlled release of breath that carried the particular weight of someone absorbing information that confirmed a fear he had already been carrying. "House Nikitin has always been loyal to House Rozanov. Are you certain, Ilya?"

"Yes. I do not blame the entire Nikitin bloodline yet," Ilya said, unbendingly. "But his involvement is no longer speculation. Shane described him clearly. The leadership role. He was there during the blood extraction. The familiarity with the operation. The personal obsession." He paused, letting each detail land. "Shane was very clear when he told me."

Aurelion's expression darkened, not dramatically, not with the theatrical gravity that lesser rulers employed when they wanted to signal seriousness. The King's face simply *closed*, the way a door closes when someone shuts it firmly. The warmth that usually lived in his features, directed at Ilya, at his court, at the kingdom he had ruled for longer than most civilizations had existed, retreated behind something colder and harder.

"You must be absolutely certain, my son," Aurelion said, quietly. "Sasha was once your lover and friend."

"I am certain. Sasha has expressed sentiments that align with the Ashen Cross. I suspect that he is the true architect of the Ashen Cross."

Vasily inclined his head. "That narrows the field considerably."

"It does more than that," Ilya said, coldly. "Nikitin has been careful, he has always been careful, even when he was careless about everything else, he has patterns. Houses he trusts. Supply routes he has used before. Old favors he believes still exist because he has not tested them in long enough to know they have expired."

Cassimir leaned forward, the casual posture dropping away. "We can flush him out."

"You will," Ilya said. The shift from *we* to *you* was deliberate. Ilya's role in what came next was different from theirs, more contained, more personal, and infinitely more dangerous. "I want him found, tracked, and taken alive to the black site."

Gregor hesitated. "Alive."

"Yes," Ilya said, raising his eyebrow. "I will not have him killed in the field. He must answer to me for everything that he has done to Shane, our people, and the threat to the Great Truce."

The hesitation in Gregor's expression was not disagreement. It was something closer to caution, the instinct of a general who understood that the cleanest resolution to a threat was usually the most permanent one. But he nodded, accepting the directive without further argument.

Aurelion watched Ilya closely. The King's gaze had not left his face since the beginning of the meeting, studying him with the particular intensity of a parent who had spent centuries learning to read his expressions and was now reading something new in them. Something that had not been there before.

"You have already been to the black site," Aurelion said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"And conducted the interrogations."

"Yes."

Silence settled over the room. Heavier now. The kind of silence that existed when everyone present understood that something significant was about to be disclosed, something that would change the shape of the conversation, perhaps the shape of everything that followed.

"The monster surfaced," Ilya said calmly. "Four times."

Cassimir stilled. The shift was immediate and total, the way a predator stills when it detects something unexpected in its environment. "Define surfaced, Your Highness."

"It took control long enough to drain four vampires to final death," Ilya said, matter-of-factly. "All were secondary operatives. All possessed only minor information relevant to Ashen

Cross operations. They were expendable."

The room absorbed this. Ilya watched each of them process it, Cassimir's jaw tightening almost imperceptibly, Gregor's eyes widening by a fraction before discipline smoothed the expression away, Vasily's posture shifting into something more alert without actually moving.

Aurelion turned fully toward him. "You *drank* vampire blood."

"Yes."

"That is poison to our kind."

"Yes," Ilya agreed. There was no defensiveness in his tone. No apology. Only the calm, clear presentation of fact. "It was not to me."

Cassimir frowned, a deep, thoughtful crease between his brows that suggested he was not merely skeptical but actively trying to understand the mechanism. "Explain."

"I cannot," Ilya said, shrugging. "I can only describe the effect. It does not weaken me. It does not make me sick. It fills something." He paused, searching for the precise language to convey an experience that existed outside the vocabulary available to him. "The monster settles. Not suppressed, but *satisfied*. The way I am satisfied after feeding on human blood, but deeper. More complete."

Gregor frowned, mirroring Cassimir's expression. "You truly felt no ill effects."

"No. The opposite. It sated the hunger in a way that human blood does not. The monster quiets afterward rather than pressing for more."

Aurelion's voice was controlled, but tight, the particular tightness of a king who was also a father and was trying very hard to remain the former while the latter demanded his attention. "Or you are adapting. Evolving."

The observation hung in the air. Ilya met his father's gaze directly.

"Perhaps," he said. "But it did not escalate past my control of it. It did not spread. I ended the interrogations when the necessary information was secured and no sooner. The hunger did not return in the hours afterward. It did not push for more."

Vasily spoke carefully, with the measured precision of someone offering a hypothesis rather than a conclusion. "Your bloodline is unique, Your Majesty. Sire inheritance may be a factor. There are accounts, old ones, poorly documented, of royal vampires possessing metabolic anomalies that do not present in lesser lines."

Aurelion's gaze was unblinking. "You are tampering with something ancient, Ilya. Something that has existed in our blood longer than our civilization has existed to study it."

"I am thriving in my change," Ilya replied. The words were not defiant. They were simply true. "And I will not apologize for that."

Or stop.

The King studied him for a long moment, searching, assessing, weighing something that existed beyond the scope of the briefing. Then he inclined his head. A single, deliberate nod. Not approval, exactly, but an acknowledgment and permission to continue.

"The remaining prisoners confirmed the Ashen Cross's broader intent," Ilya said, plainly. "Their goal was to provoke war against the humans. Nikitin believed my attachment to Shane made me weaker. Predictable. Vulnerable to manipulation through emotional leverage." Ilya's mouth curved, not a smile, but something close to one, carrying a dark amusement that had nothing to do with humor. "He was correct on one count."

"And which one was that?" Gregor said, curiously.

Ilya smiled. "Shane does have emotional leverage, but not one that I fear he will use to manipulate me. He is my Consort after all."

Cassimir said, nodding. "Then we will dismantle what remains of the Ashen Cross."

"You will," Ilya agreed. "But understand this clearly." He looked at each of them in turn, Cassimir, Gregor, Vasily, and finally Aurelion. The monster did not surface. It did not need to. The weight of what Ilya was about to say carried its own gravity. "If anyone attempts to touch Shane again, anyone, from any House, for any reason, there will be no interrogations. No black site. No restraints. The monster and I are aligned in how we will protect Shane and from this moment forward."

No one in the room doubted him.

Aurelion dismissed the others with a gesture, a slight inclination of his hand, the signal that had ended a thousand councils before this one. Cassimir and Gregor departed without protest, each offering a formal bow as they passed. Vasily bowed to Ilya, deeper than the others, the bow of a Seneschal to his Prince, and followed them out, the door sealing behind him with the same quiet thrum it had made when it closed.

Father and son stood alone.

The silence that followed was different from the silences in Shane's apartment. This one was not tender. It was not weighted with grief or gratitude or the complicated texture of intimacy. It was the silence of two people who had known each other for centuries and understood, without needing to say it, that what came next was not a conversation so much as a reckoning.

Aurelion's voice softened. Not entirely, the King did not shed his authority the way a human might shed a coat, but enough. Enough to signal that what he was about to ask was not a question from the crown. It was a question from a father.

"You have still not Turned him."

"No."

"You had opportunity. Authority. Even justification." Aurelion's tone was careful, not accusatory, but probing. The way a surgeon probes a wound to understand its depth. "Shane was near death. He's still vulnerable. You could have administered the Turn without him being conscious of it."

"I considered it so many times."

"And you still chose not to."

"Yes."

Aurelion regarded him with something like grief, an old grief, worn smooth by centuries of carrying it, but no less real for its age. "You know why I ask."

"I do."

"My Consort," Aurelion said quietly. The name, or rather, the role, the designation that stood in for a name that his father rarely used aloud, carried a weight that filled the room. "Irina wanted eternity with me. She gave me her consent. She understood what it meant and she chose it freely, and I did everything in my power to give her that choice exactly as she made it." A pause. The King's jaw tightened, a small, involuntary movement, the only crack in centuries of composure. "And still I lost her."

"I know," Ilya said. His voice gentled, not to softness, exactly, but to something warmer. Something that acknowledged the wound without trying to heal it, because some wounds did not heal. They simply changed shape over time, becoming familiar rather than acute. "And I am sorry for your pain. Every day."

"Then why deny yourself this certainty?" Aurelion asked, a little angrily. "If you Turn him, he exists. He stays with you – with us! The threat that was used against you disappears entirely. The vulnerability that Nikitin exploited ceases to exist."

"Because it would not be certainty," Ilya said. "It would be force."

Aurelion frowned. "He would live."

"And hate me," Ilya said, frowning. "Or worse. Endure me."

The words carried the particular weight of someone who had thought about this at length, who had turned it over in the dark hours of Shane's vigil, examined it from every angle, and arrived at a conclusion that cost him something to accept.

"Shane was violated, Father. His body. His mind. His blood. His choices. Everything taken without his consent, in a place where consent was meaningless. He is rebuilding himself from that wreckage, piece by piece, and every piece he rebuilds belongs to him again. What kind of man would I be if I added another violation to the list? If I took his mortality, his *humanity*, without his permission, no matter how noble the reason?"

Aurelion's jaw tightened again. This time the movement was not grief. It was something closer to recognition.

"He must be allowed to choose," Ilya continued, his voice softening. "Without pressure. Without fear. Not because I love him, and not because you are afraid of losing him, and not because the world is dangerous and immortality would make him safer. He must choose because it is his choice to make, and I will not be the person who takes that from him."

"And if he never does?" Aurelion asked, the question was quiet, stripped of rhetoric, and carried only the raw weight of a father who had lost someone he loved to the one thing no amount of power or authority could prevent.

Ilya did not hesitate. "Then I will love him for the length of his human life and bear the loss when it comes."

The words settled into the room like stones dropping into still water, heavy, final, carrying the kind of conviction that could not be argued with because it had already survived every argument Ilya could bring against it.

Aurelion searched his face for a long moment. The expression on the King's features was difficult to read, it shifted, settled, shifted again, cycling through something complex before arriving at a stillness that carried, beneath its composure, something very close to awe.

"You have changed," the King said, regarding him at length.

"Yes. For the better."

"At least," the King said quietly, and there was something almost like a smile at the corner of his mouth, faint, bittersweet, the expression of a man who had lived long enough to recognize growth when he saw it and was proud of it even when it frightened him. "You are no longer lying to yourself."

Ilya inclined his head. A small gesture. An acknowledgment that carried more weight than a longer speech might have.

When he left the war room, his path turned not toward strategy chambers or security briefings or any of the dozen things that demanded his attention in the aftermath of what had happened. It turned back toward Shane's apartment. Toward the warmth and the quiet and the sound of a human heartbeat that had become, without his permission or his planning, the center around which everything else in his life now organized itself.

The black site did not pretend to be humane.

It was stone and steel sunk deep beneath layers of wards old enough to remember wars that no one spoke of anymore, conflicts so ancient that the civilizations which had fought them had crumbled to dust, but the wards remained, embedded in the rock like scar tissue, still functioning after millennia because blood magic did not forget its purpose. No windows. No clocks. No natural light, no indication of weather or season or the passage of time beyond what the controlled lighting permitted. Just silence and stone and the steady, oppressive awareness that in this place, time belonged to someone else.

Ilya stood just inside the threshold of the interrogation chamber, hands clasped loosely behind his back. The posture was deliberate, relaxed enough to suggest he was not afraid, controlled enough to suggest he did not need to be. The vampire restrained in the chair across from him was young. Not newly turned, perhaps fifty years into immortality, old enough to have developed some sophistication, some awareness of how the world worked, but inexperienced enough that terror sat plainly on his face like a confession written in plain text.

The shackles bit into his wrists and ankles. Enchanted Fae iron, humming softly with suppression wards that dampened the vampire's strength and dulled his senses just enough to make resistance feel futile. The vampire's eyes flicked up when Ilya entered, a reflexive movement, the prey-instinct that existed in every vampire regardless of how civilized their exterior, and whatever hope he had been clinging to evaporated in the space of a single heartbeat.

Ilya could smell it. Fear had a scent, sharp, chemical, unmistakable once you learned to recognize it. This vampire's fear was flooding the room, saturating the air with its particular acrid sweetness.

"I can't," the vampire rasped. His voice was thin, stretched tight with the effort of maintaining any composure at all. "I swear I already told them everything I know."

Ilya said nothing.

He stepped closer. The movement was unhurried, one step, then another, each one deliberate, each one closing the distance between them with the patient inevitability of something that could not be stopped. As he moved, the monster began to rise. Not rushing. Not raging. Simply unfolding, the way something ancient and cold unfolds when it is given permission, stretching into the space that Ilya offered it, filling the room with a pressure that had nothing to do with air and everything to do with the sheer predatory weight of what Ilya carried inside him.

The vampire felt it immediately. His body reacted before his mind caught up, breath hitching, pupils dilating, every muscle in his restrained frame tensing as prey instinct slammed into something older and more fundamental than thought. The instinct that said: *Something is hunting you. Something you cannot fight. Something you cannot escape.*

The vampire whimpered.

"Please," he said, the word tumbled out fast, desperate, and stripped of dignity. "I don't know where Nikitin is. I swear. I was just logistics. Supply drops. Transport routes. I never met him face to face. I never even saw his —"

"That was not the question."

His voice was quiet. Conversational, almost. The tone of someone conducting a routine exchange, nothing urgent, nothing threatening. The contrast between the mildness of the words and the weight of the presence filling the room was deliberate. Ilya had learned, over the course of centuries and more interrogations than he cared to count, that the most effective

fear was not the fear of violence. It was the fear of *what might come next*. Of the unknown. Of a predator whose intentions were entirely opaque.

The monster slipped the rest of the way to the surface.

Ilya felt it complete the transition, felt the familiar expansion, the way his senses sharpened and the world contracted around him until there was nothing left but the vampire in the chair and the blood moving beneath his skin. The air in the room changed immediately, the pressure intensifying, settling against the stone walls like something physical and heavy. The temperature dropped, not dramatically, but enough. Enough to make the vampire's skin prickle. Enough to make the environment itself feel hostile.

The vampire's pulse spiked. Ilya heard it clearly, a frantic, uneven drumming, the rhythm of genuine terror. The sound was not satisfying. It was not gratifying or pleasurable in the way that some creatures might find the fear of their prey. It was simply information. Data. A confirmation that what Ilya was doing was working.

Ilya leaned down and bit him.

Fangs pierced flesh with precise cruelty, not savagery, not frenzy, but the calculated accuracy of someone who had done this thousands of times and understood exactly where to sink his teeth to maximize the effect. The artery at the vampire's throat opened beneath him, and the blood that followed was thick and wrong and *burning*, nothing like human blood, which was warm and rich and carried its own quiet music. Vampire blood was bitter, acrid, laced with something that should have been poison and was instead something else entirely. Something that filled a space inside Ilya that he had not known was empty until the first time he drank it and felt it close.

The monster drank. Not greedily, not the desperate, consuming hunger that characterized feeding on humans. This was slower. More deliberate. A drawing-in, steady and measured, taking exactly what was needed and no more.

The vampire screamed.

The sound tore from him uncontrolled, high and breaking, ripped from somewhere primal, every myth he had ever believed about the safety of his own kind shattering in an instant. Among vampires, there existed an unspoken assumption, never articulated, never examined, simply *accepted*, that the greatest threat to a vampire's existence was humanity. Humans with their weapons and their technology and their relentless, terrifying capacity for violence. The idea that another vampire might drain one of their own to final death was not simply taboo. It was, for most, literally unimaginable.

This vampire had just discovered that the unimaginable was happening to him.

His body convulsed against the restraints, wrists and ankles straining against the shackles, back arching, every muscle contracting in a futile attempt to escape something that could not be escaped by movement alone. The suppression wards hummed louder, absorbing the surge of desperate strength, holding him in place while Ilya drank.

Ilya withdrew before death claimed him. The precision of it was exact, he pulled back at the precise moment the vampire's heartbeat began to falter, sealing the wound with a swipe of his tongue that healed the punctures without healing the terror that accompanied them. Blood dripped from his lips, dark, viscous, carrying the same acrid sweetness that filled his senses. He did not wipe it away immediately. He let it remain, visible, a deliberate statement.

The vampire sobbed. The sound was raw and ugly and entirely involuntary, the kind of crying that happened when the body's fear response overwhelmed every other system. His eyes were unfocused, pupils blown wide, body trembling so violently that the chair rattled against the stone floor. Terror, complete, absolute, the kind that dismantled every pretense and left only the animal beneath, sat plainly on his face.

Ilya straightened. He reached for a cloth that had been left on the table beside the chair, set there before the interrogation began, as part of the preparation, and wiped his mouth with careful, unhurried movements. The gesture was almost domestic. Almost civilized. The contrast was another tool.

"You will speak," Ilya said, calmly. "And you will do so clearly."

The vampire nodded. Frantically, repeatedly, the movement so fast it was almost a tremor. "Yes. Yes, I will. Please. I didn't know. I didn't know he'd go that far. I swear, I didn't —"

"Where does Aleksandr Nikitin hide when he believes himself exposed?"

The vampire swallowed, a convulsive movement, his throat working against the residual trembling.

"He doesn't stay long anywhere. He moves. But there's an old safehouse. Northern industrial sector. An abandoned tram depot near the river." The information came quickly now, tumbling out with the desperate speed of someone who understood that cooperation was the only thing standing between him and what had just happened again. "He used it decades ago when House Nikitin fractured. He trusts it because no one thinks he'd go back. It's too obvious. Or it was obvious, a long time ago, and now it's just forgotten."

Ilya straightened fully. The monster retreated, smoothly, obediently, sliding back beneath the surface with the ease of something that had learned, over the course of weeks, exactly how far it was permitted to extend and exactly when it was expected to withdraw. Control returned like a blade sliding into its sheath: clean, precise, final.

"How many guards does he have?"

"Two," the vampire said quickly. "Maybe three. Old loyalists. People who were loyal to Nikitin before House Nikitin broke apart and have been waiting for him to resurface ever since. No Ashen Cross insignia. Civilian fronts, they look like ordinary residents, run a small business or two. Nothing that would attract attention."

Ilya turned toward the observation window, a slab of reinforced glass set into the wall, behind which the intelligence team waited in silence.

"Go tactical," he said to them. "Full containment. I want Nikitin alive and conscious when he arrives here."

"Yes, Your Highness," came the immediate reply through the intercom, a single voice, calm and professional, the tone of someone who had been briefed on what was happening in this room and had chosen not to think about it too carefully.

Ilya looked once more at the vampire in the chair. The creature had stopped sobbing, or rather, the sobbing had subsided into something quieter and more sustained, a continuous trembling that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than fear. From the place where the body kept its record of what had been done to it.

"If you have lied to me," Ilya said, quietly. "You will not survive our second conversation."

The vampire nodded. Again and again, the movement automatic now, the gesture of someone who had moved beyond bargaining and into simple compliance.

Ilya left the chamber without another word, reaching into his pocket for a handkerchief, wiping the vampire's blood from his mouth and chin.

The corridor beyond was silent, the particular, enforced silence of a place where sound was controlled as carefully as light. His footsteps made no noise on the stone. The wards dampened everything, absorbing vibration, creating an environment in which even the act of walking felt muffled and contained.

Above ground, teams were already mobilizing, getting into the helicopter. He could feel it through the wards, the subtle shift in the site's energy that accompanied classified tactical operations. Resources moving. Communications firing. The vast machinery of a kingdom's intelligence apparatus engaging with the smooth, practiced efficiency of something that had done this before and would do it again.

Sasha Nikitin had nowhere left to run.

Ilya watched on the monitors, following the tactical team on their mission. There was little drama to Sasha Nikitin's capture. No shouted warnings. No dramatic confrontation at the gates. No resistance worth noting, the safehouse had been breached with clinical efficiency, the guards neutralized before they could raise an alarm, and Nikitin himself had been taken from sleep.

The helicopter landed near the site and the tactical team delivered Sasha with the same quiet professionalism they brought to everything: restraints layered in Fae magic, his composure already cracking under the accumulated weight of where he was and who had ordered him brought there, his clothes torn and stained with blood that was not his own, the blood of the guards who had tried, in the final moments, to protect him.

Ilya waited in the central holding chamber.

The room was larger than the interrogation cells, a stone chamber with high ceilings and a single overhead light that cast everything in a flat, directionless illumination. No shadows to hide in. No angles to exploit. Just the room, and the stone floor, and the chair at its center where prisoners were sometimes bound, and the open space where they were sometimes simply left to stand, or kneel, or understand exactly where they were.

Sasha was thrown to his knees at the center of the floor.

The guards did not treat him gently. They had been briefed on what Nikitin had done, not the full scope of it, not the details that existed only in the confessions extracted in this very facility, but enough. Enough to make the restraints tighter than protocol strictly required. It was not only because of Shane, but for the attack on Captain Marlow and Shane's security team; their love for their Captain making their movements carry a particular edge. Ilya would have to bestow rewards on them for not outright killing Sasha. He would not blame them if they had.

Ilya watched from where he stood, near the far wall, hands clasped loosely behind his back, positioned so that Sasha would have to look up to find him. The posture was deliberate. The angle was deliberate. Everything in this room was deliberate.

Sasha looked paler than Ilya remembered. The observation arrived without sentiment, simply a fact, registered and filed. His hair was disheveled in a way that suggested he had been dragged from sleep and not given time to compose himself. His clothes, once tailored, once the kind of careful presentation that Sasha had always been meticulous about maintaining, were torn at the shoulder and stained dark along one sleeve. Blood that was not his own. His guards' blood, most likely, or perhaps the blood of someone else Sasha had fed on in the days since his safehouse was compromised and he had begun to run.

He was still beautiful. This observation arrived alongside the first one, equally without sentiment. Sasha had always been beautiful, it was one of the things that had drawn Ilya to him, centuries ago, in another life. The sharp lines of his jaw, the dark fall of his hair, the particular quality of his mouth when it curved into something that might have been a smile. Beauty did not diminish with desperation. It simply changed the purpose.

When Sasha looked up and saw Ilya, something transformed in his expression, a complex, rapid sequence of emotions that played across his features in the space of a second. Relief, first, sharp and genuine, the involuntary response of someone who had been expecting worse and had found, instead, a face he knew. Then fear, rushing in to replace it as the relief collided with the reality of where he was and what the presence of Ilya in this particular room meant. And beneath both of them, something older. Something that had existed between them long before Shane, long before the Ashen Cross, long before any of this.

Hope. Faint, desperate, and entirely misplaced.

"Ilya," Sasha breathed in relief. "Thank the gods that you're here. You have to tell them that there's been a mistake."

Ilya said nothing.

The guards withdrew at a gesture, a slight inclination of Ilya's hand, the signal that no further assistance was needed. They left without comment, the door sealing behind them with the same quiet thrum that characterized every door in this facility. The sound of it closing was final. Absolute.

Silence followed. Thick and deliberate, the kind of silence that Ilya had learned, over the course of centuries of interrogations, was more effective than any threat he could articulate. The silence said: *I have all the time in the world. You have none.*

Sasha swallowed. His eyes searched Ilya's face with an urgency that bordered on frantic, looking for something familiar, something that might still exist between them, some thread of connection that could be pulled upon and used.

"I knew you'd understand," he said quickly. The words came fast, rehearsed, as if Sasha had been preparing this speech for days, perhaps had been preparing it since the moment he realized he had been captured. "I knew you'd see why I had to do it. Why it was necessary."

Ilya stepped closer. One step. Measured. The distance between them contracted by a precise amount, enough to make Sasha flinch, not enough to touch him.

"You hurt him," Ilya said, looking down at him.

Sasha flinched again, a full-body movement this time, involuntary, the kind of physical recoil that happened when someone heard their own crime spoken aloud in a voice that carried the weight of judgment.

"I didn't mean to hurt him. Not like that. He was never supposed to almost die, the blood extraction was meant to be controlled. The others were careless. I told them to be careful with him. I gave specific instructions –"

"You nearly drained him," Ilya continued. His voice did not change. Did not rise, did not sharpen, did not carry any of the fury that lived beneath it. It simply stated facts, one after another, each one landing with the quiet precision of a blade being laid on a table. "You told him about me. About us. You used our history as a weapon against him while you stole his life."

Sasha's composure cracked. Not dramatically, not with the theatrical breakdown that some vampires employed when they understood that their situation was hopeless. It cracked the way old stone cracks: quietly, along lines that had been forming for a long time.

"I was trying to protect you," he said, the desperation in his voice was genuine. Ilya could hear it, could taste it in the air the way he could taste fear. This was not a performance. This was Sasha's version of the truth, and he believed it completely. "You were losing yourself. Binding to a human. Letting the King weaken you. Letting yourself become *vulnerable* in ways you never were before. I watched it happen and I couldn't –" His voice broke. He swallowed hard and continued. "I did this for you. Because I love you. Because I couldn't watch you destroy yourself."

Love. The echo of something that might once have mattered, centuries ago, in a time when Ilya was younger and lonelier and had not yet learned the difference between passion and possession. The echo of a relationship that had burned bright and consumed everything it touched and left nothing behind but ash and the particular kind of damage that only someone who *loved* you could inflict.

It reached nothing inside of him.

No grief. No nostalgia. No betrayal sharp enough to wound. Only a cold, precise clarity, the clarity that came from having already processed this, already understood it, and already decided what it meant and what it did not. The monster did not stir. There was nothing here that the monster recognized as prey, because the Sasha that Ilya had once known, had once desired, had once allowed close enough to see the parts of him that no one else saw, no longer existed. What remained was something desperate and diminished, clinging to a version of their history that served his own narrative and ignored everything else.

"I wish you had listened to my warning."

Sasha crawled forward on his knees, a movement that was partly instinct and partly calculation, the posture of supplication, the body language that said *I am no threat, I am beneath you, please*. The chains attached to his restraints scraped against stone, the sound harsh in the silence.

"I know you," he said, looking up at Ilya. "Better than anyone. Better than that human could ever —"

He stopped himself. He must have read Ilya's expression and understood, with the particular intelligence of someone who had spent a very long time reading Ilya's face, that finishing that sentence would be a fatal mistake.

"You were never meant for this life," Sasha continued instead, the words tumbling out faster now, the calculation behind them more visible. "Not this version of it. You were meant to rule without weakness. Without the vulnerability that comes from loving something that can be taken from you. I tried to save you from that. I tried to show you what you were risking."

"You tried to save me by destroying Shane."

The words were simple. Factual. They carried no accusation, no moral weight, no emotional charge. They simply named what had happened, stripped of every excuse and justification and reframing that Sasha had constructed around it.

Sasha's face crumpled.

"I would have stopped," he said, his voice breaking on the words. "I swear. I just needed to show you what you were risking. What he was costing you. Once you saw, once you understood —"

"You would have stopped," Ilya repeated. Not a question. An observation.

Sasha nodded frantically. "Yes. Yes, I would have. It was never meant to go that far. The others, they exceeded what I –"

The others. This was an interesting tactic. Ilya had questioned the four vampires from the warehouse; once Ilya spoke Sasha's name, they had told him everything.

"And if Shane had died?"

The question landed in the silence like a stone dropped into still water. Sasha's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. Nothing came out.

Ilya looked down at him. Studied the face that had once been familiar, that had once been a source of comfort, of connection, of something that Ilya had mistaken for love because he did not yet understand what love actually was. He looked at it now with the same calm, clear attention he brought to everything, and saw only what was there: a creature who had hurt someone Ilya loved, and who would do it again if given the opportunity, and who genuinely could not understand why that was unforgivable.

"You will not die today, Sasha."

Hope flickered in Sasha's eyes, immediate, reflexive, the panic-stricken grasp of someone who had been drowning and had just been told the water was not as deep as he thought.

"You will not die tomorrow. Or the day after that."

The hope did not disappear. It simply waited, trembling, for the rest of the sentence.

"You will remain here," Ilya said, tonelessly. "Entombed. Starved. Awake. Your hunger will become your only companion. Your blood will thin. Your body will wither, slowly, over decades. And when final death comes, and it will come, eventually, because the body cannot sustain itself indefinitely without feeding, it will come slowly. There will be no moment where it ends cleanly. No mercy. No release. Only the gradual, irreversible erosion of everything you are."

Sasha's face had gone white. Not pale, *white*, the color draining from his skin as understanding replaced hope with something so complete and so total that it left no room for anything else.

"Ilya," he whispered, horror in his voice. "Please."

"You did this because you loved me," Ilya said, the words were calm. Measured. Delivered with the same quiet precision as everything else. "That is what you told me. That is what you believe."

Tears streaked Sasha's face, silent and involuntary, the body's response to a terror that had moved beyond what words could express.

Ilya turned away.

"I do this because I love Shane," he said, softly. His back was to Sasha now, a deliberate choice. A signal that this conversation was ending. That whatever Sasha said next would not be heard, or if it was heard, would not matter. "I will care for him. Protect him. Bind myself to him in every way that is available to me. And if he chooses immortality, in his own time, I will Turn him with his consent and spend eternity earning his love."

The words were not addressed to Sasha. They were addressed to the air, to the stone, to the wards that would carry them down into whatever depth Sasha would be confined to. They were a statement of fact. A declaration of what existed now, in place of what Sasha had tried to destroy.

Sasha screamed. The sound tore from him, raw, ragged, grief and rage and terror braided together into something that was neither entirely human nor entirely vampire but simply *broken*.

"Ilya!" His voice cracked on his name. "You cannot do this to me. I am yours. I have *always* been yours. You don't get to – you can't just –"

The guards were already there, summoned by the sound, or perhaps by a signal Ilya had given that Sasha, in his current state, had not registered. They moved efficiently, hauling Sasha backward, the chains pulling taut as he fought them with the futile desperation of someone who understood, finally and completely, that there was nothing left to fight for.

Ilya did not look back.

"Prepare the coffin," he said to the warden, who waited at the chamber's entrance with the particular stillness of someone who had witnessed many things in this facility and had long since stopped being surprised by any of them. "Stone. Seal him in it. No blood. No communication. No access."

The screams echoed as Sasha was dragged down the corridor, his voice breaking, fragmenting, dissolving into incoherent sobs that grew quieter as the distance between them increased. The sound followed Ilya for only a moment.

Then the door closed.

Hours later, deep beneath the black site, in a chamber that had not been used in decades, excavated from the rock specifically for this purpose, a stone coffin was lowered into the earth. Wards flared as it settled into place, Fae magic engaging with a pulse that Ilya felt through the soles of his feet even from the chamber above. Chains locked. Seals were placed, layer upon layer, each one designed to hold, to contain, to ensure that what was inside would remain inside for as long as the wards endured.

Ilya stood above the sealed chamber until the final ward was placed and the stone floor was smooth and unmarked, as if nothing had ever been lowered into the earth beneath it.

"Bury him."

The warden nodded. The order was noted. The record would be kept, buried as deep as the coffin, accessible only to Ilya and the King.

When it was done, Ilya left the darkness behind. He climbed the stairs to the surface with the same unhurried pace he brought to everything, not rushing, not burdened by what he had just done in any way that showed on his face or in his movements. The monster was quiet. Satisfied in a way that had nothing to do with blood and everything to do with the completion of something that had needed completing. He slipped into the awaiting helicopter, nodding to the pilots.

He returned to the one place that mattered: *Back to Shane.*

The door to Shane's apartment opened quietly, the mechanism responding to his touch, and the sound that greeted him was laughter. Real laughter. Happy and unguarded, filling the sitting room with a quality of sound that Ilya had not heard in this apartment since before Shane was taken. It echoed off the high ceilings and the stone walls and the tall windows, bouncing off surfaces that had grown accustomed to silence and seemed almost surprised to be vibrating again.

Hayden was perched on the arm of the leather armchair, one leg tucked beneath him, wings fluttering behind him, as he was gesturing animatedly with a hand that held a glass of something amber. Harris sat nearby, leaning back in his chair with the relaxed posture of someone who had been there long enough to stop being formal about it, a glass of bloodwine balanced on the arm beside him. Evangeline occupied the opposite end of the sofa, tucked into the corner with her shoes off and her feet tucked beneath her, her expression bright with the particular kind of enjoyment that came from watching someone else tell a story well.

"And then," Evangeline said, wiping at her eyes with the back of one hand. "He tried to pretend he had meant to knock over the entire chessboard. Very dignified. Terrifying Crown Prince. Absolutely defeated by gravity."

Hayden snorted, a sound so undignified and so genuinely amused that it made Harris laugh in response, the two of them feeding off each other's amusement in the way that only people who had been friends for a long time could.

"He *glared* at the board like it had personally betrayed him."

Ilya paused just inside the doorway. He did not announce his presence. He simply stood, and watched, and let the moment exist without interrupting it.

"Why do you always tell me such terrible stories about Ilya," Shane protested, through his giggles.

"So that you know he's not the Crown Prince, His Royal Highness, but that he's Ilya, kind of a dick, and kind of stupid," Hayden said, his voice teasing. "Don't believe that being six hundred years old means he's any wiser than anyone else."

Ilya narrowed his eyes at Hayden, but he wasn't mad at him. It was true. Probably.

Shane sat curled into the corner of the couch, the same corner where Evangeline had been moments before, evidently displaced when she moved to make room. A blanket was draped loosely around his shoulders, more habit than warmth at this point, and his cheeks were flushed from laughing, the particular brightness that came from genuine amusement, the kind that bypassed every defense and simply *existed* in the body without permission or apology.

"Look, I appreciate all the stories, I want to hear all of them, but I know he's not just the Crown Prince. I *like* him, okay. I love him."

"Awww...that is so fucking sweet, Shane," Harris said, snickering.

"*Ohmygod*, fuck you, Harris!" Shane said, throwing a couch pillow at Harris as they all laughed.

He looked better than he had most mornings. Not healed, that would take longer, would take therapy and time and the slow, unglamorous work of rebuilding a sense of safety from the inside out. But he was connected to the people around him in a way that suggested his mind had, for at least this moment, stopped being hypervigilant about whether it was safe to relax.

When Shane looked up and saw Ilya in the doorway, everything else fell away.

The shift was immediate and total, as natural and inevitable as gravity. Shane's attention moved from the conversation, from Hayden and Harris and Evangeline, from the laughter that had been filling the room, and locked in on Ilya. The rest of the world did not disappear, exactly. It simply became irrelevant.

His smile went incandescent.

"Ilya," Shane said, already moving.

He crossed the room with more speed than he probably should have, his body not yet fully recovered, his balance not yet entirely reliable, his reflexes still calibrated for a world in which sudden movement was dangerous. The blanket slipped from his shoulders as he moved, forgotten, pooling on the couch behind him. He crossed the remaining distance and threw his arms around Ilya's neck with fearless abandon.

Ilya caught him instantly. His hands settled at Shane's back, firm, steady, and positioned precisely where they needed to be to support Shane's weight and ground him simultaneously. The grip was secure without being restrictive.

Shane kissed him without hesitation. "*Hmm*...you've had blood."

Ilya smiled. "I stopped at the kitchen for my meal, yes."

Shane wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "I know what that means."

He kissed Ilya again, soft at first, a press of mouth against mouth, warm and unhurried, the kind of kiss that was more about connection than passion. Then deeper. More insistent. A

claiming press of warmth and intention that said *mine* without words, said it with the particular confidence of someone who had, in the days since his return, discovered something important about what he wanted and was no longer willing to be quiet about it.

Ilya answered it just as instinctively. Relief flooded him, sharp, sudden, and so complete that it nearly took his breath away. He kissed Shane like someone proving something, not to Shane, not to the others who were watching with varying degrees of amusement and warmth, but to himself. Proving that this was real. That Shane was here. That the worst had not won.

When they broke apart, Shane looked at him with eyes that were still searching, not anxious, not afraid, but curious.

"You're different," he said, softly. "You don't feel...angry anymore."

Ilya brushed his thumb along Shane's jaw, a small, deliberate gesture, the kind of touch that carried more weight than words.

"I am not."

Ilya looked past Shane to Hayden, Harris, and Evangeline, who had, with varying degrees of subtlety, stopped pretending to continue their conversation and were watching the two of them with expressions that ranged from fond to openly amused.

"Everyone out. I need time alone with my Consort."

Hayden grinned immediately, wide, genuine, and entirely unburdened by any pretense of formality. "Oh, trust me, we can read the room."

Harris stood, stretching with the languid ease of someone who had been sitting too long and was grateful for the excuse to move.

"We'll check on you later, Shane. No overdoing it."

Evangeline smirked, a sharp, knowing expression that carried the particular edge of someone who had been watching Ilya and Shane interact for long enough to find their dynamic genuinely entertaining.

"Be gentle," she added, the comment directed pointedly at Ilya.

Hayden laughed, bright and loud and completely without embarrassment. "He's still recovering, Your Highness. Go easy on him."

Ilya inclined his head. The gesture was formal, the acknowledgment of a prince to his court, but it carried something warmer beneath it. A promise, made silently, that Shane would be cared for. That he was safe with Ilya. That the people in this room did not need to worry about the person they had come to love.

Shane did not wait.

He tugged Ilya down with him onto the leather couch, a movement that was part invitation and part demand, Shane's hands finding Ilya's jacket and pulling him closer with an insistence that left no room for hesitation. He climbed into Ilya's lap with a soft sound of satisfaction, settling there, fitting himself against Ilya's body with ease, his weight warm and solid and *present* in a way that Ilya had spent days afraid he would never feel again.

Shane's hands slid up beneath Ilya's jacket, fingers warm and insistent against the fabric of his shirt, mapping the planes of his chest and shoulders with a touch that was equal parts sensual and reassuring.

"Mine," Shane murmured against Ilya's jaw, pressing kisses there, along the line of his jawbone, down to the corner of his mouth, up to his temple. Each one a small, quiet claim. It made Ilya shiver in anticipation and desire, to be claimed by Shane. "I want you. I want all of you."

Ilya's control did not resist him.

It welcomed him, the way a lock yields when the right mechanism is engaged. Ilya leaned back into the couch cushions, letting Shane settle more fully against him, letting himself *feel* the aliveness of the person in his arms. The leather creaked softly beneath them as Ilya's hands slid up Shane's back, settling there, holding him, drawing him closer with a gentleness that surprised even Ilya with its depth.

"I thought I lost you," Ilya admitted quietly. The words came without calculation, pulled from somewhere beneath the discipline and the composure and the centuries of carefully maintained distance. His voice was rough, stripped of the smoothness it usually carried. "I have never known fear like that. Not in six hundred years. You scared me, Shane."

Shane stilled. The restless, searching movement of his hands quieted. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's shoulders instead, pulling him in, holding him close, the embrace carrying the particular weight of someone who understood, precisely, what Ilya had just admitted and what it cost him to say it.

"I'm here," Shane whispered. His voice was quiet, not fragile, but steady. Sure. The voice of someone who had decided, in the weeks since his rescue, exactly what mattered to him and was no longer willing to be ambiguous about it. "You found me."

Ilya buried his face against Shane's neck. Breathed him in, the particular warmth of his skin, the scent that was uniquely Shane's, layered now with the soap and the tea and the ordinary, mundane textures of a mortal life being lived. Alive. Present. Here.

"I love you," Shane said. Simple and sure. No hesitation, no qualification, no hedging. The words carried the weight of something that had been true for a long time and was only now being spoken aloud with the full force of Shane's conviction behind them.

The words struck deeper than any blade Ilya had ever encountered. Deeper than the black site's interrogation chambers, deeper than the fury that had driven him through those corridors, deeper than the monster that lived inside him and had been fed and sated and silenced. They reached the part of him that existed beneath all of that, the part that was

simply a man, ancient and tired and desperately, aching in love with someone who chose to love him back.

Ilya lifted his head. His eyes were dark, not with the predatory blackness of the monster, but with something quieter. Something that existed in the space between the man and the creature, in the narrow territory where both of them could coexist without either one consuming the other.

"Say that again."

"I love you," Shane repeated. The smile on his face was real and sweet. This smile was private. It belonged only to Ilya. "And..." He hesitated, not from uncertainty, but from the particular care of someone who was about to offer something precious and wanted to make sure it was received correctly. "If you wanted to," he added, his voice dropping seductively. "You could bite me. Just a little. I want it. I want you."

Shane sat up briefly to pull off his black tee-shirt, folding it neatly and dropping it on the floor.

The sleeping monster stirred, Ilya could feel its interest and curiosity.

It rose slowly, not surging, not seizing, but lifting, the way something rises from deep water when it senses something on the surface. It felt Shane's invitation and recognized it for what it was: consent. Eagerly offered. The exact opposite of everything that had been done to Shane in captivity, and the monster understood the difference in a way that surprised Ilya with its clarity.

He wants. Taste Consort.

Ilya shifted them carefully, guiding Shane so that his shoulder was exposed, the movement gentle but unyielding, the hands at Shane's back holding him steady. He pressed a kiss to Shane's shoulder first, reverent, unhurried, a pause that was not hesitation but intention. Then teeth, grazing the surface of Shane's skin in a warning that was also a question.

"Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I won't," Shane said, breathlessly. The certainty in his voice was absolute.

Ilya bit him.

Not deep enough to harm, just deep enough to taste.

Shane's *Sanguis Resonans* blood filled Ilya's senses; it was richer beyond anything he had ever tasted, layered with complexity, with depth, with something that went beyond the unique chemistry of Shane's blood and into the territory of emotion itself. Love. Trust. Devotion offered without reservation or condition. It poured through Ilya like light through glass, warming him from the inside, reaching places that had been cold for longer than he could remember.

It suddenly dawned on Ilya that perhaps the rarity of *Sanguis Resonans* wasn't the blood itself, but that it carried the essence of love that only a vampire could taste. The true secret of the Resonant Heart line.

Shane moaned with a low throaty sound, his fingers clutching Ilya's hair, then holding Ilya's head, keeping him close.

"Ilya," Shane whispered, his body shivering against Ilya. His voice was wrecked, soft and breathless and carrying the particular quality of someone who was being overwhelmed by sensation and did not want it to stop. "Ilya, Ilya..."

Ilya pulled back before hunger could claim him, before the *man* could press for more, before the intoxication of *Shane's love* could override the discipline that had kept him contained for hundreds of years. He sealed the wound with care, tongue against skin, the ancient mechanism of vampiric healing engaging, closing the punctures and leaving only a faint mark that would fade within hours. He pressed a final kiss to Shane's skin, reverent, grateful, and carrying the weight of everything he could not fully explain with words.

"Was that okay?"

Shane sighed softly. "There was a little pinch...and then it felt like you were...sucking me from the inside. I liked it. I think I have a biting kink now."

Ilya chuckled, kissing Shane's mouth, sucking on his bottom lip. "After we bond, I will show you what it will feel like to bite you while I am fucking you."

Ilya met Shane's astonished gaze, a blush working its way on Shane's cheeks. He really was unfairly pretty.

"How did – did it taste...good?"

"It tastes like love," Ilya said, meeting Shane's shy gaze. "I do not have words to explain it. And I realized why none of the texts could accurately capture what it is like."

"Sasha said...that it didn't taste good to him, that he's had better. That you've had better, too."

Ilya kissed him, just quick soft pecks to Shane's lips. He pressed his forehead against Shane's and just closed his eyes and breathed, feeling how just that small mouthful of Shane's blood had filled him.

"I have never tasted the blood of someone who truly loved me," he confessed, smiling into Shane's eyes. "That is why *you* are so precious to me."

"You really are an incurable romantic, aren't you?"

"Yes. It has always been true."

"You know that it's not a weakness. To care and love and want to show it. I see it when you're with Aurelion, our friends, your subjects. And especially with me. That's one of my

favorite parts of you.”

He held Shane close. Drew him back against his chest, one arm wrapped securely around Shane's shoulders, the other hand settling against the back of Shane's neck, holding him there, anchoring them both as Shane trembled softly against him. The trembling was not fear. It was the body's response to something profound, the aftershock of an experience that had touched something deeper than the physical and left both of them changed by it.

“I love you, Beloved.”

Shane raised his head to look into Ilya's eyes. His cheeks were flushed and his pretty freckles more clearly visible against his rosy pink skin. His brown eyes were slumberous with contentment.

“Beloved? I like that.”

“Yes?”

He nodded. “Yes. I love you, too. Beloved.” Shane scrunched his nose, shaking his head. “No, that doesn't fit. Your Highness? No, that's weird, I'm not calling you that in bed. *Umm...honey? Sweetheart?*”

“Ilya,” he said, rubbing his hands down Shane's back. “Just Ilya.”

Shane grinned. “I love you, Ilya.”

“I love you, Beloved.”

He hugged Shane tightly, delighting in the feel of him. Shane was here. Alive. Loved. And his, not by force, not by duty, not by the ancient laws that bound a Tribute Consort to his Crown Prince. But by choice. By the freely given, openly expressed, unambiguous decision of a man who understood exactly what he was choosing and had chosen it anyway.

The monster agreed, purring its own contentment.

Love Consort.

Yes, sleep now.

Chapter 15: Bonding Day

Chapter Notes

Author's Note 1: Holy shit, Friends, this story is finished!!! Happily ever after!

Author's Note 2: I never planned to write a sequel for this story. I thought it was a self-contained fic. But I've gotten a couple of comments that's led me to consider a possible sequel. No promises, though, because I don't know if I have the energy to write a sequel yet. I have a feeling that it'll probably be emotionally grueling; there's a lot of darker story ideas that could play a part in a sequel (i.e., Shane's recovery, consequences of Ilya's actions, Shane's Turning and what he might have inherited from his Sire, Shane's experiences as a newly-Turned vampire, vampire-on-vampire sex, all the power dynamics, all the parents getting in their business, the continued threat to the Great Truce, and so much more!).

Author's Note 3: Thank you for all the kudos, hearts, reads, and comments! I think I'm at chapter 6 when it comes to responding to comments. I'll definitely try to get to all of them...this year? If you haven't heard from me, please know that I truly appreciated all of your thoughtful words. It's been wonderful to know that so many of you enjoyed this fic!

Shane woke to the slow drag of Ilya's wet mouth along the inside of his thigh, and for a long, warm moment, he just kept his eyes closed and smiled. There was no fooling Ilya, who would've heard the change in Shane's breathing and heartbeat, but they both enjoyed the playful game.

His bed was familiar and comfortable; and he had one arm folded behind his head, the other hand resting on the mattress, palm down, his fingers loosely curled against the sheets. He could feel the morning light just starting to come in through the curtains, barely there, and the room held the kind of hush that only existed in the space between sleep and waking, a silence that felt sacred.

And in that silence, Ilya's mouth moved on his cock, an unhurried and deliberate pleasure that Shane felt all the way up through his chest.

He let himself enjoy it. The press of Ilya's lips and tongue. Shane thought he must've had blood because of the heat of his breath, slow and even against his skin. The way Ilya moved his mouth on his cock, like there was nowhere else in the world he wanted to be, and that Shane's body and this bed and this particular morning ritual, was exactly where he had chosen to be.

Shane was still learning the shape of that. Still learning what it felt like to be desired and loved like this, so thoroughly and so sweetly, without condition or caveat. The last six weeks was an eye-opening time for them; moving through the ups and downs of their everyday life together. There were some rough patches that they were still working through, but today, their bonding day, Shane let up on trying to control and fix everything between them.

"Good morning," Shane murmured, and smiled, not bothering to open his eyes.

Ilya hummed against his cock, hardening now inside his mouth, and the vibration sent a shiver up Shane's spine, a ripple of pleasure that started low in his belly and spread outward throughout his body. He felt Ilya's hand settle on his hip, thumb tracing a slow arc over the bone, and the touch was so gentle that Shane felt something in him unclench, some knot he hadn't even been aware he was carrying, loosening thread by thread under Ilya's hands. This was Ilya savoring him. And Shane was learning, slowly, beautifully, to let himself be savored.

Ilya pulled his mouth away and pressed an open-mouthed kiss closer to the crease of Shane's thigh, and Shane's breath caught, a soft moan floating out of his throat. His body responded without hesitation, anticipation pooling in his belly, a languid heat that spread through him like sun through water. He didn't fight it or second-guess it. He let himself want it.

"You know," Shane said, his voice rough with sleep and delight. "I've heard that most people get flowers on their bonding day."

The vampire actually smiled, Shane could feel the curve of his lips, the press of blunt teeth against his skin as Ilya's mouth shifted, and when Ilya looked up, Shane finally opened his eyes.

The sight of him throbbed in Shane's chest the way it always did: like a small, bright impact. Ilya's face was tilted up toward him, half-shadowed in the pale morning light, and his expression was the one Shane kept falling for. Blue eyes half-lidded, dark and warm at the same time. Mouth slightly swollen, lips pink. A glint of something wicked underneath the lazy satisfaction, the shine that meant Ilya was enjoying himself and knew exactly what he was doing to Shane and had absolutely no intention of stopping.

"I think you like this better," Ilya said, low and unhurried.

Shane's stomach did something ridiculous, a slow, swooping turn that he would have been embarrassed about if he'd been keeping track of how many times it had done that by now. He kept his face carefully nonchalant.

"Yeah."

Ilya's mouth moved lower, and Shane stopped talking. His mind drifted over memories, his feelings, but he didn't spiral. Not when Ilya's mouth was keeping him in the moment. Today, Shane was going to bond – and honestly, marry – Ilya. It was going to be one of the happiest days of his life. So much had happened the last three months, he found himself in a reflective mood. The past six weeks were hard for Shane. He really didn't think that he'd be here today.

*

Shane couldn't sleep. He laid on his back, staring at the ornate ceiling of his bedroom, the huge bed swallowing him whole, thick cotton sheets cool and perfect against his skin.

Too perfect. Too silent.

Every breath sounded wrong in the stillness. Every shift of his body felt like it echoed.

He was alone, one of the few nights when Ilya wasn't with him.

He turned onto his side, then his stomach, then sat up entirely, his heart thudding too fast for no reason he could name. He pressed his hand against his chest, like that could slow it down. He focused on his breathing, working through the growing panic. His room felt unfamiliar in a way that scraped under his ribs. Golden light from the city filtered in through sheer curtains, warm and soft, but it only made the shadows in the corners look deeper.

He ran both hands over his face. It did nothing to steady him. His pulse refused to settle. His thoughts came in sharp bursts that tangled and collided until he could not pull them apart. He felt too aware of everything. The bed. The room. The palace. The fact that he was loved by someone powerful enough to shift entire political structures with a single decision.

He should have been comforted. Instead, something in him twisted with unease.

He stood. Sat down. Stood up again. He paced a few steps before stopping just to press the heels of his palms into his eyes. A tight, painful breath shuddered out of him. His chest squeezed as if a fist had closed around his lungs. His throat thickened.

Fuck. Get yourself together. Don't do this now. Not now. He hated when this happened. The sudden breaking open inside him, the ground shifting under his feet without warning. His body bracing for a threat that was not there, that had never been there inside these walls.

He sat on the floor beside the bed and curled forward, elbows on his knees, forehead in his hands. The silence wrapped around him like a too-tight band. His breath stuttered. Another followed, uneven and rough. His vision blurred with pressure and he realized dimly that his eyes were stinging.

He didn't cry often. Not unless he was pushed to a limit he never admitted existed. But the tears came now, slow and unsteady, slipping down his cheeks unchecked. He breathed through them as quietly as he could manage.

His mind couldn't tell if he was safe. Sometimes, his wrists ached from phantom pain. He held out his arms, turning them over. The bruises were gone. Dr. Sommers said that his body would heal. His body was here, in his room, in his apartment in the palace, in Ilya's secured North Tower. But his mind...sometimes, it was still there. In that warehouse. Sasha leering at him. Sasha drinking his blood.

Knock it off, he told him. Ilya said that Sasha and the others were in prison. Shane was safe.

The shaking eventually eased, leaving him drained and hollow. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, pulled his knees closer to his chest, and sat there in the half light until the worst of it faded enough for him to stand again.

He crawled back into the bed. Sleep still did not come, but exhaustion kept him still. He laid on his side, waiting for the rest of the morning. He had to get his shit together before Ilya found out.

*

Ilya always took his time, especially in the mornings when Shane sometimes woke up raw and panicked. So Ilya took his time, waiting for Shane to wake up to pleasure. His lips and tongue were devastating in their patience, and Shane's hands found the sheets, gripping loosely, his head falling back against the pillow. The pillow was cool against the back of his neck. The sheets were warm under his palms. He breathed through it, rode it, let the pleasure build in long, rolling waves.

"Ilya, it's so good..."

Shane let his eyes drift shut again, let himself sink into it. There was something about the way Ilya did this, the total focus of it and the way he never seemed to rush toward an endpoint, that made Shane feel less like he was being touched and more like he was being listened to. Every small shift in his breathing, every involuntary twitch of his hips, was met with a response. An adjustment. A deepening. It was a conversation conducted entirely through his body, and Shane was only just beginning to understand how fluent Ilya was in it.

Then Ilya's fangs grazed the inside of his thigh and Shane's entire body went white-hot.

"Oh god! Please!"

It wasn't painful. It was pressure first, a sharp, focused point of contact that made every nerve ending in the area snap to attention, and then a bright crackling sting as Ilya's fangs pierced the skin. Endorphins flooded through Shane's blood like electricity, that made his vision blur at the edges and his mouth fall open in a sound he didn't shy away from. The sensation was immediate and total, radiating outward from the wound in waves that Shane felt in his chest, behind his eyes, at the tips of his fingers. The bite landed exactly where Shane needed it to, exactly hard enough, and his hips jerked involuntarily, chasing the feeling.

"Holy shit," he breathed, one hand flying down to fist in Ilya's hair. The curls were soft under his fingers, slightly tangled from sleep, and Shane gripped without gentleness because he couldn't help it. "Fuck, Ilya."

Ilya drank from him, just a few pulls, slow and deliberate, each one a careful draw that Shane could feel echoing through his entire body. He could feel the way his own pulse kicked up, the blood rushing toward the wound, toward Ilya's mouth, answering the call of it. The dizziness that came with it was the good kind, the kind that made everything softer at the edges.

Shane's bite kink was something he didn't examine too closely, had never quite understood the architecture of it, the way it lived in his body separate from everything else. He should hate it, be disgusted by it, but with Ilya, it made perfect sense. It made sense the way everything about Ilya made sense. Like his body had been waiting for exactly this, exactly this person, and had known it before Shane's mind had caught up.

Ilya sealed the wound with his tongue, a careful stroke that made Shane shiver, made his fingers tighten involuntarily in Ilya's hair. The sting faded into a glow, and the glow hummed beneath Shane's skin like a second heartbeat.

And then Ilya moved back to sucking Shane's cock, back to the task that had woken Shane up in the first place, seamless and unhurried, and Shane stopped thinking entirely.

He came apart under Ilya's mouth, back arching off the bed, fingers tightening in messy curly hair, a groan tearing out of him that he didn't bother to muffle. There was no one to hear them except each other, and Shane was done being quiet. The sound that left him was raw and unselfconscious, and he felt good about that, felt proud even, in a way that surprised him. Now he let it out. Let Ilya hear it. Let himself have the full, unedited version of this.

"Ilya...god, that was so good," he mumbled, catching his breath.

He floated in the boneless aftermath, his heartbeat loud in his ears, when Ilya crawled up the bed toward him. The mattress dipped with his weight, and Ilya settled beside him with an ease that spoke of many mornings like this that had become theirs. The shape of them together in this bed had become familiar, lived-in, and Shane loved it. He loved that it wasn't new anymore.

He loved that he could have it for the rest of his life.

*

It was inevitable. The fight began quietly. Shane always imagined their first real fight would come with shouting, sharp words, or something dramatic. Instead, Ilya spoke in a low, measured voice that felt colder than any raised tone could have been.

Shane met Ilya in his private study, sitting in the leather chair in front of Ilya's desk. He'd just finished his first session with his new therapist, Dr. Eric Bennett. He was a vampire who was Turned in his 40s, but had existed for over 100 years. Shane liked him because he was soft-spoken and gentle and didn't feel like a threat. Of all the therapists he could've selected, he thought that talking to a vampire therapist was the best choice because he could understand Shane's terror about Sasha.

"How was your session with Dr. Bennett?" Ilya said, moving out of his desk chair to lean against the front of his desk, to be closer to Shane.

"It was okay, I guess," Shane said, looking up at him. "We talked about my sleep issues and my nightmares. I thought he was going to give me some meds, but we decided that we would try more natural solutions first. I was kind of mad at him about it, but I think he's right."

“Did you....talk to him about Sasha?”

“Yeah. I told him about seeing him in my nightmares,” he said, exhaling slowly and rubbing his palms over his knees. “I know you said that he’s been caught and the Ashen Cross disbanded, but I keep thinking that he’ll get out and hunt me down or something.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Shane’s eyes were drawn to how tight the sleeves of his dress shirt stretched around his biceps and Shane bit his tongue, trying to control himself.

“Shane. Sasha will never touch you again. I have seen to it personally.”

“Okay,” he said, frowning slightly. “What does that mean?”

“I ordered him to be buried in stone until his final death.”

Shane stared at him as if the words had scraped across his skin. For a moment, he didn’t understand them. They sounded like something from a horror movie. Something not meant to exist outside whispered vampire legends. Something too monstrous to come out of Ilya’s mouth.

“What?” Shane’s voice cracked halfway through. He stood up from the chair, meeting Ilya’s eyes. “What did you do, Ilya?”

Ilya stood with his hands clasped behind his back, posture perfect, expression unreadable in that way Shane had always found disciplined and regal. Now, it only made something hot and sick rise in his throat.

“He hurt you,” Ilya said, unapologetically. “He would have done it again.”

“That’s not an answer.” Shane took a step forward, then stopped because he realized he was shaking and did not want Ilya to see it. “What does that mean? Buried in stone?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.”

Shane felt the room tilt. He pressed a hand to the edge of the desk to steady himself. Images formed unbidden in his mind. A body trapped. Caught in darkness. Immobile. The slow crushing press of time. Eternal awareness without escape or mercy. How long did it take for a vampire to starve to death?

His stomach turned violently.

Ilya continued, unaware or unwilling to acknowledge the horror blooming across Shane’s face. “It is a common sentence for vampires who have gone against the Crown. A fitting punishment for an immortal being.”

Shane’s voice came out thin. “You buried him alive.”

“He is not alive in the human sense.”

“That doesn’t make it better, Ilya!”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “You are not being rational. Sasha was a danger to you. He –”

*“I don’t care what he was. I care about what **you** did.” Shane’s voice rose for the first time, breaking open from the inside. His eyes burned for reasons that had nothing to do with fear alone. “He tried to kill me, yes, I know that. But that’s not the point. You sentenced him to something...that.”*

His breath trembled. He couldn’t say the words. Buried in stone. It felt like a fist closing around his heart.

“And you lied to me.” Shane looked at him, really looked, and the distance between them felt vast, like it could swallow them whole. “You let me think he had been imprisoned. You let me sleep beside you without knowing you had done something like that.” He pressed his hands against his face. “What else have you lied to me about, Ilya?”

Ilya’s eyes flickered for the first time, a crack in the calm. “I was protecting you.”

*“No,” Shane said, quietly. “No, you weren’t. You were wielding **your** power. **Your** revenge.”*

The silence after that was sharp and painful.

“I would do that again and I have done even more to keep you safe,” Ilya said, his voice filled with hurt and confusion.

“Please, Ilya, that’s not...right.” He stared at his future bondmate and husband, a little terrified of Ilya’s immense power.

He remembered Sasha telling him that there was a time when Ilya enjoyed the suffering of others. Shane had read the historical texts of Ilya leading wars for Aurelion, that he had fought and killed countless humans and supernatural beings. Shane knew he was naive to think that the Ilya in the books wasn’t the same vampire who stood before him now; that the monster inside of Ilya wasn’t his bloodlust given form.

“Holy shit, Ilya...”

Ilya drew a slow breath, but Shane could see the tension in it. “Yes. You see me clearly as a monster now, yes?”

Shane didn’t answer right away.

“Not a monster...but someone with unlimited power.” He licked his lips and dragged his hand through his hair. “Ilya, you can’t use your power like that. That’s not ethical. That’s not justice. That’s only punishment.”

“Why are you defending him when he tried to kill you?”

“Because everyone has a right to a fair trial!” Shane sat down in the chair, his legs giving out.

“I am the Crown Prince and it is my power to –”

Ilya stepped toward him and Shane flinched before he could stop himself. The movement was small but unmistakable.

Ilya froze.

“I’m sorry.” Shane swallowed hard, throat tight. “I just need a little space.” His voice wavered but did not break. “Please.”

For a long moment, neither of them moved. Then Ilya bowed his head in a gesture that looked nothing like surrender but everything like restraint. Shane could see in Ilya’s eyes and expression that he was sad and angry. But he controlled his temper and didn’t lash out at Shane.

“I will see you later tonight.”

Ilya left the room without another word. The door closed softly, almost gently, behind him. When the silence settled again, Shane pressed his hands to his face and let out a breath that shook through his entire body.

Did he make a mistake, talking to Ilya about his power? Shane knew Ilya would inherit the entirety of the supernatural kingdom one day. But Shane never thought that deeply about what that actually meant. That Aurelion and Ilya had absolute power. And he didn’t want to finish that thought.

“Fuck me,” he whispered to himself, sitting back in the chair.

They couldn’t get past it, and Shane hated himself and hated Ilya a little, too, for not being able to have a calm discussion about it. So they went to their opposite corners during the two weeks that they didn’t really speak to each other. He sought out his parents for their advice.

“Of course Ilya did the right thing! Sasha tried to kill you. Fuck Sasha! Fuck him up the ass! He deserved everything he got,” Yuna said, hotly. “Why would you even question Ilya about that?”

Shane stared at her, his mouth dropping open. “Mom! You just agreed with Ilya’s unilateral decision to torture a supernatural being for – for years, maybe decades!” He took a deep breath and stared at his hands. “Maybe I could speak to King Aurelion. Ask him to give Sasha and all the other vampires a real trial and a humane sentence.”

David placed his hand on Shane’s shoulder. “Son, how would Ilya feel if he made a decision you didn’t like and your only solution is to go to his father to ask him to overrule it?”

“But it would be the right thing –”

“Buddy, you’re going to be married to Ilya in a few weeks. How you define your relationship with him now will be the foundation for everything that happens after you’re bonded. If going

to his father becomes the precedent in your relationship, neither of you will learn how to communicate with each other and talk things through to come to a solution you can both agree on. Is that what you want with Ilya? How would you feel if he did that to you?"

Shane frowned. "He kind of already did that to me."

"No, he didn't," David said, kindly. "Ilya made a decision, representing the Crown. Was it one that you agreed with? No. But you can listen to him, find out why he made that decision, and ask him to listen to your reasons. You can share with him what you know about law and ethics. But at the end of the day, he is still the crown and blood."

"What's that?"

"Something that Aurelion taught me. It's an ancient vampire tradition or something; that only the vampires who wear the crown and who are next in line by blood, can make hard decisions. It's not always going to be fair or right, in our eyes, but we're not crown and blood like Ilya." David grinned, looking at Shane. "But you're the Consort of crown and blood; no one has more influence on the King and the Crown Prince than you. Do you understand? Are you going to be able to live with that?"

Shane smiled at him. "Wow, Dad, are you and Aurelion like best friends now?"

"Well, we're both fathers of sons who will be bonded soon. It seemed like a good idea to get to know him. You know, we have a lot in common. Did you know that he likes to read The New Yorker, too?" David said, chuckling. "Plus, it's a little funny that he's afraid of your mom."

"David, really!" Yuna said, frowning at him.

Shane sighed and rubbed his head with his hands. He knew his dad made sense. And he knew his mom was still angry about everything. Most of all, he didn't like fighting with Ilya.

"Okay, I'll talk to Ilya. I'll listen to him." He paused, staring at his hands. "Maybe I can put together a plan, about the rule of law and the ethical rights of all beings, and how he could use his power to have more fairness and justice in the supernatural kingdoms."

A few days later, Shane put together a PowerPoint presentation, with Harris's help, and presented his proposal for the creation of a judicial council for Aurelion and Ilya and their Senechals. At the conclusion, the four of them stared at him for a long moment, utterly speechless. Shane didn't think it was because they were against the idea of a judicial council, but maybe because he had a PowerPoint presentation?

King Aurelion stood from his chair and walked towards Shane, placing his hands on Shane's shoulders, looking into his eyes. "My lovely boy...if you force me to sit through another PowerPoint presentation again, I shall have you stripped naked and put into stocks in the public courtyard."

He kissed Shane on his forehead and left the conference room. Gregor winked at him as he followed Aurelion out of the room.

Shane just stared at Ilya speechless. "What – what, uh, stocks?"

Ilya smiled widely and got up, cupping Shane's cheeks with his hands. "It was brilliant, Shane. Father and I will discuss it with our council." He kissed Shane's mouth and then pressed his forehead against Shane's. "You have a kind heart and an honorable character. I promise to give it all of my consideration. Father and I will need to convince the vampire council, but I know there will be a few who will champion your ideas."

"But...it doesn't change your mind about Sasha and the other vampires?"

"No," Ilya said, softly.

Shane let out his breath and tucked his forehead against Ilya's shoulder. "I hope that one day, you'll let go of your anger and give them a fair trial."

"Perhaps. One day. But not today." Ilya kissed the side of his head and stepped away. "Come, Vasily, we must check on His Majesty to ensure he hasn't walked into the sun."

Vasily gave Shane an amused smirk and a bow of his head as he followed Ilya out of the room. Shane turned to Harris, shrugging.

"That wasn't death by PowerPoint, was it?"

Harris laughed, throwing his arm over Shane's shoulders. "You're just lucky that Evangeline didn't have to attend. She might have actually cut off your head."

Shane turned his head and looked at Ilya. His lips were swollen, his expression lazy and satisfied in a way that made Shane's chest ache pleasantly, a full, warm pressure behind his ribs that he'd come to recognize as happiness, plain and uncomplicated. Ilya's hair was a mess, curls sticking up around his head like a wicked halo, and his eyes were still half-lidded, and he looked, Shane thought, absolutely gorgeous.

Shane pulled him in and kissed him. Ilya tasted faintly of salt and blood, and Shane let the kiss deepen for a moment, letting himself linger in it, savoring the intimacy of it and the closeness that came from tasting himself on Ilya's mouth, before he pulled back with a soft laugh.

"So," Shane said, tracing a lazy finger along Ilya's jaw. The skin was smooth under his fingertip, only a little cool in the way that Shane had stopped noticing weeks ago and now simply registered as part of the texture of Ilya. "Bonding day."

"Bonding day," Ilya confirmed, and there was reverence beneath the usual confidence, a softness that only appeared in moments like these, when it was just the two of them and nothing else, and it made Shane's heart turn over in his chest.

"You're going to have to actually make good on all that teasing, you know," Shane said, keeping his tone light and playful. He let the corner of his mouth curve. "I've been keeping a mental list."

Ilya's eyebrow lifted in response, a mirror and a challenge. The corner of his mouth curved, too, and Shane watched the amusement settle into his expression like light through glass. "A mental list."

"Detailed sexual things." Shane met his eyes and held them. Held them with the kind of steady, open confidence that had taken him months to learn. "Very detailed."

Ilya laughed, low and warm, that Shane felt in his own chest like a vibration, and pulled Shane closer, one arm settling around his waist with an easy possessiveness.

"Then I plan to deliver," he said, his mouth brushing Shane's temple, lips warm against the skin there. "And then some."

Shane grinned against Ilya's shoulder. The muscle was solid under his mouth, and he pressed a kiss there, just because he could. Today was the day. Today was finally, officially, the day.

"I must go and prepare," Ilya said, and the regret in his voice was genuine, and Shane could hear it in the slight drag of the words, the way Ilya's arm tightened around him for a fraction of a second before loosening.

"Yeah, it's too bad we can't just do the bonding ceremony here, in bed." Shane said it casually, but he watched Ilya's face for his reaction, because it was fun. It was always fun.

Ilya hummed in interest. The sound was low, considering, and Shane watched the corner of his mouth twitch.

"You would have our parents, all of our friends, the entire vampire court, and delegates from all of the human and supernatural territories here with us, in your bed, while you are naked and drunk on pleasure? I can make that happen if it is your wish."

The image was so absurd, so perfectly and deliberately absurd, that Shane burst out laughing, a real laugh, his eyes watering.

"*Hmm...*okay, maybe not, they'd get too jealous seeing how happy we are."

Shane smiled at Ilya, wide and unguarded, and watched as Ilya's expression shifted in response, a small, private softening around his eyes that Shane suspected Ilya didn't even know he was doing.

"You better go now before we start round two."

"I think you mean round three, Beloved."

Beloved.

He couldn't hide his delight. His face did the thing it always did when Ilya said it: opened up, so bright and fond that Shane was pretty sure it made him look ridiculous but he didn't care even slightly.

"You are so adorable."

Shane rolled his eyes. "*Ohmygod*, shut up."

Ilya just huffed out a soft laugh, seeing the look on Shane's face. He knew. Of course he knew. He'd figured it out weeks ago, maybe before Shane had, and he said it deliberately, savored the effect of it, and Shane loved him for that. He loved that Ilya noticed what made him light up and then did it again, and again, like it was a gift he enjoyed giving.

"Go. I'm serious. We have to get ready. My parents will be here soon."

"*No, I want to stay in bed with you.*" Ilya whined, a low, theatrical sound of suffering, but got out of bed.

Shane turned on his side, propped his head on one hand, and watched. The morning light caught the lines of Ilya's body as he moved, the long slope of his back, the way his shoulders shifted when he reached for his clothes. The perfect roundness of his ass, which Shane was absolutely not above appreciating with zero shame.

He grinned, watching as Ilya dressed, his eyes tracing the familiar landscape of him. And knowing, holding onto the knowledge that in a few hours, after the ceremony, after the reception, after all of it, he'd have Ilya back in this bed again. Making good on all of his promises.

"I will see you in a few hours," Ilya said, bending over Shane and kissing him. The kiss was hard and passionate, thorough, and Shane felt his blood stir in response, felt the heat of it travel down through his body like a current. Ilya kissed him like he meant it.

Shane pushed him away, giggling, actually giggling, which was a sound he would have been mortified to make in the past and now just felt natural.

"You have to go."

"Fine. I will go," Ilya said, straightening. He gazed down at Shane, and his eyes, those blue, blue eyes that Shane had fallen for during his First Presentation, slid down the length of Shane's body with a slow, unhurried hunger that made Shane shiver. Ilya's gaze settled on the small bruise on Shane's inner thigh, still faintly pink against his skin. Ilya's jaw tightened and his eyes went dark, and he let out a little growl that was so quiet it was almost a vibration.

"We will bond. And tonight...tonight I will be yours to command."

Shane smiled as he nodded. He hugged his pillow to his chest, watched Ilya take a step away from the bed with visible effort, like it physically cost him something to leave. And Shane felt, in that moment, so treasured that it was almost dizzying.

"Bye."

He watched Ilya go until the bedroom door closed behind him, and then he lay there for another minute, in the warm, Ilya-scented quiet, and breathed.

The apartment felt different, charged in a way Shane couldn't quite name. Not just the light, though the light was different, warmer somehow, slanting through the windows at an angle that turned the familiar space into something that felt almost ceremonial. It was the air itself, the particular quality of the atmosphere, like the apartment knew what day it was. Like it was holding its breath along with him.

His parents were already there when he emerged from the bedroom, showered and dressed in the clothes Yuna had laid out for him. The suit was a deep charcoal, impeccably tailored, the kind of suit Shane would never have been able to afford on his own, the kind that fit like it had been made for him because it had been. He'd stared at it for a full minute before putting it on, running his fingers over the fabric, because the last time someone had laid out clothes for a ceremony involving him, the circumstances had been very, very different.

But this was a happy day.

Shane held onto that thought as he buttoned the jacket. *This was a happy day.* It wasn't a reminder so much as an anchor, something to press against when the strangeness of it all threatened to creep in. Because it was strange, sometimes, to stand in this apartment in this kingdom in this life and try to reconcile it with the life he'd had before. Not bad strange. Just...large. Larger than he'd imagined anything could be.

David was in the small kitchenette, sleeves rolled to his elbows, making coffee with the particular focus he brought to any task he considered important. The coffee maker, a sleek, dark thing that had been a gift from someone in the vampire court whose name Shane had already forgotten, gurgled steadily under David's supervision. His dad stood over it like a man overseeing a critical process, which, in David's world, he probably was.

Yuna was arranging something on the coffee table, her movements precise and unhurried. A small collection of items that Shane recognized as the personal touches she'd been collecting for weeks: a pressed flower from the Commonwealth gardens, still faintly fragrant, its petals the color of late summer. A small framed photo of the three of them at the lake house. Shane was maybe twelve in it, gap-toothed and squinting into the sun, David's hand on his shoulder, Yuna laughing at something off-camera. A handwritten note in Yuna's careful, looping script that Shane didn't read yet, because he knew it would make him emotional before noon and he was trying to hold it together until at least the ceremony.

"You look handsome," Yuna said, without looking up from the coffee table. Mothers had a sixth sense for these things, could feel you standing in a room without ever turning around, could assess you from the back of her head. It was uncanny and Shane had long since stopped questioning it.

"Thanks, Mom." Shane poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter, cradling the mug in both hands. The warmth of it seeped into his palms. He watched his

mother arrange the pressed flower one more time, nudging it a millimeter to the left, and felt something quiet and tender expand in his chest.

She was dressed beautifully, in a deep blue dress that brought out the warmth in her skin, the particular golden undertone that Shane had inherited. The fabric was simple but elegant, not ostentatious, because Yuna had never been ostentatious, even in a world where ostentatious was the baseline. She moved around the space with an ease that had taken time to develop, and Shane noticed it every time he saw her here. Six weeks ago, the Vampire Kingdom had still been foreign to her. Shane remembered the careful way she'd walked through the palace hallways, like she was navigating a space she didn't quite trust yet. The way her eyes had tracked every supernatural being in the room with a vigilance that was hard-won and entirely understandable, given everything they'd been through. Now, she moved through the space as if she had always belonged here. Not because the kingdom had changed to accommodate her, though it had in ways both subtle and significant, but because she had found her footing. Had built something solid enough to stand on.

The lake house decision had come three weeks in, quiet and practical, announced over dinner one evening as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They'd been sitting around the small table in Shane's apartment. Shane and his parents and Ilya, and David had set down his fork and said it, like he'd been turning it over in his head for days and had finally reached a conclusion.

"Your mom and I have decided that we'll keep the lake house in the Commonwealth. It's our home and we're not ready to give it up."

"I'm glad," Shane admitted, looking at Ilya. "Maybe it could be a vacation house for us."

Ilya gave him a chaste kiss on his lips. "I would like to visit there very much."

David had found work shortly after. A position in the kingdom's Treasury Office, which suited him in a way that almost felt destined, or at least like the universe had a sense of humor about these things. David had spent twenty years in municipal finance, budgets and audits and the particular dry satisfaction of making numbers balanced. The Treasury Office was just a larger municipality, as far as he seemed to be concerned. A bigger spreadsheet. More zeros.

He'd come home after his first day with a quiet satisfaction on his face that Shane hadn't seen since before everything had gone sideways, before the attack, before the weeks of fear, before the slow, grinding process of rebuilding something that felt stable enough to stand on. The satisfaction was small and contained, the way his dad's emotions always were, but Shane had recognized it immediately and it loosened the anxiety in his own chest in response.

Shane had hugged him, tight and sudden, right there in the hallway, without explanation or preamble. David had hugged him back without asking why. They stood there for a long moment, and neither of them said anything, and it was enough. It was more than enough.

Yuna's position had come a week later, and that one had hit differently.

The Irina Foundation. Shane had felt his heart flutter in his chest when she'd told him. The foundation was Ilya's legacy for his mother. Something Ilya had started on his own, quietly, with the same deliberate care he brought to everything that mattered to him. A charitable organization that carried Irina's name and focused on caring for humanity. And now Yuna was working in it. She wasn't running the place yet, and maybe not ever, and that wasn't the point, but contributing to it. She was lending her steady, capable hands to something that had been built in grief and carried forward in love.

Shane thought about that sometimes, in quiet moments. The parallel of it. Irina, who had shaped Ilya into who he was, who had loved him with a ferocity that had left marks on the kingdom even after her death, whose absence was still felt in the way Aurelion and Ilya spoke about her, in the way Ilya's eyes went distant sometimes when he thought Shane wasn't looking.

And Yuna, who had shaped Shane into who he was, was still very much alive and very much here, stepping into a space that Irina had once occupied. She wasn't trying to replace her. It was nothing so simple as that. But continuing something and carrying something forward. The way good things sometimes did, when the people who started them were gone.

Shane imagined them together sometimes, Irina and Yuna, in some alternate universe where Irina was alive and existing in the same space as his mom. He imagined the two of them meeting for the first time, in some neutral territory, maybe a café, maybe a garden somewhere, somewhere with good light. He imagined the particular intensity that mothers reserved for the partners of their children: the sizing-up, the quiet assessment, the way they looked at you and saw not just who you were but who you were becoming, and whether that was good enough for the person they'd raised.

He imagined Yuna's dry wit meeting whatever sharp, elegant thing Irina might have said back. He imagined the two of them at a dinner table, trading barbs with the kind of precision that only mothers could achieve, not cruel but pointed. They would be delighted by each other. He imagined them conspiring over drinks, heads bent together, laughing at something he and Ilya had done that they both found ridiculous. He imagined them arguing over seating arrangements with the kind of passionate intensity usually reserved for matters of state.

He imagined them becoming best friends. The kind of friends who understood each other without explanation, because they had both done the same impossible, terrifying, extraordinary thing: raised a son they loved into someone worth loving.

It made him smile, standing there in the kitchen with his coffee going cold in his hands. One day, he should share this daydream with Ilya. He'd tell Ilya about the imaginary café and the imaginary dinner table and the imaginary holy terror Irina and Yuna would have been. In a way, Shane had a feeling that Ilya probably had a similar one. He probably imagined his mother and Shane's mother in the same room, and had probably smiled at the thought in some quiet moment of his own.

It was one of the things Shane loved about loving Ilya. The way their separate griefs and separate joys could exist in the same space without diminishing each other. The way their families, so different and so shaped by different worlds, could find common ground in the

simplest, most fundamental thing: the love that parents gave and children carried with them, long after the giving was done.

"Shane." David's voice pulled him back.

His dad was watching him over the rim of his coffee mug, one eyebrow raised in the way that meant he'd noticed Shane had gone somewhere in his head. David had always been able to read him like that, and could tell just by looking, when Shane had drifted out of the present tense and into some internal landscape that had nothing to do with the room they were standing in.

"You ready for your big day?"

"Yeah," Shane said. He set down his cup, lukewarm now but he'd barely tasted it anyway, and straightened his jacket. The charcoal fabric settled against his shoulders like it belonged there. "Yeah, I'm ready."

Yuna crossed the room and straightened his collar, even though it didn't need straightening, because that was what mothers did. It was reflexive, automatic, the same gesture she'd been making since he was five years old and heading out the door for the first time. Shane stood still and let her do it, the way he always did. She looked up at him, and her eyes were bright, not with tears exactly, but with something close to it, something that lived in the same neighborhood as tears but more luminous.

"I'm so proud of you," she said, simply. No qualifier. No "but" or "even though" or any of the complicated caveats that pride sometimes carried. Just the statement, plain and true.

Shane swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "Thanks, Mom."

Shane remembered feeling so intimidated, standing in the Amber Room after his First Presentation. He remembered the way the light had fallen, amber and golden and heavy with age, and the way his hands had felt, slightly damp, pressed flat against his thighs. He remembered the cold, formal distance of the Crown Prince across the room: the stillness of him, the careful neutrality of his expression, the way Ilya had looked at Shane like he was assessing something without revealing what he was looking for.

That was where it had started. That room. That handshake. Shane thanking Ilya for protecting his parents, and Ilya accepting the thanks with a nod that gave nothing away.

Looking back to three months ago, and standing in this same room on his bonding day, Shane couldn't have predicted any of it. He couldn't have seen, in that first careful exchange with Ilya, the shape of everything that would follow. The arguments and the discoveries and the slow, terrifying process of learning to trust someone with the parts of himself he'd spent years keeping hidden. The way Ilya had waited, patient and steady and never pushing, until Shane was ready to open himself to Ilya.

And today, he was finally going to bond and marry someone he loved.

The thought settled in his chest like something solid. Not nervous energy. Not the fizzing, carbonated feeling of anticipation that he might have expected. Something quieter than that. Something sure.

Hayden leaned against the window sill with his arms crossed and a look on his face that Shane had come to recognize as his version of dressed up. The Fae had made an effort, his clothes were neater than usual, his hair actually combed, and there was something almost formal about the way he held himself, though Shane suspected that was more to do with the setting than any personal investment in aesthetics.

"You know, this is genuinely kind of historic."

Shane glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it." Hayden ticked the points off on his fingers, one by one, with the particular emphasis of someone who had clearly been thinking about this for a while and was pleased to finally have an audience. "Vampire binding to a human. Fae standing as witness." He gestured to himself, a small, theatrical motion. "Werewolf standing as witness." He jerked his thumb toward the doors, presumably indicating Scott, who was already outside in the throne room with Ilya. "That's four different species represented in one bonding ceremony. All we're missing is a mer and this thing would basically be a complete cross-species event."

Shane blinked. Then his eyes went wide, and he felt something cold drop through his stomach, the particular sensation of realizing, too late, that he had missed something important.

"Wait," he said, frowning. His mind was already running through it, pulling up every detail of the ceremony planning, every conversation with Aurelion and the court advisors. "Wait. Did we not invite the mer? We don't have a mer delegate? There's no mer representation, Hayden. This is a problem."

Hayden stared at him. "Shane."

"No, think about it." Shane was already turning toward the doors, one hand raised in a vague gesture of alarm, the other pressed against his forehead. The panic was swift and specific, the kind that came from caring too much about getting things right, about making sure no one was left out or overlooked. "If this is supposed to be this historic, precedent-setting thing, and we just left out an entire race of beings." He was moving now, actually moving, toward the doors. "We should stop the ceremony. We should postpone. I can't in good conscience —"

"Shane." Hayden grabbed him by the shoulder, firmly but with an obvious amusement that Shane could hear even through the rising tide of his own alarm. "Stop. Breathe."

Shane stopped. Breathed. He stood there with one hand still half-raised and the other pressed against his temple, feeling slightly unhinged.

"Aurelion already handled it," Hayden said, and he was smiling now, the kind of smile that said he was going to remind Shane of this moment for years, was probably already cataloguing it for future use. "He spoke with the King of the mers himself. Extended a formal

invitation. The mers sent a gift in lieu of attending. Everything is fine. Everyone is represented. No one is left out."

Shane exhaled. The tension drained out of his shoulders like water. "Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh.'" Hayden's grin widened. "Fucking hell. Ilya's going to kill me for telling you that, because now you're going to be flustered, and he's going to blame me for getting you all upset before the ceremony."

"I'm okay," Shane said, and rubbed the back of his neck, because he could feel the heat creeping up to his ears, the mortifying warmth of having nearly derailed his own bonding ceremony over a diplomatic oversight that had already been handled weeks ago.

Hayden studied him for a moment, the amusement softening into something warmer. Something that looked, if Shane was reading it correctly, a little like pride.

"Are you nervous?"

Shane considered the question. He turned it over in his mind, examined it with the kind of honest attention he'd been learning to give his own feelings, without flinching away from them, without immediately trying to rationalize or dismiss them. *Was he nervous?* He waited, deliberately, for the familiar tightness in his chest. The way his stomach used to clench before anything that mattered. The low-grade dread that used to accompany any moment of significance, the quiet voice that whispered *this is too good, wait for it to fall apart*.

It didn't come.

He waited a beat longer, just to be sure. Nothing.

"No," he said, and meant it completely. "I'm not."

Hayden smiled, slow and genuine, the kind of smile that reached his eyes and stayed there. "Good. I'm really happy for you, Shane."

They stood there for a moment, shoulder to shoulder, and Shane felt the weight of it. The steadiness of having someone in his corner who had been there from the beginning. His first real friend, who had kept showing up, kept cracking jokes, kept refusing to let Shane disappear into the dark places in his own head.

There was a discreet knock on the door, three light taps, evenly spaced, the kind of knock that announced presence without demanding immediate attention.

"Enter," Shane called, and rubbed his sweaty palms on the inside of his jacket, because apparently nerves could be physical even when they weren't emotional.

Vasily opened the door and smiled at him. The smile was warm and genuine. Vasily had become something close to a friend over the past weeks, and Shane appreciated the way the Seneschal carried himself: efficient without being cold, formal without being distant.

"Consort Hollander, we are ready to start."

Shane felt something click into place in his chest. The way a key turned in a lock, smooth and certain and final.

"Alright," Hayden said, nodding toward the doors. "Ready to make it official, buddy?"

Shane straightened his jacket one more time. Felt the fabric settle against his shoulders. Took a breath, deep and slow, the kind of breath that was less about calm and more about marking the moment. About letting himself feel the full weight of what was about to happen.

"Yeah. Let's go!"

Hayden paused, and the grin was back, the particular insufferable grin that Shane had learned meant trouble. "Just so you know, Scott and I have been talking. About tonight."

Shane turned to look at him. "What about tonight?"

"Your wedding night." Hayden's expression was perfectly, infuriatingly innocent. The kind of innocence that was so calculated it had looped back around to being genuinely funny. "We have thoughts."

"Hayden."

"Suggestions, really. Friendly ones."

"Hayden, I swear to God."

"Just friendly advice between..."

"Fuck off," Shane said, and his face was burning, actually burning, the heat so acute he could feel it in his ears, and he was laughing, helplessly, and Hayden was laughing too, doubled over slightly, one hand braced against the wall. They were both still laughing as they followed Vasily out of the Amber Room, Shane shaking his head and Hayden wiping his eyes, and the absurdity of it, the sheer ridiculous normalcy of it, made Shane love his life so much it ached.

"Jesus, get it together, Hay!" Shane said, clearing his throat as he stood at the double doors.

"This is so undignified," Hayden said, snorting. He coughed and fluttered his wings, like he was trying to shake off the giggles. "Okay. Ready."

Shane nodded to the guards and waited as the doors were opened for him.

The throne room was exactly as Shane remembered it: bright light filtering through panels of stained glass, casting long, colored shapes across the floor, amber and gold and deep warm red. The air carried a faint hum that Shane had come to understand was the oldest magic in the kingdom, laid into the walls centuries ago by Fae hands. It was subtle, barely perceptible unless you were listening for it, but Shane could feel it now, a low vibration beneath his feet, like the building itself was aware of what was happening inside it.

The space was intimidating by design, meant for moments of significance, and today it held nearly everyone from the vampire court, the supernatural territories, and human guests. Shane had never seen so many beings in one room. The sheer density of it – vampires in their dark formal attire and werewolves broader and rougher at the edges and Fae with their particular quality of stillness with their beautiful wings and humans scattered throughout in their own careful finery – was overwhelming in a way that was also, somehow, beautiful. All of these people. All of these different kinds of people. Here, in this room, for this.

For them.

Ilya was standing at the far end of the room, Scott at his side.

Shane's breath caught, just for a second, the way it always did when he looked at Ilya and forgot, momentarily, that he was allowed to. That this was real. That the person standing at the end of that long, amber-lit room was his.

Ilya was dressed in deep black, the fabric catching the stained-glass light in subtle ways that made the lines of him look almost luminous, like he was lit from within, which, given what he was, might have been literally true. He wore the royal red sash across his chest, a slash of color against the dark, and his hands were at his sides, relaxed; but his eyes, those blue, blue eyes, were fixed on Shane with an intensity that made the air feel thinner. Like the room had narrowed to just the two of them, and everything else was peripheral.

Shane held his gaze. Held it all the way across the room, through the crowd, through the stained-glass light, and smiled. A real smile, not the carefully composed one he wore in public, but the one that was just for Ilya. The one that started in his chest and worked its way out.

Everyone stood as Shane entered, the rustle of movement a quiet, collective acknowledgment. Hayden fell into step two paces behind him, and Shane walked the length of the room with his shoulders straight and his eyes on Ilya, and for the first time in his life, he didn't feel small in a space like this. He felt exactly the right size. Exactly where he was supposed to be.

The first time he had taken this walk, in a different context and a different ceremony and with very different feelings in his chest, he had been so nervous that his hands had trembled at his sides. He had been scared, then. Scared of what was happening to him, scared of the kingdom he was entering, scared of the person at the end of the room who was supposed to be his future and felt like he'd be a cold stranger forever.

But today, everyone in the room disappeared as he looked at Ilya. The crowd, the light, the hum of old magic in the walls, all of it fell away, until there was nothing but Ilya's face at the end of the room and the steady, certain feeling in Shane's chest that said: *Yes. This. Him.*

Scott stood to Ilya's left, arms folded, expression calm and watchful in the way that werewolves seemed to carry as a baseline, a quiet alertness that was less vigilance and more simply how they moved through the world. Hayden moved to Shane's right and took his place, and the room settled into a quiet, expectant stillness. The kind of stillness that felt alive

rather than empty, full of held breath and anticipation and the particular reverence that people brought to moments they knew they would remember.

The officiant, an Elder of the kingdom's court whose name Shane could never quite pronounce and whose age he could only guess at, something ancient and something that predated the kingdom itself, stood between them. The Elder was small and still, dressed in robes of deep burgundy, and radiated a quiet authority that had nothing to do with size or volume. The ceremony had been explained to Shane in detail beforehand, every step, every word, and he'd studied it carefully, because this mattered and he wanted to do it right. He wanted to honor it. He wanted Ilya to see that he understood what this meant, not just to them but to the kingdom, to the fragile, extraordinary thing the world was becoming.

The vows came first.

Shane had been offered the choice of traditional or personal vows, and he'd agonized over it for days, had lain awake at night turning the decision over, drafting sentences in his head and then discarding them, trying to find the balance between formality and sincerity. In the end, he'd settled on something in between: the traditional framework, with a few lines he'd written himself, because he wanted Ilya to know that he meant every word. Not just the ancient ones, the ones that had been spoken by beings for centuries. The ones that were his. The ones that came from the specific, irreplaceable shape of what they were to each other.

Ilya spoke first, and his voice was steady and low, carrying through the amber-lit room with a quiet authority that Shane had heard in a dozen other contexts, in council meetings and private conversations and the particular tone Ilya used when he was saying something he had thought about carefully and meant completely. But it landed differently here.

The traditional words were beautiful, ancient and formal, promises of protection and devotion that had been made by vampires for centuries, worn smooth by repetition like stones in a riverbed. But when Ilya reached the part that was his own, his voice shifted. Just slightly. It became something more private, more vulnerable, stripped of the public polish. And Shane felt the words settle into his chest like they were being written there, one by one, in ink that would never fade.

"I choose you, Shane Hollander," Ilya said softly, his gaze never leaving Shane's face. "Not as Prince, not as heir, and not as duty. I choose you as the man who steadies me when the centuries feel too heavy, and who reminds me that eternity can still hold wonder."

Shane's breath caught, his hands trembling slightly in Ilya's grasp.

"I vow to stand beside you in light and shadow," Ilya continued, voice gentler now, meant only for him despite the witnesses. "To guard your heart as fiercely as our kingdom. To speak truth to you, even when it is difficult. To listen when you are afraid. To cherish your courage, your kindness, and the fragile, brilliant humanity that taught an old monster how to love."

The room felt impossibly still to Shane, the words wrapping around him like a blanket.

"And for as long as I exist," Ilya finished, thumb brushing over Shane's knuckles. "You will never stand alone again."

Shane smiled at him, his eyes watering. They had been working on their personal vows in secret, wanting to speak them for the first time during the bonding. Shane sniffled and cleared his throat.

His voice didn't shake, which surprised him a little. He'd half expected it to, had imagined in the days leading up to this, that when the moment came, something in him would crack open and the emotions would spill out and he wouldn't be able to get through it. But it didn't shake, because he meant what he was saying. Completely. Without reservation or qualification or the instinctive impulse to pull back from anything that mattered too much. And there was something steady about that. About certainty. About knowing, in the deepest, most fundamental way, that this was right.

"Ilya, I don't have centuries of words to draw from," Shane said, meeting Ilya's eyes, his hands warm where they were held between Ilya's own. "I only have a human lifetime of promises. But they're all yours."

He swallowed once, not from doubt but from the sheer weight of meaning pressing gently against his ribs.

"I vow to walk beside you even when I'm afraid," he continued, voice quiet but clear. "To tell you the truth, even when I worry it will disappoint you. To remind you that you are more than your crown, more than your power, and more than the darkness you carry."

Shane's thumb brushed over Ilya's knuckles without thinking, grounding himself in the familiar solidity of him.

"I vow to be stubborn when you retreat, patient when eternity makes you tired, and brave enough to love you in the open light of every day we're given."

His chest felt tight, but not painfully so. Full.

"And for as long as my heart beats," Shane finished, voice softening. "It belongs with yours."

Ilya looked like he was about to cry, both of them trying to keep it together. Ilya squeezed his hands and nodded while Shane made a soft nervous sound.

Then came the bite.

Ilya took Shane's left wrist in both hands, gently, the way one might hold something precious and fragile, with a care that was almost reverent. His fingers were cool against Shane's pulse point, and Shane could feel his own heartbeat there, quick and steady, and he wondered if Ilya could feel it, too. If he could feel the life in him, the warm blood moving just beneath the surface, and the intimacy of that thought, of being known that way and seen that way, made something in Shane's chest expand.

Ilya lifted Shane's wrist. Ilya's fangs extended, just barely visible, gleaming faintly in the amber light like something that had been waiting in the dark to emerge. Shane took a breath and held it.

The bite was precise. Ceremonial. Ilya's fangs sank into the pulse point of Shane's wrist with a controlled pressure that was almost reverent, not the sharp electric hunger of their nights but something slower. A statement. Shane felt the familiar spark of it, the bright sting followed by warmth, the way the sensation radiated outward from the wound like ripples in water, and he let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The sound was quiet, barely audible, but Shane felt the room register it. He felt the collective attention in the space shift, just slightly, toward them.

It was intimate in a way that went beyond the physical. It was a claim, yes, Ilya marking him and binding him in the most literal and ancient sense. But it was also a question, and Shane's answer was in the way he held his wrist steady. In the way he didn't flinch. In the way he watched Ilya's face while it happened, watched the way Ilya's eyes fluttered closed for a moment, the way his jaw tightened with restraint, and felt, impossibly, safe. Safer than he had ever felt in his life.

Ilya sealed the wound with his tongue, a slow careful stroke that made Shane shiver, and released his wrist gently, cradling it for a moment longer than necessary before letting go. Their eyes met, and something passed between them that Shane couldn't have named if someone had asked him to. Something wordless. Something that lived in the space between what language could say and what the body already knew.

Then it was Shane's turn.

A small silver blade was offered, placed in Shane's palm by the Elder, handle first, the metal cool and light. Shane closed his fingers around it and felt the weight of it, the reality of what he was about to do. Ilya held out his own wrist, palm up, the skin smooth and pale in the stained-glass light. Shane took the blade in his right hand, steady, and made a small, careful cut across Ilya's inner wrist, just deep enough. The motion was precise. He'd practiced it. He had spent an evening with Ilya and an orange, learning the exact pressure, the exact angle, until he could do it without hesitation.

Dark blood welled up, not red but something richer, something deeper. A color that caught the light differently, that seemed almost to glow in the amber-tinged air. Shane watched it rise to the surface of the wound and felt something stir in him that he hadn't expected. Not revulsion. Not discomfort. Something closer to reverence. This was Ilya's blood. The thing that made Ilya what he was. The thing that had sustained him for centuries. And Ilya was offering it freely, palm up, wrist extended, without hesitation or fear. An act of trust that Shane understood the full weight of.

Shane hadn't been entirely sure how he'd feel about this part. He'd read about it, had discussed it with Ilya, had asked questions, had examined every angle of it with the thoroughness he brought to anything that frightened him even slightly. He understood the symbolism. It was reciprocal. It was equal. Shane claiming Ilya's blood was the human's way of saying: *I accept you. I choose you. I am not afraid of what you are.* It was a declaration. Shane drawing Ilya's blood into his own body and letting it become part of him.

He lifted Ilya's wrist to his mouth.

The first taste hit him like a wave.

It flooded through him, warm and rich and metallic in a way that should have been strange but was instead grounding. Familiar, even, like something his body had been expecting without his mind's permission. It spread through his chest like heat, like something that belonged there, and Shane's breath stuttered and his eyes widened and before he fully understood what he was doing, before his conscious mind had caught up with what his body was already doing, he was drinking.

Not a polite sip. Not a ceremonial taste, delicate and restrained. He was sucking, greedy and sudden, his hand tightening around Ilya's wrist, his mouth open against the wound, pulling Ilya's blood into himself like he'd been starving for it without knowing. The warmth flooded through him in waves, each one brighter and more expansive than the last, and the room seemed to brighten around him, the stained-glass light intensifying until the amber and gold were almost blinding.

Shane's gaze snapped up, over the space between them, and met Ilya's eyes.

He stared.

Ilya stared back. And his expression was something Shane would remember for a very long time, for his life probably, in the quiet moments when he replayed this day in his mind. Surprise, barely contained. The careful composure that Ilya wore like armor cracking, just slightly, at the edges. And beneath it, something dark and pleased and wanting. Something that burned.

Shane held his gaze and sucked out another mouthful. A little noisily. Daring Ilya without meaning to, or maybe meaning to exactly, because Shane had learned, slowly, to trust his instincts, and his instinct right now was to make Ilya look at him exactly like that.

The silence in the room was absolute for one beat, two, three, a silence so complete Shane could hear the hum of the old magic in the walls, could hear his own heartbeat loud in his ears. And then someone laughed. It sounded like Aurelion, a short surprised burst of sound that broke the tension like a stone through glass. And suddenly the room was warm with quiet laughter, the kind of laughter that wasn't mocking but celebratory, that said *yes, this, exactly this*, and Shane felt heat flood his face as the reality of what he'd just done caught up with him.

He had just, in front of the entire supernatural court and every diplomatic representative in the kingdom, drunk his husband's blood like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. And it had been. That was the embarrassing part. It absolutely had been.

Ilya gently, carefully, drew his wrist back. He lifted it to his own mouth and sealed the wound with his tongue, the same slow careful motion he'd used on Shane's wrist, mirroring it and making it equal, and then he leaned in close. Close enough that his lips brushed Shane's ear, close enough that Shane could feel the cool press of Ilya's breath against his skin.

"Tonight," Ilya whispered. One word. A promise. A threat. Both.

He pulled back and reached into his pocket, producing a white handkerchief with the kind of casual elegance that only Ilya could manage. He lifted it and, with infinite gentleness, blotted

Shane's lips, wiping away the thin line of dark blood that had escaped the corner of his mouth. The gesture was so tender, so careful and so intimate, that Shane felt his chest tighten.

Shane's entire body went hot.

He swallowed, nodded once, and straightened up. He drew a deep breath and let out a soft giggle. He let the warmth of Ilya's blood settle into him like a second pulse, steady and sure. And the rest of the ceremony passed in a warm blur of words and formality and ritual, the Elder's ancient voice carrying through the room, the quiet responses of the witnesses, the final pronouncements that sealed what had already been sealed long before this room, long before this ceremony, long before any of it.

Shane heard it all, and felt it all, and understood that the words were important, were necessary, were part of the architecture of this new world he was building his life inside, but the thing that mattered, the thing that had already happened, was the quiet, unshakeable feeling that something fundamental had shifted in the architecture of his life. And that it had shifted exactly the way it was supposed to.

The reception was *enormous*.

Shane had attended parties before, gatherings and events and celebrations of various scales, from intimate dinners to the formal receptions at the palace that he'd attended in the first weeks of his time in the kingdom. But nothing quite like this.

The great hall had been transformed into something that felt less like a room and more like a world unto itself: every surface gleaming, the air filled with music, live music from somewhere Shane couldn't quite identify, strings and something else that vibrated at a frequency he felt more than heard, and conversation, and the particular warmth that came from a room full of people who were genuinely happy to be there.

Hundreds of guests moved through the space, and Shane watched them from Ilya's side, close enough that their shoulders touched, and felt something vast and quiet settle in his chest. A feeling he was still learning the name for, something bigger than happiness, something that encompassed the whole room, the whole day, the whole improbable, beautiful fact of being here.

Humans and supernatural beings stood together at the bar, glasses in hand, talking with the easy familiarity of people who had stopped seeing each other as fundamentally different. Werewolves laughed at something a Fae woman said near the fireplace, a real laugh, loud and unselfconscious, and the Fae woman smiled in response with a warmth that Shane found quietly moving. A group of vampires Shane vaguely recognized from the court were deep in animated conversation with two humans he'd met at a Council event weeks ago, leaning toward each other with the particular intensity of people who had found something interesting to disagree about.

The ease of it, the casual unremarkable way different species occupied the same space, breathed the same air, shared the same celebration, was something Shane noticed in a way he

suspected most of the guests did not. It was still new enough to him that it felt like a gift every time he saw it. Like something precious that could be taken away, except that it couldn't. Not anymore. Not now. The world had changed, and this was what it looked like when it worked.

They accepted congratulations for what felt like hours.

“Your Highness. Your Grace.”

That had been an interesting revelation; that as the bonded Consort to the Crown Prince, Shane had gained a new title: *His Royal Grace, Consort of the Crown Prince*.

Ilya's hand stayed at the small of Shane's back, gentle and present, a constant point of contact that Shane leaned into without thinking, the way you leaned into a wall you trusted to hold you up.

People approached in waves: vampires with formal bows and genuine smiles, the kind that reached their eyes and stayed there. Werewolves with firm handshakes and rougher congratulations, claps on the shoulder that Shane felt in his teeth. Fae with their particular brand of graceful sincerity, words chosen carefully and delivered with an elegance that felt almost choreographed but was, Shane had learned, simply how they communicated. Humans with handshakes and laughter and the kind of uncomplicated joy that Shane's own species seemed to specialize in, the straightforward unadorned happiness of people who meant what they said and said what they meant.

Shane absorbed all of it. Let it wash over him and settle into him like warmth from a fire. Each congratulation was a small affirmation, not just of the marriage, but of everything that had led to it. Of the choice he'd made, and the choice that had been made for him, and the way those two things had eventually become the same thing.

He was shaking someone's hand, a vampire lord whose name he'd already forgotten, whose grip was firm and whose smile was polite, when he spotted a familiar face near the edge of the crowd.

Captain Marlow.

Shane excused himself, politely, with a nod and a smile that he hoped conveyed genuine gratitude even though he couldn't remember the man's name, and made his way through the crowd. The guests parted for him, not dramatically and not the way they might have parted for Ilya, but with a quiet easy deference that Shane was still getting used to.

Marlow was standing with all six members of Shane's former security detail, all of them dressed in civilian clothes that somehow still managed to look like uniforms, the way they held themselves, the slight rigidity in their posture, the way their eyes moved through the room with a professional awareness that couldn't be entirely turned off. They were all alive. They were all here, standing in this room, holding drinks and wearing almost-smiles and being, against all probability, fine.

That fact still landed in Shane's chest with a weight that hadn't diminished, even after weeks of hospital visits and recovery updates and the slow, patient watching of people he'd come to care about healing from something that should have killed them. Shane carried that weight quietly, had learned not to let it show too much on his face, but it was there. It would probably always be there. A reminder of what the stakes had been. Of what had been risked, and what had been paid.

"Cliff," Shane said, and extended his hand.

Marlow took it, and his grip was firm, firmer than Shane expected, given how recently he'd been in a hospital bed. His color was good. Better than good. When he smiled, it reached his eyes, and there was something in it, something warm and unguarded, that Shane hadn't seen from him before. Maybe it was the occasion. Maybe it was the bloodwine. Maybe it was simply what it felt like to be alive and celebrating something worth celebrating.

"Congratulations, Your Grace. Hell of a party."

"Thank you for coming. All of you." Shane looked at the others, made sure each of them knew he meant it. That he saw them. That he remembered what they'd done, and what it had cost, and that he was grateful in a way that went beyond the perfunctory. "I'm glad you're all here."

One of the guards, a young vampire named Reyes whose arm had been in a sling for three of Shane's hospital visits and whose healing had been slower than the others and whose quiet determination through it had made Shane quietly proud, raised his glass of bloodwine. The sling was gone now. The arm moved freely, naturally, and Reyes held the glass with a steady hand and a smile that said he knew exactly what Shane was thinking.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Your Grace," Reyes said, warmly. "Seeing you with His Highness today made it all worthwhile."

Shane smiled at them and felt something ease in him that he hadn't known was still tight. Like a thread he'd been holding, unconsciously, since those awful days, finally releasing its grip.

He drifted back to Ilya's side, and Ilya's hand found his again, warm fingers lacing between Shane's, a gesture so automatic it felt like breathing, and Shane looked out at the crowd. At the lights and the noise and the absurd, wonderful scale of it all. At the humans and vampires and werewolves and Fae, all of them together, all of them celebrating something that would have been unthinkable a year ago.

I have never been this happy, he thought.

The foot taps came an hour later.

They were standing near one of the pillars, half-hidden from the main crowd by a cluster of tall arrangements, white flowers and dark greenery fragrant in a way that was almost dizzying, and Shane shifted his weight so that his foot was close to Ilya's. Then he tapped. Once. Twice. Three times. Four.

Ilya's gaze snapped to him. Immediate. Instinctive. Like a wire being pulled taut.

Shane didn't look away. He held Ilya's eyes and let everything he was feeling show on his face, which was something he was still learning to do, still practicing, but tonight he didn't want to hold anything back. Tonight, he wanted Ilya to see all of it. Love. Desire. Want. The reckless pull of knowing *exactly* what was about to happen and wanting it so badly it made his skin feel too tight. The joy of it.

Ilya's expression shifted. The polite, composed mask he wore at social events, the one that kept the court satisfied and the diplomatic machinery running smoothly, dissolved like smoke in sunlight. And what was underneath was nothing but want. Pure, uncomplicated, burning want, directed entirely at Shane, and it made Shane's pulse kick up in a way that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with the fact that he was wanted like this, by this person, with this intensity, and he got to have it. He got to have this.

They slipped out together, quietly, through a side corridor that Ilya knew and Shane was learning. The noise of the party faded behind them, the music and the laughter and the hum of conversation, replaced by the soft echo of their footsteps on stone, and the quiet, charged silence between them. Shane could feel the anticipation building in his body like a physical thing, a pressure behind his ribs, a heat that started low in his belly and spread.

"My apartment," Shane said, his voice low.

Ilya glanced at him. The eagerness in his expression hadn't diminished. If anything, it had intensified, sharpened, the way a flame sharpened when you blew on it.

"Yours?"

Shane thought about it for half a second and weighed the options.

"No. Yours. Less chance of someone walking in on us."

Ilya's mouth twitched, the ghost of a smile, dark and amused. "The couch."

"The couch," Shane confirmed, and they both laughed, quiet breathless laughter that echoed in the stone corridor, because two weeks ago, they had been in the middle of something very promising on Shane's leather couch when Yuna and David had come through the door without knocking. The resulting scramble had been mortifying in a way that Shane still couldn't think about without his face going red, the way Shane had practically fallen off the couch and Ilya had moved with inhuman speed to cover them both with a throw blanket. Yuna had simply rolled her eyes and David had stood in the doorway with an expression that suggested he was reconsidering every life choice that had led him to this moment.

They did not speak of it. Ever. And they never, ever would.

Ilya's apartment was dim and toasty when they arrived. Ilya didn't bother with the lights beyond the barest glow, didn't need to, and neither did Shane. Shane knew this space now, knew the geography of it the way he knew Ilya's body: by feel and instinct and the specific way the shadows fell across familiar surfaces. The shape of the furniture in the dark. The

slight coolness of the air near the windows. The way the bedroom door felt under his hand when he pushed it open.

Shane would officially move into Ilya's apartment tomorrow, even though he had spent many of his nights there with Ilya.

"I have waited for you all my life," Ilya murmured, kissing his neck.

Shane giggled, dissolving into a soft moan as Ilya nipped him gently. "That's a long time to wait."

Ilya growled. "Yes."

He let Ilya press him back onto the bed, let himself be guided down into the sheets with a sigh that broke out of him before he could stop it. It was the kind that softened every muscle in his body at once, that made him feel boneless and open and completely, utterly present. The mattress dipped under Ilya's weight, and then his mouth was at Shane's neck, warm breath first, then lips, then the slow drag of fangs not breaking skin, just tracing the line of his pulse. Teasing. Shane tipped his head back automatically, a surrender carved into muscle memory by now, and closed his eyes as the tension of the day unspooled under Ilya's hands.

"Is it okay?" Ilya said, sucking gently. "Here?"

"Yeah...just...slow, okay?" He said, a little nervously. He didn't think Ilya would actually cause damage, he trusted Ilya with a little pain.

"I will always be careful with you, Beloved."

Every stroke down his ribs, every gentle press to his hips, loosened something inside him, thread by thread and knot by knot, until Shane felt like he was melting into the mattress. Ilya kissed him and kissed him, murmuring words against his mouth, his hands stroking Shane's head, fingers on his jaw as he held Shane steady. Shane *loved* kissing – the soft gentleness, the wet sloppy messiness, the sucking and nipping – all of the ways that Ilya kissed him and Shane kissed him back.

"More kissing," Shane murmured, chuckling. He grabbed a handful of Ilya's curly hair, drawing him back.

"Yes, more kissing," Ilya said, his lips against Shane's mouth. "Pretty lips and pretty mouth and pretty freckles. There is so much pretty, I am helpless."

Shane laughed, throwing his head back. "*Ohmygod*, you're ridiculous."

"*Hmm*...don't tempt me yet," Ilya said huskily, nosing along Shane's jawline to kiss his neck.

Their clothes just seemed to disappear. Shane couldn't remember when Ilya started to remove them, only that his hands were warm on Shane's bare skin now and Shane was trembling slightly with the anticipation of what came next. Ilya's hands moved over him with the kind of care that made Shane's breath catch, not just desire but attention. Like Ilya was

memorizing him with his palms and his eyes; like every inch of Shane's body was something worth knowing.

"I love you, Shane," Ilya said, meeting his eyes.

Shane smiled, blushing. "I love you, too, Ilya."

Ilya groaned, dropping his body against Shane and just...rubbing himself all over him.

"Fuck, I want to taste every part of you and never let you out of bed again."

Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's back, holding him tightly. "You can have everything you want."

He raised his head and peered at Shane, his eyes moving everywhere on his face. His fingers traced across his cheek.

"You can have everything **you** want, Beloved."

Feeling bold and sure, Shane grinned at him. "Then I want you to fuck me."

He barely noticed when Ilya got the lube; Shane only felt the warm slide of fingers between his thighs, the steady, patient touch that made him feel adored. Ilya opened him slowly, carefully, murmuring something low in Old World against his throat, words Shane didn't understand but felt all the same, felt in the tone of them, in the reverence that threaded through the sound.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes," Shane said, nodding.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes, come on, Ilya, we've waited long enough – *ohh!*"

His body softened around each careful push, breath catching at the gentle burn of it, and by the time Ilya lined up against him, Shane was shaking with need, trembling in a way that had nothing to do with cold and everything to do with how badly he wanted this, wanted Ilya, wanted to feel him everywhere at once.

"*Ohhh...ohmygod –*"

When Ilya pressed his hard cock into Shane, it was slow at first, so slow Shane could feel every inch of it. The stretch. The pressure. The deep, claiming sink that stole his breath and scattered his thoughts like leaves in the wind.

"Oh fuck Ilya!"

"Still good?"

"Yes *ohmygod* yes, don't stop!"

He sucked in air through his teeth, his fingers tightening involuntarily in the sheets, his back arching slightly off the mattress. But Ilya's hands were on him immediately, one firm on his hip grounding him like an anchor against the sensation, and one sliding up his chest, a steadying warmth that pressed against his sternum like a promise.

"Breathe for me," Ilya murmured against his jaw, and Shane did, because Ilya knew what Shane needed. Because it was the easiest thing in the world to do what Ilya asked, when Ilya asked like that, quiet and certain and without pressure.

"Just...just give me a moment – *ohmygod* –"

The fullness settled. Sharp and overwhelming and unbearably good, all at once. Shane's body trembled under Ilya's patient strength and control, adjusting and accommodating around the hard thickness and length inside of him, and the initial sting ebbed quickly, melting into an ache that was transforming into pleasure, that made heat coil low in his belly like something waking up.

"Okay," Shane said, breathlessly, opening his eyes and nodding at Ilya's questioning look.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, then leaning down to kiss Shane's mouth, his tongue slipping in between his lips like a soothing caress.

Ilya braced his hands on the bed and began to move his hips, not fast and not rough, but deep. Each thrust measured and deliberate, pushing into Shane like he was something precious that deserved care, especially in the heat of wanting.

"Shane. Fuck. You feel so good," Ilya murmured, brushing his face against Shane's hair.

He breathed in deeply and then shifted his hips, meeting Ilya's thrusts in slow, undulating movements. He spread his knees wider, bracing the heel of one foot on the back of Ilya's plump ass, arching into the next thrust with a loud moan as Ilya's cock dragged over his prostate.

"*Ohmygod!*"

"That's it, just like that," Ilya cooed, his hands burying in Shane's hair, holding him steady against the pillow. "Just like that, move with me, oh fuck yes –"

The rhythm built steadily, and Shane felt it everywhere. Not just in his body, but in the air around them. In the way Ilya watched him, focused entirely on Shane's face, reading every flicker of expression, every shift in his breathing. Every point of contact was a live wire: Ilya's hips against his, Ilya's breath brushing his ear, Ilya's thigh pressing Shane's legs apart a little more, guiding him wordlessly into a position that made Shane gasp and grip Ilya's shoulders harder. Shane held on and breathed and let himself want it, all of it, without fear, without hesitation, without the old instinct to pull back from anything that felt too good. He clutched at Ilya's shoulders, pulling him deeper, needing more. Needing all of it.

Ilya bit him on the neck.

“Ilya!”

Shane's back arched off the bed instantly. The sound that tore out of him was raw and wrecked, a cry that he didn't try to muffle, didn't try to contain. The bite wasn't deep, just the sharp electric pressure of teeth on skin, right at the pulse point, but combined with the thrust of Ilya's hips, the sensation detonated inside him. Heat flooded his bloodstream like liquid fire, racing through every nerve ending at once, and his vision went white at the edges, pleasure crashing through him too fast and too hard for him to brace against.

“Jesus Christ! Yes! Ilya!” He gasped Ilya’s name like a lifeline and something he was holding onto, and his fingers dug into hard muscle, holding on as he came so hard, untouched and rolling through him in waves. It was a trembling force that overwhelmed him, but he wanted more even as it wrung him dry, even as his body shook with the power of it.

Ilya kept moving through it, gentler now but still deep. Still intent. Still focused entirely on Shane, like Shane's pleasure was something he could drink from, something inexhaustible. Shane felt himself softening, felt the aftershocks flickering through his body like electricity after a storm, and Ilya pressed their foreheads together and groaned softly against his lips, a sound that was quiet and rough and full of something Shane recognized as need, as wanting, the vulnerability that Ilya only showed him.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya whispered, shakily.

Eventually, Ilya stilled, his breath warm on Shane's cheek, and the room seemed to settle with them, the air going still and the world outside going quiet, contracting down to the two of them and the dark and the warmth between their bodies.

Afterward, Ilya drew back just enough to bring his own wrist to his mouth. Shane watched, dazed and heavy-lidded, as Ilya's fangs pierced his own skin with a swift, practiced motion, quick and precise, barely a flinch. Dark blood welled up, a thin line catching the faint light from the window, rich and deep. Ilya held out his wrist without a word, just offered it, palm up, like an unspoken vow. Like something that needed no explanation because it was self-evident.

Shane looked at it for a moment. He felt the weight of what it was, and what it wasn't. Drinking wouldn't Turn him, wouldn't bind him to anything except the intimacy they chose, the closeness they built deliberately, night by night, touch by touch. It was indulgent. It was an invitation, freely given, and Shane could accept it or not, and either way it would be fine.

He pulled Ilya's wrist to his mouth and drank.

The taste flooded his senses instantly, warm and rich and metallic in a way that should have been strange but was instead grounding. He closed his eyes and savored it, felt the heat spread through his chest like a second pulse, felt Ilya's breath hitch against his temple, a small involuntary sound that Shane filed away and treasured quietly.

His own body relaxed even further under the warmth of it, pliant and trusting, sinking deeper into the mattress, into Ilya, into the particular surety of this moment.

When he opened his eyes, Ilya was watching him. The expression on Ilya's face was something Shane would carry with him for a long time: reverence and hunger. His pupils dark and blown wide, his lips slightly parted, his whole face open in a way that was rare for Ilya, stripped of the layers he wore for the world, down to something raw and wanting and completely, devastatingly honest.

"You know that it turns me on," Ilya said, his voice rough, almost hoarse, the kind of roughness that came from restraint, from holding something back. "Feeling you take from me like that."

Shane smiled against his skin, a slow lazy curl of satisfaction warming him from the inside out.

"I know."

He released him gently. Ilya healed the wound with a brush of his tongue, the skin knitting smooth again in seconds, seamless, as if it had never been broken, and then he gathered Shane close. Pulled him in against his chest, one arm settling around Shane's waist with a weight that felt like being held. Shane went willingly, tucked his face into the curve of Ilya's throat, and breathed him in. Something underneath that was just Ilya, a scent Shane had learned without trying, had memorized the way you memorized the smell of home.

They settled together in the dark, tangled and warm and satisfied. Inside, the bedroom was warm, and the silence between them was the kind that didn't need filling. The kind that was full already, full of everything they were to each other, and didn't require a single word to say so.

For a while, they didn't talk. Shane lay with his head on Ilya's chest, listening to the quiet, deliberate beat of Ilya's heart, the one that was slower than a human's. Shane counted the beats without meaning to, letting them become a rhythm, a metronome, something to settle against.

"I want to be Turned," he said, nuzzling Ilya's neck.

The words came out calmly. He'd been thinking about it for weeks, had been turning the idea over carefully, examining it from every angle, the way he'd learned to examine the things that mattered. Asking himself, again and again, whether it was what he truly wanted or whether it was something else, fear or obligation or the desire to keep up with Ilya in some way that had more to do with insecurity than love.

Shane was sure. He was sure in the same quiet, unshakeable way he'd been sure in the Amber Room, when Hayden had asked if he was nervous. The same certainty that had carried him through the ceremony, through the vows, through the bite.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Shane felt his chest rise and fall beneath him, felt the slight shift in his breathing, the way it changed when Ilya was thinking carefully about something. Processing. Giving the words the weight they deserved.

"You don't have to rush to a decision," Ilya said, and his voice was careful. It was gentle. Leaving the door open without pushing Shane through it.

This was what Ilya did, Shane had learned: he never asked for more than Shane was ready to give. Never pressured, never assumed, and never let his own desires override Shane's need to move at his own pace. It was one of the things Shane loved most about him. One of the things that had made it possible for Shane to trust him with this.

"I'm not rushing." Shane lifted his head and looked at him directly and openly, with the kind of eye contact that used to make him uncomfortable and now felt like the most natural thing in the world. "I've been thinking about it for weeks. I know what it means. I know what it involves. I've thought about it from every angle I can think of, and every time I come back to the same answer: I want you to Turn me."

Ilya studied his face, searching, looking for doubt, for hesitation, for any crack in the certainty that might indicate Shane was saying what he thought Ilya wanted to hear rather than what he actually felt. Shane let him look. He had nothing to hide.

"When?" Ilya asked, after a long moment. The single word carried everything: acceptance, and care, and the quiet reverence that Ilya reserved for the things that mattered most.

"My twenty-seventh birthday."

Something flickered in Ilya's expression. Recognition. Understanding. Shane watched it land, watched the way Ilya's eyes changed, the way his mouth softened almost imperceptibly.

"The same age I was," Ilya said, quietly.

"Yeah." Shane smiled.

It wasn't a grand gesture. It wasn't meant to be poetic or symbolic in some sweeping, cinematic way. It was just something that felt right to him, a point on the timeline that meant something to both of them. A shared reference. A future they could look toward together and see the same thing when they looked.

"I thought we could look forward to it. Together." Shane sighed, settling against Ilya. "It'll give me time to talk to Dr. Bennett, make sure that it really is what I want. Maybe on a bad day, I won't want to be Turned and we'll fight. But I've decided that it's what I want."

Ilya was quiet for another moment. Then Ilya pulled Shane closer, gathered him in, pressed his lips to Shane's forehead, held him with the kind of careful, fierce tenderness that made Shane's chest ache in the best possible way.

"I love you," Ilya said, his voice emotional.

The words were simple. Steady in the way that Ilya was steady, like something that had been true for a long time and had simply been waiting for the right moment to be said out loud.

Shane closed his eyes. Felt the rightness of it, the certainty of it, and it settled into his bones. Into the deepest, most fundamental part of him, the part that had been scared – still scared,

but he could be brave. He would still be Shane.

"I love you," Shane said, kissing Ilya's chest and snuggling closer against him.

Shane held on to Ilya and to this moment and to the quiet extraordinary miracle of being here, alive and loved and chosen, and he let himself have everything he'd ever wanted.

The End.

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