A Simple Question; A Solid Truth

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A Simple Question; A Solid Truth

by loveleclerc

Summary

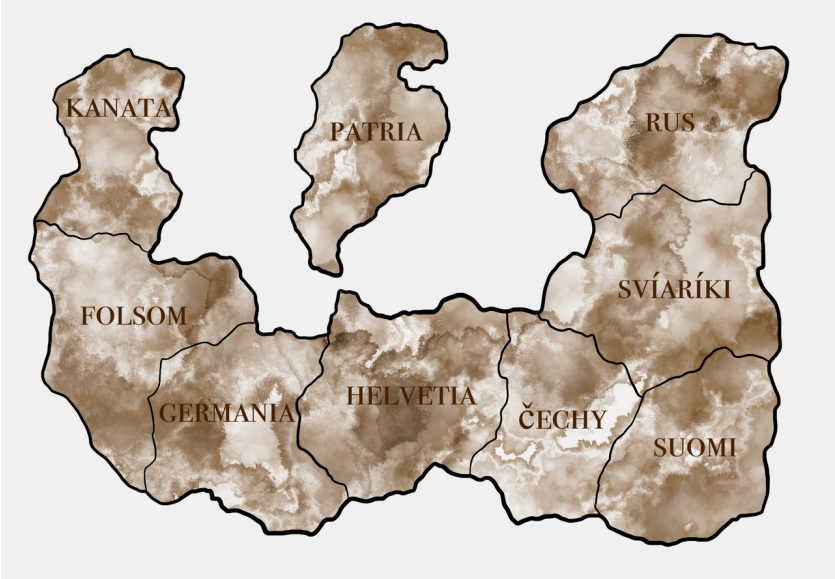
A soulmate. It was what all alphas, betas, and omegas had searched for since the creation of their kind. It was a time that came for every and all beings of full maturity that could speak, run, feel, breathe, hunt, and fuck. And now, it was Shane's turn. He would embark to find his mate like all others who had come before him, consummate the mating bond, and begin the next chapter of his life with the missing piece of his fractured soul—an alpha of his very own.

A Hollanov primal A/B/O AU fueled by instincts, mating traditions, and soulmate bonds.

Notes

“Instinct is a marvelous thing. It can neither be explained nor ignored.” ― Agatha Christie

Chapter 1: I’m here and I see you



Shane stared at the rocky path that jutted out into the sea, a rough and jagged walkway that allowed Helvetia to be connected with Patria during low tide. He swallowed hard and gripped the hide bag slung over his back and across his chest. It carried only the essentials inside—food for the first few days, tools to start a fire, small weapons to defend himself and hunt, skins for warmth, a few empty leacher pouches for water, and personal belongings he refused to part with.

Patria was the homeland, where his people had originated. The first alphas, betas, and omegas had been grown from the land, shaped out of the clay and water and air and earth to become whole beings. It was them who had populated their world, settled in frozen mountains and lush plains, filled it with stories and creations, and solidified the first bond between two beings when nature was so certain they were designed to belong to one another.

It was what every alpha, beta, and omega had searched for since, time and time again. When every being that roamed the earth reached full maturity, their time would come too for them to seek out the bond that had come to their ancestors. It was a time that came for every and all beings that could speak, run, feel, breathe, hunt, and fuck. And now, it was Shane’s time. He would embark to find his mate like all others who had come before him, consummate the bond, and begin the next chapter of his life with the missing piece of his fractured soul.

He just needed to cross the rocky path in front of him. There was no telling how long the voyage would be. For some, mates were found in days or weeks. For others, it took months or years. There had been legends of some waiting close to a decade for their mate simply because they had been born later. Shane would not leave Patria until his mate was found and his bond was sealed. He would remain, away from his parents and his homeland, for as long as it took.

Shane flared his nostrils in determination, then stepped forward onto the first slab of stone that parted the shallow sea. It was early in the day, the sun just past the horizon now, which Shane had planned. The passage from Helvetia to Patria was one taken by some thousand or so alphas, betas, and omegas a year and Shane couldn't help but stare at the rock beneath his feet which had seen so many humans come alone and leave accompanied.

The path had seen his parents, his grandparents, and his relatives whose names and faces had been lost with time. It would see him one day with someone by his side. In years after his mating, the passage would see his children as well. Then his grandchildren. Then his kin whose names and faces would never be seen or heard by his mortal being.

Shane hailed from the land of Kanata. It was a territory far north on the west half of the Chelean continent that he had parted ways from two months ago. He'd trekked along the coast of Folsom, Germania, and part of Helvetia to reach the pass and had run into a handful of other men and women his age who were either embarking on the same journey or returning from it with a new person at their side. He'd heard stories of immediate connection at first sight, hard to get games, passionate nights, soft conversations, and feelings of absolute wholeness that only came once a bond was fulfilled.

It had been talk he'd heard from his own parents numerous times growing up, but it was still nice to hear from strangers that there was someone for everyone—a sureness in a connection that the universe had made true and final. Someone was out there for him. Someone was waiting for him. Someone belonged to him. Shane tried to imagine who that someone was. He knew since he was young that he liked men, had never really been fully attracted to a woman, so his mate was likely to be a man.

He himself was an omega by designation, so his mate was also likely to be an alpha. Shane let his mind drift for the hour or so it took to cross the passage, allowing himself to come up with a fuzzy face in his mind of what his mate might look like. The universe was rarely cruel when it came to mates. For example, if someone preferred brunette women with chocolate eyes, the universe was likely to give that person a brunette woman with chocolate eyes as a mate. Very seldom did someone end up with a mate whose characteristics were not already desired by that person.

In Shane's mind, he imagined a strong alpha, muscular and tall, with soft eyes and golden hair. He would be gentle with Shane, protective, but also challenging in a sense that Shane never felt less than or undermined in his abilities. He would match him in all matters of life, value him as an equal, and face obstacles without fear when sometimes Shane felt uncertain of it all. He wouldn't mind that Shane was a little shy or awkward or sheltered sometimes. He would love every bit of Shane the same way Shane would love every bit of him.

When Shane's foot suddenly touched the sandy shore of Patria, he froze. Energy ran through his feet, charged and heavy within his veins, and went directly to his thundering heart. It was as if every one of his senses opened tenfold and his circadian rhythm thudded louder to match the ancient beat of the land he now stood on. Kanata might have been where he was born and raised, but Patria was home.

He slowly made his way across the tan sand of the shore, his eyes soaking in the sight of miles upon miles of evergreen trees spreading out in every direction. The mountains that

bordered nearly the entire far coast of the island were shadowed in the distance, overlapping hues of grey and blue, and Shane wondered if anyone had climbed those peaks within their journey. Had someone's mate ever been waiting at the top—eager to see what person would accept the task?

Shane himself had decided on a plan. He would not be an easy omega to hunt down. If his mate wanted him, he would have to follow his scent, explore the valleys and ridges of the island, pursue him with no doubt in mind, and prove himself worthy of Shane's affection. He would not just roll over for any alpha or any man. Shane was a Hollander, and if there was one thing his mate would come to discover about Hollanders, it was that Hollanders were not easy to acquire.

In the case of his own mother and father, Yuna had required at least five gifts from David before she even allowed him into the shelter she had built for herself in the center of the island. She had wanted a fresh catch to prove David could provide, a white shell from the ocean to prove he paid attention to detail, a live bird to prove he could handle things with care, a sharp weapon to prove he could protect others, and a clean fur to prove he could build a home. Yuna had accepted after a month of David's work.

Unbeknownst to her, David had expected to provide gifts anyway to his mate as his own father, Shane's grandfather, hailed from the land of Rus. Alphas from that land were very attentive to their mates despite their hard exterior. It was extremely uncommon for alphas from Rus to *not* give gifts to their mate upon their first meeting and even long beyond it. David, after Yuna had accepted the other gifts, had promptly dumped about four others at her feet after they'd consummated the bond, much to her delight.

They had been inseparable since.

Shane hiked his hide bag further up his shoulder and began to set off into the forest directly in front of him, beckoning him into the land of Patria. The ground was uneven and thick with plant life, fallen branches and logs, rocks, and soil. It was difficult at first to make his way through the toil, but the terrain eventually spread out and flattened the further he went into it. Scents of all kinds of people wafted through the air along with echoing calls of wildlife, the subdued contact of leaves, and twigs snapping beneath Shane's weight.

If he listened hard enough, he could maybe hear the tail-end hush of conversation carried by the breeze from others who had already found a place here to wait. He felt eyes on him at different points, heavy and piercing within the foliage, but nothing caught him or sought him out as he passed. He could smell alphas, betas, and omegas all around him, a cacophony of scent that suggested the emotions of ecstasy, happiness, anxiety, pleasure, sadness, and tranquility had been felt on each corner of the island.

For all he knew, there could still be scents lingering on bark or stones from people who had passed through ages ago.

It was cold on Patria. The breeze that sifted through the towering evergreen trees reminded him that Patria was surrounded by frigid sea, the winter season was upon all lands, and Patria itself stretched further north than Kanata at points. That was where Shane wanted to go—as far north on Patria as he could possibly manage without actually going into the mountains. It

would likely be a week's journey to make it to the furthest point he could reach, but Shane was ready. If his mate wanted him, he would have to come get him.

The first night, Shane ran into no other person. He'd found someone's shelter that had been abandoned, a lean-to made of thick branches and leafage, and had patched up some of the holes that had come from lack of attention over time. He'd made a small fire surrounded by rocks to avoid any kind of disaster while he slept, and curled up on the earthen floor in what hides he'd managed to bring with him for warmth.

By the end of the first week, Shane had only met three other people, two omegas and one alpha. They had all been pleasant, kind and eager like he was, though none of them had found their mates either. Nothing about them called to Shane and nothing about Shane called to them either. They bonded over hot meals and traded stories, shared shelters for a few nights, then departed easily with hopes of running into someone else that would be it for them.

The further north Shane went, the colder it got. Snow began to powder the tips of evergreen trees and water turned icy along the banks of streams. It rained for three days, frigid and harsh, after Shane had broken off from the last person he had run into. His shelters didn't do that great of a job at keeping the frozen wet away and Shane found himself more often than not shivering with every fibre of his being in his hides while pitiful fires struggled to keep him warm.

Whenever the rain stopped, Shane doubled his efforts with trekking through the wilderness of Patria until the rocky bases of the mountain range started to become common with the territory. It was easier to find crevices or caves in the grey stone and Shane was able to restore some of his internal heat as he waited for the rain to fizzle out before starting again. This continued for another week in which he ran into a newly mated pair in one of the caves that snarled at him mid-fuck to leave them alone and a beta woman who was just happy to talk to someone.

In the end, it took Shane two weeks and two days to finally find a cave he was happy with. Here, the snow was packed tightly and the trees were covered in the powdery white substance that replenished itself quietly throughout the day. The snowfall was silent and Shane watched from inside of the little home he'd made for himself as it tumbled through the air, completely at the whim of the breeze.

He'd set traps in the forest for game, foraged for branches and twigs that kept his fires going, and spent time passing the day by busying himself with a family tradition that had been passed down for generations—creating bead necklaces. It had started on his mother's side of the family with a man who had quite a few greats before the term grandfather. He'd created a simple bead choker necklace as a gift for his mate the first night they'd spent together.

Ever since, bead necklaces had been something shared between mates in the long line of Hollanders. After a certain amount of time, the necklaces started to be created for more than just mated pairs. There were necklaces made for sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and so much more of all different designations. Shane himself wore three beaded chokers of red, white, and black—the colors of his land—around his neck. One symbolized him as a human born of the omega designation, one highlighted the

fact he was a son to a living mother, and the last showcased him as a man who also had a living father. They were life displays.

He would eventually wear a necklace that told everyone he was a mated man as well.

His fingers worked slowly beside the fire as he made a handful of beaded necklaces in all different colors. Because Shane had no idea where his mate was coming from, he had packed the colors of beads that represented all homelands and busied himself with making a choker for each territory that his mate could belong to.

Red, white, and blue for Folsom, Čechy, and Rus. Black, yellow, and red for Germania. Blue and yellow for Helvetia. Blue and white for Suomi. Red and white for Svíaríki. Shane spent days busying himself with trapping game, designing necklaces, gathering logs, cooking meals, and exploring the area he found for himself. The day that he found the hot spring to bathe was the day that his world changed forever.

Shane woke that morning with a dull ache in his neck that came from sleeping awkwardly on his arm for a pillow. He'd only brought three hides that just covered him when he slept, and hadn't been able to fit anything else for sleep in his hide bag if he didn't want to drag it halfway across the island. He rose slowly to his hands and rubbed his crusted eyes with the back of one, then turned his attention to the world outside which had just barely started to wake as well.

No snow fell, but the ground was just as heavy with the white substance as it had been the day before. His fire had died greatly, just smoldering embers burning beside him, and Shane knew that he'd have to look for a different source of warmth soon if he didn't want to permanently lose feeling in his toes and fingers. His mother had told him that the island had natural hot springs the further north he went, but he'd have to look well and good for them.

That was to be Shane's mission that day. He brought the fire back to a healthy burn within ten minutes after loading it with fresh timber, then rose to his feet to stretch out every bone in his body with a satisfying pop. It was when he was at his full height that he realized something was sitting just outside the mouth of the cave. Brown, small, and neatly settled, Shane cocked his head to the side and slowly approached. The brown package was bound leather and it was covered in a dusting of snow that suggested it had been there a while.

He licked his lips nervously and flicked his eyes up to look out at the surrounding forestry, but he found nothing. All that remained of whoever had been here was the leather and the faint scent of something delicious in the breeze. Every instinct in his body screamed *mate mate mate* while the hairs on his body rose to attention, goosebumps covered his skin, his mouth salivated at the subtle pheromones just barely left behind in the air, and his heart sped up rapidly inside of his chest.

His mate had found him.

Shane slowly made his way forward to retrieve the package in the snow and brought it back into the shelter with trembling fingers and wide eyes. The scent of his mate was strong on the leather, not so dull in the open air and frozen ground. He stroked the soft brown hide with

reverent fingers, then shamelessly brought it up to his nose so he could inhale the pheromones that coated whatever had been wrapped.

Earthy and smoky, like the tall grasses of wild vetiver and bonfires for celebrations, while also floral and light, like the lilies that bloomed in untamed patches in valleys. There was a hint of something else though, something unique, bright, sweet. Shane could taste it on his tongue, what that scent was, and it made his head spin when he finally recognized that tang in the air. They were delicacies from his mother's side of the family, a sweet fruit with white flesh and red skin—it was lychee.

He shuddered at the few memories he had in his brain of tasting those fruits from his grandmother, a fresh treat that she had brought from her own homeland an ocean away on another continent, and found comfort in the fact his mate carried such a small important thing in his pheromones. Shane knew his mate was a man. Shane also knew his mate was an alpha. There was no denying the underlying musk in the scent that screamed of both facts, though Shane had no qualms about either.

The universe had given him exactly what he had hoped for, along with a material gift. Shane carefully sat down on the hides that had been left near the fire and gently unlaced the leather cord that had been tied around the package. It fell open without a sound to reveal three giant chunks of soap, thick and pale green with stems of evergreen nettles and dried lavender blossoms. Shane plucked one from the small pile and brought it to his nose, inhaling the comforting smell of the soap in his grasp that had clearly been painstakingly made and cut.

Someone had put time into rendering animal tallow, wood ash, and nature to create these things. Someone who knew that Shane *needed* these things. Someone that had been watching Shane closely without him knowing. Shane had run out of his own rudimentary soap bar four days ago and had been bathing, much to his dismay, with heated water only at night. This, though… This was luxurious.

Shane attentively removed the chunks of soap from the leather and moved them to one of his small rucksacks that he had been planning to take with him on the search for a hot spring. He held onto the soft leather that had encased his gift with the plan of leaving it out for his mate tonight with a gift of his own. What he'd be giving, Shane wasn't entirely sure yet, but he liked this plan of trading back and forth until a final reveal was had.

He was already hooked on his mate. His scent was devastating to Shane when he brought the leather back to his nose quickly and inhaled, greedy and selfish. Every nerve ending lit up in his body with pleasure, with agreement that this alpha was his other half. On second thought, Shane pocketed the leather into his trousers with full acknowledgement that he would be sniffing it throughout the day in his hunt for naturally hot water. If his mate saw, all the better.

His inner omega preened at the thought of his alpha watching him for days. Whatever his mate saw, he obviously liked very much to leave such a thoughtful gift without imposing on him immediately. His mate was thoughtful, traditional, and obviously displayed self-control well to come so close to Shane yet still leave him to his privacy and turn away. Shane wanted nothing more than to leave himself completely naked upon his hides that night and welcome the alpha in, present himself for the taking, but he wanted this too—this silent game they were engaging in.

As disappointed as his instincts were at not immediately rolling over and accepting a knot and a mark from his mate, they were also very much interested to see just what this alpha was willing to do for Shane's approval. So Shane rose to his feet and left the cave to brace the frozen winter weather around him. He pulled one of his hides closed around his shoulders and huffed out a chilly breath, watching it steam into the air before him.

His clothes were fine, nothing special. He wasn't warm, per se, but he wasn't numb either. Shane should've known better with his plan to prepare for whatever winter weather Patria brought, but all he had thought about with this journey was his mate and what it would finally be like to be bonded. Those thoughts kept him company as he stepped slowly through the snowy land and marked trees absently with red chalk to remember his way back.

Shane wouldn't just be leaving with a mate and a mark on his neck. His left hand lifted languidly and rested on the flat plane of his stomach, an empty space beneath that would one day be filled and swollen, hopefully sooner rather than later. What would his child or children look like? Would they have his eyes? His black hair? His plain nose or arched lips? Or would all of their prominent features reflect that of his mate? His alpha?

He dropped his hand and marked another tree as he passed, then halted immediately when the sound of something hitting a nearby trunk echoed through the forest. Shane's eyes flicked to the noise instantly while years of training as a hunter with his father drew up every instinct in his body to pay closer attention.

The sound came again in the same direction, possibly even against the same tree, and Shane crept forward with a low stance as curiosity outweighed his anxiety. His steps were measured and quiet through the shin-deep snow, but when he finally came to what had caused the noise, he was a little caught off guard to find two small stones in the white fluff around his legs beside a trunk with two notches taken out of it.

Then, the alert came again in a new direction. Something, or someone, was guiding him somewhere. The breeze drifted through the trees and carried with it the subtle scent of the very man that had left the soap behind outside of his cave—his alpha. Shane's body reacted immediately as a shiver ran down his spine and his pupils dilated with attention. His mate was leading him somewhere, and if he had given soap as a gift, there was a strong chance his alpha was trying to guide him to exactly what he was looking for.

So Shane followed slowly as rocks hit one tree, then another, then another for an indefinite period of time. He tried his damnedest to catch a glimpse of his alpha, but saw nothing. Maybe a blur here and there in the distance, though Shane wasn't entirely sure if it was actually his mate or just his mind playing tricks on him. Eventually, the sight of steam rolling up into the frigid air came slowly into focus followed by the murky turquoise surface of the pool he had been intent on discovering.

The rocks had stopped minutes ago and Shane felt as if he was alone once more when he carefully approached the shore of the hot spring and dropped his bag. He looked around him, scanning the horizon through the winding maze of evergreen trees, but found no one staring back. The scent of his mate lingered, however. Shane bit deep into his bottom lip as the thought of putting on a show for his alpha while undressing came quickly to his mind.

He could feel his cheeks heating at the thought and he willed himself into action before he could back down from the swell of bravery he felt in that moment. He'd never been naked with another person before, not one in his entire life despite most people experimenting with others before they reached maturity, so Shane wasn't exactly sure how to go on about undressing in a seductive way that would make his alpha tremble in the shadows.

Shane began first by slowly shrugging off the hide he wore around his shoulders and letting it drop silently into the snow beside his bag. His fingers found the bottom of his linen overshirt and the cotton long sleeve beneath it. With a soft inhale, Shane pulled up at the hem and dragged the warm fabric off of his body before letting that too fall into a heap with the hide and his bag. His nipples hardened immediately at the cold while his skin erupted in goosebumps, but Shane pushed on.

He bent over and began to unlace the leather wire around his boots, then slid each piece of footwear off of his legs until his toes were frozen in the snow and quickly becoming insensitive to the cold. Shane didn't delay, however, as he undid the single button at the top of his pants and pushed the fabric down leisurely, making sure to really bend over and show the curves of his body to the eyes that were definitely watching.

Shane could feel his mate's gaze on him—a pinprick to the back of the brain that said *I'm here and I see you.* He left only his beaded chokers on as he stepped forward, his back to the man undoubtedly watching him from the treeline, and sank into the sweltering water that boiled naturally from the heated energy beneath. Shane nearly moaned at the feeling as his limbs turned loose from the warmth and every ache inside of his bones was soothed away with the hot liquid.

He continued in until only the tips of his shoulders, neck, and head were untouched, and then —

Shane dipped under the surface for a moment, the briefest of pauses in time to simply steady himself in the calm vacuum of water, before rising back up and running his hands through his now sopping wet hair. The clash of his sizzling skin to the frigid temperature surrounding him was instant, but Shane welcomed the shock to the system nonetheless. He turned slightly to reach for the bag he had brought with him and rummaged through it carefully until he found a block of soap that had been gifted to him by his mate.

The scent of his alpha had gotten somewhat stronger, closer, but Shane continued to play the tense game they were both involved in. He dipped the soap beneath the surface of the water, then rubbed its silky surface over his skin until it lathered nicely and covered his body in small bubbles filled with the aroma of evergreen and lavender. Shane closed his eyes and let his head fall this way and that as he cleaned himself from toe to chin.

The sensation of being watched grew sharper, nearer, more present. He opened his eyelids just a fraction and tilted his head slightly to the side to glance out of the corner of his eye and find where his alpha was. His heart skipped a beat inside of his chest when the very distinct presence of a man standing close enough to be seen was acknowledged. His mate was right there, right behind him. Shane's lips parted to practically drink in the pheromones radiating off of the alpha and found that it was a complex mixture of desire, arousal, and appreciation.

Slowly and deliberately, Shane rose out of the water until his upper body was exposed in the freezing winter air and the warm droplets of the hot spring ran down his naturally tanned skin. He began to turn gradually, giving his mate time to back out if he didn't want to truly see Shane yet, until he was facing the man that stood feet away in the powdery snow. All of the breath left Shane's lungs while his heart stopped in his chest at the sight of his alpha.

Beautiful.

Shane's lips parted and his eyelids fluttered as he met the intense hazel gaze of the man staring back at him through long, dark lashes. The golden curls atop his head quivered in the wintery breeze while snowflakes of the larger variation latched onto the curved locks, as if they too didn't want to be parted from the perfection they had fallen on. His jaw was sharp and dusted with matching honeyed facial hair that Shane yearned to feel against the soft skin he sported on his own face.

Lush lips bowed at the peak, just as angular as his cheekbones and chin, and they too were parted as Shane's were from simply observing one another. Shane could tell that his alpha was strong. He was tall, broad, *big.* Even beneath the large brown fur he wore across his shoulders, Shane knew that his mate was muscular and sculpted in the same way his face was. There was a singular braid that fell alongside his left cheek, a simple plait decorated with a leather strap at the end to keep it in place, and stopped just at the top of his jaw.

It was a cultural practice and one that Shane knew well, for his father's side of the family had worn them in their youth too. The alpha staring back at him in all of his wondrous glory was from Rus. When Shane called to him, it was in his mate's language.

"You found me," he said softly, the accented words curling easily around his tongue despite their thick sound. Shane watched as the alpha physically shuddered and flared his nostrils at the impact of Shane's words. He had been caught off guard to hear his native tongue unexpectedly on Shane's lips. This pleased something inside of him, the knowledge that he spoke the same language as his other half, so Shane offered up the smallest of smiles and continued gently, "Have you been searching for me long?"

The alpha hadn't moved a muscle since Shane had turned around and Shane waited patiently, watching as his mates eyes danced over his half naked body with blown pupils and glazed irises. His inner omega preened at the attention—the clear approval from his alpha at his appearance. Shane cocked his head to the side but said nothing else, leaving the quiet air open for the alpha to speak next. When his voice did come, it sent a hot jolt of liquid *rightness* straight to Shane's gut.

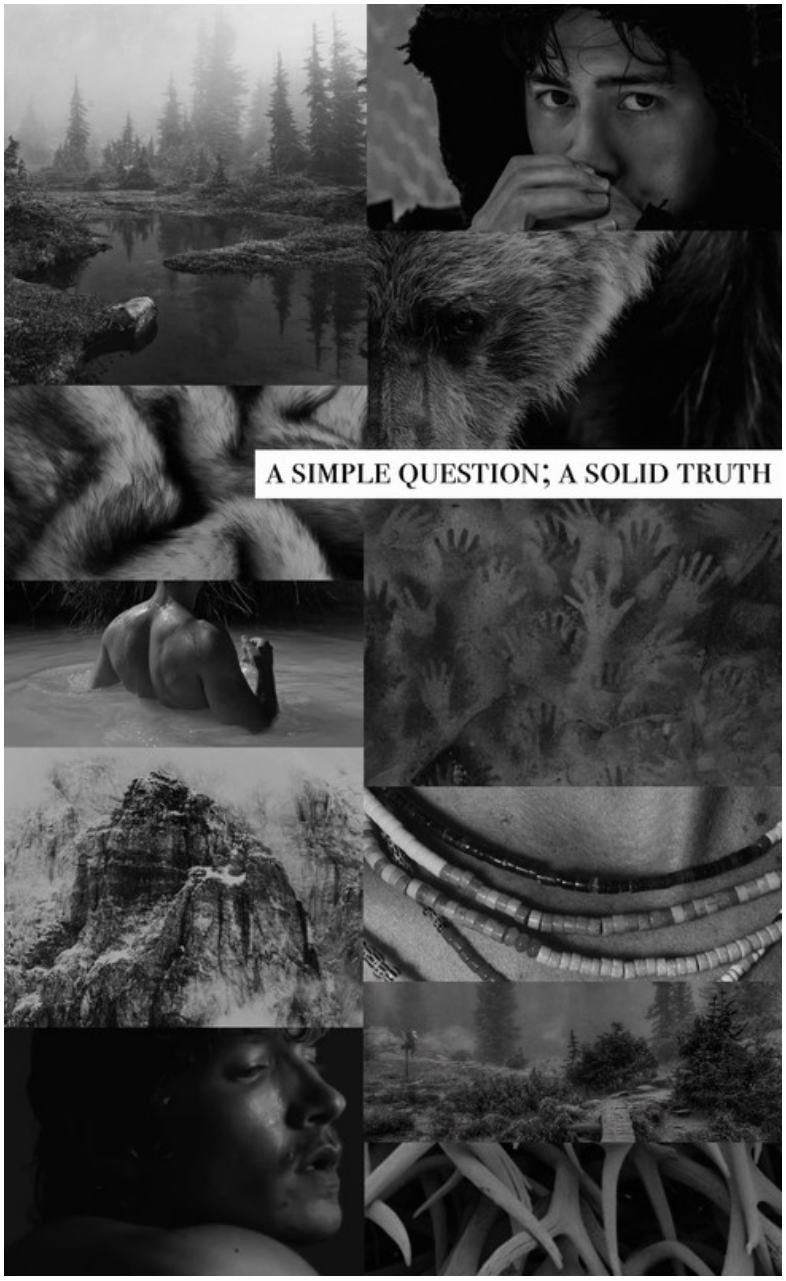
"I've waited years for you."

Shane's breath hitched in his throat at the admittance. Years? His alpha had waited years for him? Here? Shane felt his face transform into something tender, pained, and desperate as his right hand unconsciously lifted from the water and reached for the man standing so close, yet so far away. Before he could say or do anything, his mate turned and disappeared into the forest, leaving behind only the scent and memory of his being there.

Chapter 2: Tonight and all nights

Chapter Notes

> “Trust your instincts, and make judgements on what your heart tells you. The heart will not betray you.” ― David Gemmell



Ilya’s eyes flicked over the white land in front of him, the silence deafening in his ears as he waited for the slightest hint of movement or the smallest sound. His breath steamed in front

of him from where he was crouched within the loose branches of an evergreen tree, but Ilya found that he was unaffected by the cold blanketing his body. He was warm within the furs and layers he had traded for throughout the years in Patria, though his mate, his beautiful mate, was not. Ilya had gotten his first real look of his omega's face and had nearly claimed him right then and there in the hot spring he'd guided him to.

The first assault of his mate's scent had come a week ago within the deep forests of Patria. There had been an abandoned shelter that Ilya had discovered while hunting that was absolutely saturated with pheromones of pine, sea salt, and maple. Ilya had fallen to his knees within it, sinking his fingers into the soft dirt there only to bring the crumbling earth up to his nose and inhale. He'd felt drunk on it, the scent of the omega, and he knew that the years he had spent waiting had finally come to an end. His mate had arrived.

Ilya had followed the faint trail of the omega's scent immediately after. He'd slung his hide bag over his shoulder, fisted his bow with determination, then headed out through the uneven terrain to discover the man that he belonged to. Ilya had initially been confused about his mate's direction. It seemed as if he was heading directly for the mountain range, and when that suspicion became true, Ilya wondered why this omega was going somewhere so cold and so far north. Snow blanketed the ground, water froze on the edges of streams, the trees were stiff from the cold, and barely any game resided within the mountains.

But then he'd caught his first glimpse of his mate, his lovely dark-haired mate, setting up camp within one of the many caves belonging to the range and Ilya knew why the trek had been made. It was a challenge. Ilya had watched from afar, studying the omega's movements and actions throughout the day, and made mental note of everything he observed while also holding back his inner alpha's desire to claim, mate, breed.

He was fascinated with how his mate intensely crafted traps for small game in fine detail, how he spoke softly to himself in the common tongue of the continent behind the crackling of a flame, how he could spend hours inside of the crevice without appearing bored, and how he went for a walk every day in search of something before retreating back to safety for a rudimentary wash with heated water. As soon as Ilya had figured out that it was a larger body of hot liquid he was looking to sink himself into, Ilya began to venture out himself.

He'd plucked evergreen leaves from their wispy branches, rummaged through his collection of spices and herbs within his bag to procure dried lavender blooms, and painstakingly cut fat away from meat and bone of killed prey to render down. All he could think of was his mate, his devastatingly perfect mate, looking for somewhere to bathe and using a gift that Ilya had created from his own hands. It was worth it, in the end, to gift his omega with the soap blocks and discover a nearby hot spring for his use, because the sight of his mate naked, flushed, content, and warm filled Ilya with a primal sense of pleasure. Then he'd turned around.

His mate had turned, slowly—oh so slowly, and looked him right in the eyes. Ilya's entire world unravelled around him as every primitive instinct latched onto the breathtaking man in the turquoise water and chose to revolve around him instead. Ilya had never beheld such a creature in his life. Hair the color of squid ink, skin a shade of warm beige, chocolate eyes flecked with amber undertones, rosy lips that bowed deeply at their peak, and freckles that

swept across his full cheekbones and straight nose… It was like looking at something ethereal that had no reason to bless the moral realm.

And then his mate had spoken his language, his *native* language, and Ilya knew he would never be the same again after that first meeting. His voice was strong, true, and sure. He spoke without any denial for the bond they shared and had greeted him fondly, congratulating him for managing to track down where he was. Ilya had told him honestly that he'd waited years for his arrival, a fact that seemed to stun his alluring mate, and swiftly decided that if he did not turn away and continue the little game they had built between them while his body still allowed it, he would do something he deeply regretted.

This was important to him. The courtship of his mate was something he'd vowed with every fibre of his being to engage in, the way his mother would have wanted him to. He would honor her in doing this, in spoiling the man that so easily entrapped him after just one encounter. His mother had found her mate in Grigori, yes, but Grigori had viewed their bond as something transactional and unbalanced rather than equal and kind. She'd left behind all she knew of her home tribe in Rus, bore him two sons, and weathered his tempers towards her and her children until she could bear it no longer.

Ilya had been the one to find her. She had curled her body around the fire in the center of their homestead with one hand extended towards the flame and the other cradling a handful of berries the shade of darkest night. Her mouth was stained purple with dried foam trickling down her cheek, her eyes bloodshot and unseeing, and Ilya knew she had eaten the well avoided poison intentionally. Grigori had framed it as an accident to the tribe Ilya had been raised in and, seemingly overnight, Irinia Rozanov was treated as if she'd never existed.

She'd never gotten gifts of her own. She'd never been properly courted. She'd never been loved. She'd been pursued, bitten, fucked, beaten, and owned. Ilya had hated his father for it and vehemently swore that he would not treat his mate the way his father had treated his mother. His omega would only ever know kindness, protection, warmth, love, and indulgence. So when Ilya had let his eyes flick to the pile of meager deer hides his mate had been traveling with—had been using to keep warm during the frigid and unforgiving nights—he knew immediately what he had to search for next.

Ilya would prove he was worthy of his mate, that he was an alpha capable of providing for his lover, that he was strong enough to face even the toughest of battles and return to his omega with both the spoils of his trial and tenderness in his heart. So he sat in the loose branches of an evergreen tree with the white land of Patria in front of him, tuned in to the slightest hint of movement or the smallest sound. Bears were not easy to take down. They were magnificent beasts with razor sharp claws, powerful jaws, and muscle-packed bodies. Their fur, however, was prized for its velvet warmth and Ilya was determined to wrap his mate within something so decadent and dangerous.

Everyone who looked upon his omega would know that he was prized, loved, adored. Ilya would be the one to give him this and he would wait for however long was necessary until the beast of his focus wandered into the trap he had set within the snow-drowned forest. Ilya blinked at the large hunk of elk meat he had left out overtop the strategic pitfall trap he had created from downed trees, hacked off branches, and an overlay of intentionally piled snow.

Any bear who had yet to go into hibernation this far north would certainly indulge in a last minute snack before their natural slumber. It seemed, in the end, that Ilya wouldn't have to wait long.

The first crack of branches parting in the distance around a large body sent Ilya's eyes snapping to the right, instantly locked in on the direction he anticipated the beast to come from. He lifted his bow between his bent knees and carefully shifted so as not to make a sound himself while he waited in tense anticipation for the animal to reveal itself. Spears of firm pine and chipped flint rested against the thick trunk of the evergreen tree he was hidden within, a backup stash of weaponry should the bear escape the pitfall trap and avoid Ilya's immaculate aim.

He was a sharp shooter, had been since he was a boy, and knew that his arrows would strike true during this encounter. Ilya would not fail. He would do whatever was necessary to earn approval from his mate, be welcomed within the omega's home he had created for himself on Patria, and learn every detail there was to know about the man who shared the other half of his soul. Ilya didn't even know his name, but he knew that he would never tire of saying it once he was blessed with learning it.

He could guess a few things about his omega based on what he had seen—that he was likely from Kanata due to the colors he used for the beaded necklaces he wore, that his ancestry was probably a mixture of something from the Chelean continent and another across the ocean due to his epicanthic eyes, that he had been raised without prejudice against his designation due to his trapping abilities and muscular silhouette, and that his family had traditions of their own due to the previously mentioned decorative chokers clasped snugly around the column of his throat. Ilya had never seen such a thing before, but he enjoyed the sight of them on his omega. He wondered what they meant and if Ilya would get one of his own once they were officially mated.

The sight of something large and brown lumbering through the treeline of the snowy forest pulled Ilya's attention away from thoughts of his future and back to the matter at hand. He watched with even, steady breaths as the bear broke through the shelter of evergreen branches and materialized in the small clearing that Ilya had intentionally chosen for the attack. He lifted his bow higher and drew the string back with quiet confidence, his muscles rippling beneath the fabric of his shirts and personal fur, before holding. Slowly, the bear trudged through the ankle deep snow, sniffed the air with its wet black nose, then went for the bait. Ilya fired the second it plunged through the trap.

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Wind howled through the towering evergreens around Ilya as snow poured silently from the night sky above. It was pitch black around him, well below freezing, and Ily was traveling based on scent alone as he carefully made his way through the treacherous landscape of Patria. When he'd first arrived three years ago at the age of seventeen, Patria had seemed so overwhelming and daunting with all of its potential. He imagined a land swarming with other

teenagers and young adults, competition over land and food, and the sounds of sex constant in the air around him.

In reality, Patria was no different from any country on the continent. It was spread out, desolate in places, unpredictable with who or what one might encounter, and extremely lonely. He'd seen springs, summers, falls, and winters pass by his hazel eyes time and time again. He'd met solemn individuals searching for their mates just as he was doing and partner pairs that were freshly mated with glazed over eyes and wide smiles. One on occasion, he'd even stumbled across a mated beta pair that had decided to stay permanently on the island and were expecting their first baby together. Ilya had been jealous that day when he'd met them. He'd seen the woman's swollen belly, the healed marks on both of their necks, the mingled scent that was equal parts both of them, and the happiness that was shared between the couple.

He'd wanted it so badly, for it to be him, that he'd isolated himself for three months atop the mountain range with no desire to ever see another human. He'd gone through a handful of painful ruts alone, fallen asleep with an empty stomach more times than he could count, hunted until his mind went numb, and shared fires on quite a few occasions, but the years had gone by slowly for him with no real events of note occurring. Not until his mate had come to Patria.

Ilya had spent the past day cleaning the bear fur around his shoulders with painstaking detail. He'd scraped the sinew and blood off of the hide, washed it in the same soap he'd given to Shane, and dried it by the warmth of a fire while brushing out the individual locks to ensure it was perfectly soft. Only when he was certain that it was acceptable did he begin back in the direction of his mate's cave. The bear had taken a good swipe at him, leaving him with a shoddily patched up mark across his chest in the form of three gashes, but Ilya pushed through the annoyance of pain as he trudged through the snow and finally spotted the flickering fire of Shane's cave in the mere distance.

He flared his nostrils in an instinctive display of possessive excitement before continuing on with every intention of offering up the gift in exchange for the omega's acceptance of their mating bond. He had other little things in his bag that he could give for presents if his mate wanted more, though part of him sincerely hoped this would be enough to prove that he was an alpha worthy of the other man's affection, devotion, and binding. The closer he got to the cave, the stronger the omega's scent became in the breeze.

Ilya felt his eyes darken with desire while his stomach tightened in anticipation of arriving before his mate with his heart laid out plainly in front of him. Would his omega make him work for it longer? Have him go out and collect more gifts until he was satisfied? Or would he accept this fur that came from a dangerous beast and find Ilya to be the alpha he wanted for life? His heart thundered in his chest as his feet fell through the freezing snow and the wind whipped around his bundled face. It wasn't long until he was standing outside the mouth of the crevice, staring into the illuminated space that tucked his omega away from the harsh landscape surrounding them.

Chocolate eyes turned away from the flames they had been staring at and locked on Ilya's only moments later. Ilya watched as his mate's lips parted with surprise and his gaze turned

wondrous. “You’re back,” the omega greeted softly in Ilya’s native language. It was a little difficult to hear over the winter storm terrorizing the mountain range, but Ilya was so focused on the beautiful man staring at him that his ears had no choice but to dial in to that melodic voice he’d been dreaming about. Ilya dipped his head and kneeled down into the snow, careful as he pulled the massive fur off of his shoulders to spread out gently on the dry cave floor in front of him.

He refused to cross the boundary between snow and smooth rock just yet. He wouldn’t dare step over the invisible line until his omega allowed it. “For you,” Ilya informed as strongly as he could, switching to the common tongue so his mate wouldn’t feel put out with the thick accent of Rus. The omega tipped his head to the side and let out a shuddering breath of awe as he took in the sight of the bear fur that Ilya had hunted for him. Slowly, his mate untangled himself from the small, thin deer hides he had brought with him and began to pad over and kneel before the gift that awaited him. Ilya kept his head bowed, unmoving, while he waited for his mate’s verdict.

“Is this…?”

“Bear,” Ilya confirmed. He watched out of his peripheral vision as lean, tanned fingers reached out to stroke the soft brown fur between them. The action sent up a dizzying cloud of pheromones that made Ilya feel slow and entranced, lost in the delicious scent of his mate that was mere inches away from him. His shoulders sagged at the smell, his swallowing turned languid and thick, and his eyes drooped heavily with a mixture of arousal, comfort, and devotion. Ilya would bury his nose in his mate’s neck the second he was able and would remain there, filling his nose with the intense aroma of his omega for as long as he was allowed to do so.

“This is… I don’t know what to say,” his mate murmured honestly.

“You would honor me by accepting this gift and the other half of my soul that belongs to you,” Ilya carefully said. “If you will take me as your mate, I will protect you, provide for you, and please you in whatever manner you wish. It would be a great privilege if you would accept me, Ilya Rozanov, as your mate.” It was a speech that Ilya had practiced on his own many times over the years he had been in Patria and one that he sincerely hoped would work with the exquisite man in front of him. The fingers that had been touching the fur lifted, arching slowly through the air towards Ilya’s face, then gently cupped the sides of Ilya’s jaw to crane his head back and meet his gaze.

His omega’s eyes were soft, gentle, and affectionate. Silver rimmed the waterline of his eyes, but Ilya knew that the man holding him was not crying out of sadness or fear. He was emotional because of what Ilya had said and done. Ilya swallowed down the lump in his throat and waited for his mate’s answer as the touch from the other man sent warmth through his body in a way that Ilya had never experienced. It was like a fire had been lit inside of his belly and he was helpless but to let the flames roar to life within him.

His inner alpha practically howled with relief at finally having his other half in front of him, touching him, acknowledging him. The omega stroked one of Ilya’s cheekbones dotingly, his thumb brushing over the coarse facial hair that had grown there, then leaned in to close his eyes and press his forehead against Ilya’s. The alpha physically shuddered in response and

forced himself to breathe before his instincts did something rash like roll the omega over, pin him down, rip off his clothes, and consummate the bond right there in the entryway of the cave. The pheromones were driving him crazy alongside the physical contact that he had craved for so long in his life.

“I, Shane Hollander, accept your gift and you as my mate.”

Shane. *Shane Shane Shane.* His name was Shane. The moon was Shane. The snow was Shane. The trees and air and oceans and clouds and rocks were Shane. The blood in his veins was Shane. The organ in his chest that kept him alive was Shane. Everything that was anything in his entire existence was and always would be Shane from that moment on. There would be no life for Ilya to live if Shane wasn’t by his side and Ilya knew that, should Shane depart from their mortal world before he did, Ilya would blindly follow. A reality without Shane was not one that Ilya wanted to be a part of, engage in, or acknowledge. Ilya reached up to grasp both of Shane’s wrists, keeping his touch on his face for just a moment longer, and stared into the umber irises of the omega across from him.

“Will you join me? Tonight and all nights, Ilya Rozanov?” Shane asked breathily.

“I will, Shane Hollander.”

Shane tenderly released him so he could reach once more for the fur between them and draw it around his shoulders with a smile. He hummed to himself in comfort once it completely enveloped his body, then extended one hand out to Ilya from where the hide overlapped so that the alpha would accept his palm. Ilya eagerly took it and rose fully to his feet alongside Shane, his heart pounding away in his chest when Shane tried his best to hold back a grin but failed. Shane tugged on his hand, pulling him over the threshold into the warmth of the cave, and Ilya knew that he had officially been accepted by the omega in front of him.

Almost instantly, Ilya dropped Shane’s hand, shrugged off his hide bag at the entrance of the cave, and engulfed him around the back of his thighs to lift him as if he weighed no more than a few sacks of grain while Shane clutched his shoulders and yelped in amusement.

“Put me down!” he cried with pure delight.

Ilya just grinned back at him, teeth and all, and spun him a few times as he went deeper into the cave. When he finally set Shane back down on his feet, they were mere inches apart and still wrapped up in one another’s arms while the fire his mate had worked hard to put together crackled faintly beside them. Ilya reached up with one hand to tenderly cup the side of Shane’s face and pull him back in so he could press their foreheads together once more. He breathed in deeply, then admitted, “I thought you would never come.”

Shane hummed as he looped his arms around Ilya’s neck and began to ease them down to the ground beside the fire. The nest Shane made on the mountainous floor was small as the few deer hides he had and a couple articles of clothing suggested that only one person was meant to occupy it, but the slow slippage of the bear fur off of Shane’s shoulders onto the meager pile made the nest considerably bigger—easy to share with another. Ilya used his strength to carefully recline Shane fully back into the fur with one hand while the other held himself up

so he could watch the shift on the omega's face from light and joyous to something open and earnest.

"How long have you been waiting for me? How many years?" Shane asked into the shared space between them. Ilya removed his hand from the back of Shane's curved spine to sweetly push one of his mate's black locks away from his face as he considered the question. In all honesty, Ilya had been waiting for Shane since the moment his mother had told him about mates and that Ilya had one waiting for him out there in the world. He'd dreamt of Shane since he was a boy, his perfect other half that complemented him in every way. But if he assumed that what Shane was asking was geared more towards how long he'd been in Patria…

"Three years."

Shane looked as if he'd been physically hurt. Ilya was quick to shake his head and bury his face in his mate's neck, equally inhaling Shane's scent and rubbing his own pheromones over the omega to stake claim. "Don't be upset. I would wait forever if it meant you were on the other side of it," Ilya confessed easily. "It was not so long. It was worth it." He pulled back then to peer down at Shane and noticed that the beaded necklaces he wore were so much more detailed up close. Red, white, black, perfectly patterned and each wholly unique. "Do these mean something?" he couldn't help but ask, somewhat eager to change the subject. He didn't want his mate to be sad at the thought of him waiting for years.

Shane's hand lifted to stroke the necklaces before he carefully guided Ilya to lay on his side so they could speak closely beside the fire without Ilya having to continue to hold himself up with one newly trembling arm. Shane smiled shyly and said, "They're family displays. It's a tradition passed down through my ancestors to signify aspects of a person's life. The top one shows I am a son to my living mother, Yuna, the middle one shows I am a son to my living father, David, and my bottom one shows that I was born an omega. I'll wear another soon enough."

Ilya couldn't help it when he extended his palm and gingerly cupped his hand around the column of Shane's throat, engulfing the necklaces there. "What will it be? The next one?" he questioned.

Shane's grin became a little scandalous, but he answered anyway. "It will be my mating display to show that I'm a mated man. I've made one for you, if you wish to carry on the tradition with me, but I'm afraid you'll have to make mine," he chuckled. Ilya's smile twisted playfully.

"I'm very sorry for the disaster you will have to wear on your beautiful neck," Ilya apologized. "I was never good at that stuff, no matter how much my mother wished I was." Shane snorted and reached behind him to pull up the bear fur they were resting on so he could cocoon the both of them properly in warmth. Ilya pressed impossibly closer, so near to his omega that he could see every single pore in his smooth skin, while the snow storm outside of the cave caged on with whistling wind and a flurry of snow.

They didn't talk for a while, simply gazing upon each other and soaking in one another's scents until Ilya couldn't tell where his pheromones ended and Shane's began. He hadn't

realized how naturally they had gravitated together until his hand was cupping the side of Shane's cheek, both of their lids were closing, and their lips were connecting in their first true kiss. It was slow and searching, hesitant yet so meaningful, and Ilya knew he would never go another day of his life without kissing Shane. He moaned in relief at finally having his mate like this and slowly rolled Shane onto his back so he could encompass him once more with his body.

Shane sighed in approval at the action and parted his lips readily to let Ilya's tongue into his mouth, his left hand curving up around Ilya's neck so he could tug at the golden curls he found at the base there. His hips opened with ease to guide Ilya's body into a more comfortable position before he pressed his lower body up into Ilya's with a soft sound that went straight to Ilya's gut.

They knew that their close contact and acceptance of the mating bond would trigger Shane's heat and Ilya's rut. It was likely they would wake tomorrow morning and immediately lose themselves into instincts as Shane's body gave every possible signal that it approved of Ilya, wanted Ilya inside, desired Ilya's mark, craved Ilya's release. Ilya would rise to meet that fervor in earnest. For tonight, however, they could simply enjoy the feel and taste and smell of one another in the privacy of their cave. There wouldn't be any consummation tonight, no, but there could be this—enjoyment in one another.

Ilya devoured Shane's mouth, mapping every corner of it with his tongue and lips, and worked different angles with his silhouette to find new ways of slanting their bodies together that felt good. When Shane was a mess of flushed cheeks, swollen lips, and hazy eyes, Ilya finally pulled back and attempted to catch his breath as he admired the man below him. "You are so beautiful," he complimented stupidly. It had been the only consistent thought in his brain that he'd had since seeing Shane for the first time and he was dying to let Shane know. The omega just blushed harder and ducked his eyes away, but Ilya was having none of it.

He dipped down to press the side of his nose against Shane's and tilt his face back up so he could meet his mate's bashful gaze. "I want to know everything about you. Tell me something, anything," Ilya murmured. He carefully maneuvered them while Shane sucked in a steadying breath so they were both on their sides once more, only this time, Ilya was pressed flush against Shane's back with his arms encircling the omega's waist. With this vantage point, he was able to press feather-light kisses along Shane's bare mating gland and lose himself in the fantasy of biting down on it during their shared cycle to claim him.

He slid one of his hands over the omega's flat stomach and all but growled into the crook of Shane's neck as he imagined him swollen with their child one day too. Ilya would do everything in his power to make it true, to take advantage of the first heat and rut they would share together, to leave Patria with more than just another person. He wanted everything with Shane and whatever Shane wanted too. Ilya buried his nose into the soft skin of Shane's neck and listened with rapt attention as the omega began to speak.

"Well, I'm from Kanata which you probably already figured out from the colors of my necklaces. I've lived twenty years and am the son of Yuna and David Hollander. My father's side of the family is from Rus, which is how I know your native language, but my mother's side of the family is from across the ocean, a country called Nihon. My parents taught me

everything—hunting, fishing, trapping, needlework, weaving, crafting, all kinds of stuff. I was never left out. The home I left is part of a small tribe, Ottawa, and I'd like to go back, I think, if you'd allow it," Shane admitted.

Ilya snorted and squeezed Shane gently. "You do not need my permission for anything, Shane. I'm not that kind of alpha. I don't want to go back to Rus anyway, so if your home is what you want, then I will go with you," he assured. Shane tilted his head back so he could catch Ilya's gaze, his eyes full of surprise and excitement.

"Really?"

Ilya just hummed in agreement and pressed three doting kisses to Shane's cheek before trailing his lips back down to the mating gland he had been previously focused on. Shane pressed against him more beneath the fur they were wrapped up in and continued, his voice full of something delighted and warm. "I really like meditation, going for runs just for the fun of it, and getting up early to watch the sun rise over the mountains back home. Um, *oh!* I love to learn all kinds of new things. Whenever we get traders passing through or go to nearby markets, I try to pick up scrolls or books or a few words in a language I don't know from the people we meet.

"Let's see… I'm not the best cook, but I'm really going to try to learn how to be better. Hunting was always the easy part for me. My dad also makes this ginger drink that he ferments with pine needles in leather pouches and it comes out all fizzy and kind of sweet and I like that a lot, like a treat. I like when it's cold outside and the lakes freeze over and you can walk across them. I like the communal dogs that the tribe has that just kind of run around and beg for food—but you can scratch their heads or bellies, and, um… hm… I like routines a lot too. Probably too much. So sorry about that in the future," Shane wrapped up with a nervous laugh.

He'd been rambling, saying everything that came to mind just because he wanted to answer Ilya's simple request of *tell me about yourself,* and Ilya loved it. His mate was literal, honest, and sweet. Part of him wondered what else he could get Shane to say or do simply because he was a little different with interpreting questions of an open nature, but Ilya reminded himself that they would have plenty of time together in the future and that answer would also come with time. For now, he simply pulled Shane impossibly closer, kissed his neck a few more times, then whispered, "I like you, Shane Hollander."

Chapter 3: Too Much and Not Enough

When Shane woke the next morning, sweat coated his skin and sharp cramps wracked his lower body. He winced to himself, pushing his hand through the soft fur beneath his palm, and clutched the hide he found there with white knuckles. He could feel the strong press of Ilya's body behind him which brought some relief to his instincts, but he knew that he didn't have long until biology took over and turned him into something desperate and intense. He shifted in the furs and cracked open his eyes to peer at the world around him when the painful ache in his belly subsided from its prior wave.

The cave was cloaked in soft light, an indication that morning had arrived, and Shane warily turned his attention to the mouth of the crevice where he and Ilya had decided to shelter together. Outside, the world was covered in thick layers of snow that would be impossible to wade through if anyone needed to hunt, bathe, or travel. Shane guessed the cold substance was likely hip height and he knew then that he and Ilya wouldn't be going anywhere, heat cycle or not. He bit down on his bottom lip and decided to turn then where he was laying so he could look upon the man still asleep behind him.

Ilya huffed at the movement, clearly not pleased by the slight disturbance in his dream state, but he was quick to settle once Shane found himself face to face with his mate. *Mate.* Shane couldn't help but grin at the word that rang true in his head and vibrated through his blood. Ilya Rozanov was his mate, a strong alpha that had more than proved himself worthy of Shane's acceptance, and Shane couldn't wait to return home to Kanata with the man by his side. He was excited to show him off, have him meet his parents, build a home of their own, and start a family together.

The thought alone of getting started on that last tidbit made another cramp wash over his body and Shane was unable to hold back the punched out sound of pain that slipped between his lips. He screwed his eyes shut as he grimaced, then reached down with his free hand to press the flat of his palm against his lower abdomen. His body knew what it wanted and it was determined to get it. Shane had no doubt in his mind that Ilya would take care of him, give him what he needed, and fulfill *that* biological aspect of their lives, but Shane wanted to let his mate sleep just a little bit longer.

Even he wasn't truly ready to begin yet. It would be a flash heat, so not as long as a typical cycle, but it would be a heat all the same. He wanted to hold off for as long as he possibly could, even if the temperature underneath his skin was beginning to mount and the feeling of slick between his legs began to make itself very well known. Shane tucked his face beneath Ilya's neck, burying his nose into the warm linen fabric of the shirt his mate was wearing, and allowed himself just a few minutes of peace before the alpha inevitably woke up to acknowledge the needy omega in front of him.

It all seemed like a dream. After Ilya had fled from the hot spring he had guided Shane to, Shane had giddily returned to the cave and began to stock up in his supply of clean water, dried meat, picked berries, and scavenged nuts. He knew that this was coming since the first meeting between them, the heat cycle once their bond was accepted, and he wanted to be as

prepared as possible so he could spend the previous night doing exactly what they had done—getting to know one another.

Ilya had been honest with his past and where he had come from. He had a father that was hurtful and had treated his mate poorly, viewing their bond as something transactional rather than equal. It had led to the death of his mother, Irinia, which Ilya had witnessed when he was only twelve years old. Ilya had a brother, Andrei, who was older with a mate of his own. They had a daughter together and remained in Rus while Ilya had only ever dreamed of leaving his country behind to embark on the journey of finding his other half. At the age of seventeen, Ilya finally reached his full maturity and left Rus for Patria.

It had been a combination of factors, Ilya believed, for his ability to leave so early in the search. He'd had to grow up quite quickly after the death of his mother and the unstable environment he had been raised in with his father. All of it combined hadn't let him stay young for long. He'd been a skilled hunter, a boy with high expectations, and an alpha who knew exactly what he wanted. So Ilya was able to leave for Patria with nothing stopping him from doing so and he hadn't looked back since. He'd simply waited for Shane and here he was now.

Aside from the tragedy that was his upbringing, Ilya was a rather funny man. His humor ran on the sarcastic, teasing side of things and he was a fantastic storyteller. Shane could listen to him talk for hours, even if his common tongue was sometimes a little short or got lost at points. What Shane really loved to listen to when Ilya talked, however, was the syrupy accent he had with his words. Shane had fallen asleep to Ilya speaking softly to him with his slow, honeyed diction. Before his slumber, Shane had learned a great deal about Ilya.

He also enjoyed hunting, fishing, and trapping like Shane, though he was very bad at the crafting, weaving, and needlework. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy it—he just got frustrated easily with things that needed finesse. That being said, Ilya was going to try his damndest to create a nice beaded necklace for Shane once they were officially mated. Shane was excited to see whatever his mate created for him, wonky or not.

Ilya preferred to sleep in rather than wake up early, but he promised Shane that he would watch the sunrise with him if Shane ever asked him to. Going for a casual run on the other hand might be pushing it. Shane had laughed at that and said there was nothing wrong with getting some extra exercise in. Ilya had called him boring with a grin. Ilya wasn't very interested in learning languages like Shane was, but he'd never really had to as his personality often shone through communication barriers with others he crossed paths with. Ilya liked people. He loved to talk, make others laugh, compete, and show off for anyone who was around. Above people, Ilya loved dogs and was extremely thrilled about the fact that Shane's tribe had communal dogs that could be played with, pet, and used for hunting. He had quickly decided that he wanted one for his own and, well, Shane was immediately in on the idea if it made Ilya so happy.

Ilya enjoyed ale, smoking tobacco on occasion, and participating in feasts or community games. He liked proving that he could not only do something challenging but also master whatever task he'd sought out. Music made him extremely happy, though he fully admitted to the fact that he was bad at playing any kind of instrument or singing. He simply liked to be

surrounded by it and any kind of festivity that involved it. Shane had told him about his mother's attempt in getting him to learn how to play a stringed instrument called the tautirut, but Shane had hated it wholeheartedly and deliberately lost the godsforsaken thing in the forest when he was younger.

Shane had decided at the end of their conversation before he fell asleep in Ilya's arms that he quite liked Ilya Rozanov too. Their compatibility only further solidified the acceptance of their mating bond and Shane knew that Ilya was the only alpha Shane would ever want or have. So when another uncomfortable tightening sensation coiled up inside of his lower belly moments later, Shane decided it was probably time to wake the sleeping man and begin his inevitable heat cycle. Shane reached out to gently tug on Ilya's shirt before sliding his hand up to cup the side of Ilya's stubbled cheek.

His touch alone made the alpha stir before lazy hazel eyes blinked open in front of him and met his gaze. Shane could feel his heartbeat pick up in his chest while a delighted grin spread across his lips at his alpha finally waking to the frozen world around them. The fire was nothing but smoldering embers behind them and Shane knew they'd have to start it again eventually, but for right now, their body heat shared beneath the warmth of the bear fur was enough alongside Shane's heated skin. As soon as Ilya breathed in with his more conscious state, his nostrils flared and his pupils dilated.

"How long has it been going on?" Ilya asked instantly, his voice deep and gravely from a mixture of sleep and arousal. Shane shook his head as he stroked his thumb over Ilya's cold cheekbone. The alpha's body was already reacting to Shane's heat, naturally dropping in temperature to act as an external balm for Shane's body while his cum would provide internal relief later. Biology could be cool sometimes when it came to one person's designation perfectly matching the needs of another's.

"Not long. I've only been awake for three initial cramp cycles," he assured. Ilya sucked in a deep breath through his nose, then reached down with his cool hands to push his fingers beneath the hem of Shane's shirt and carefully work it off of the omega's warm upper body without a word. The silence between them was charged, full of promise and excitement for what was to come, as they tugged pieces of clothing off one another slowly. Shane could feel the temperature of his body building and burning with each layer that was removed from his skin. As soon as they were both naked within the furs, Ilya rolled Shane onto his back and sat on his haunches so he could soak in the sight of Shane sprawled out in front of him, bare and flushed.

Shane turned his gaze away in embarrassment and did his best not to cover himself up, but he'd always been bad with attention and compliments, so he couldn't help but fidget a little bit while Ilya stared at him. The alpha reached out to gently grasp Shane's jaw and guide him into meeting his darkened gaze. Shane's breath hitched in his throat when he regarded the sight in front of him. Framed with nothing but the morning light behind him and the shadows of the cave in front of him, Ilya looked like some kind of ancient god towering above where Shane was reclined.

Packed with muscle and sculpted by nature, Ilya was a sight to behold. He had three gashes across his chest that Shane felt quick panic about, though he really wasn't able to linger on

the dismay for too long as his eyes instinctively drifted down to the thick weight of the alpha's cock between his toned thighs. Heavy, long, and veined up to the weeping tip poking out around uncut foreskin, Shane's body yearned to take each inch inside and clamp around the knot that had already begun to swell at the base. His mouth watered as slick pooled between his legs and Shane forced his eyes back up to the injury before he did something embarassing like beg to be fucked.

"W-When did that happen?" he managed to squeak out, extending his fingers towards the raw looking marks hesitantly. Ilya gently grasped his wrist and pinned it beside Shane's head as he gracefully fell over top of him. The space between them had shrunk dramatically and Shane could feel Ilya's cock on his lower abdomen, so hot and heavy and drooling on his sweating skin. He swallowed hard and stared into Ilya's eyes with parted lips as he waited for his mate to speak.

"Bear was tough to kill, but won't stop me," Ilya murmured raspily.

"Stop you from what?" Shane whispered, his breath soft and shaky.

"From fucking you."

Their lips were clashing before Ilya even got to finish his last word and Shane easily gave in to the inevitable that had been brewing now for the shorter part of an hour. He opened his hips wide to accommodate the man between them and moaned loudly when Ilya rubbed his cock against Shane's, showing off the sheer size of what was going to be inside of the omega soon. Shane was faintly aware of the fact that his slick was oozing onto the fur beneath them, but he didn't care as Ilya suddenly reached between them to fist Shane's cock and pump it without mercy. Shane broke off the kiss to throw his head back in pleasure which gave Ilya the perfect opportunity to roughly mouth at the untouched skin above Shane's mating gland.

Shan could feel Ilya's sharp canines drag along the sensitive area and he knew that they would be mated after their first round together. He canted his hips up in invitation and knew he'd succeeded in diverting Ilya's attention as the alpha released his cock in favor of pressing one finger deep within his molten body. It was a little embarrassing how easily Shane took it, but he blamed biology more than anything as his hole naturally lubricated and relaxed itself for the intrusion from both Ilya's hand and eager length.

"Fuck, so tight," Ilya groaned into the crook of his neck.

"Y-You're my first," Shane whimpered. Ilya growled at that and nipped at Shane's neck before bringing his mouth back up to slam against Shane's and shove his tongue possessively into the omega's throat. Shane could smell the shift in Ilya's scent as his own instincts began to take over and give in to the rut cycle that would match Shane's heat. They would be a mess of animalistic tendencies as soon as Ilya breached Shane for the first time and was confident the omega could take it, so Shane did his best to focus on the current feelings before everything became a fuzzy mess of sweat and cum.

Ilya's finger was a welcome intrusion that cooled his body only slightly as it curled expertly against the bundle of nerves deep inside of him. It wasn't enough to sate him completely, but it would do for a little while as Ilya stretched him out and prepared him for his first time

taking both a cock and a knot. His quiet sounds of pleasure were punched out and breathy with each stroke inside of his body until Ilya carefully pressed a second finger in beside the first and drew a sharp cry of ecstasy from Shane's lips. The omega's toes curled in the air beside Ilya's hips, scrambling to keep up with the pleasure coursing through him, and Shane's arms quickly found their way to Ilya's neck where they could wrap around for further support.

The noises of Ilya's fingers fucking into Shane's slick-coated hole were obscene and lewd, only turning Shane's face a darker shade of pink while Ilya murmured absolute filth into his ear in a blend of his native and common tongue. "So fucking wet. *Dripping* for me," Ilya hissed slowly. His compliments and commentary ranged from remarking on how good Shane was taking him to how perfect his body was to how desperately he wanted to put a baby inside Shane. It didn't matter what Ilya said—Shane's body reacted indecently to it all.

When Ilya pushed a third finger inside, Shane began to really feel the pressure of his entrance being stretched open. He winced only a few times which caused Ilya to slow down and pepper his cheeks with comforting kisses until Shane began to shamelessly rock his hole on the digits in encouragement for Ilya to continue. His cock bobbed pitifully against his stomach with each thrust downward on Ilya's fingers and Shane knew he'd probably come quickly the first time they fucked. It didn't really matter if he came fast, though. He'd be orgasming quite a lot during his flash heat.

Ilya pulled out his fingers only a moment later and sat back slightly on his thighs, his dark gaze locking with Shane's heady one, to make sure Shane watched as he sucked his fingers between his lips to lick off the slick that had soaked his hand. Shane keened at the sight and opened his legs wider in temptation as his inner omega preened at Ilya's attention. He wanted his mate and he wanted him *now.*

"I need you, alpha. I need you inside. *Please…* f-fuck me," he begged as best as he could, pushing through the innate abashment that came with such a crude request. Shane could see the second Ilya let biology completely take over as his pupils blew and took up nearly all of his hazel irises with primal desire. His strong hands gripped Shane's hips and tugged him down to where the tip of Ilya's cock hung between his thighs, oblivious to the small yelp Shane let out in surprise at the action. He reached over his head with both hands to fist the fur underneath his body and held on tightly as Ilya began to push himself inside of Shane in one slow, long, unrelenting thrust.

"Ah, Ilya!" Shane cried. His back bowed off of the soft hide beneath him, his mouth opened in a silent scream of both ecstasy and intensity, and his eyes screwed shut to cope with the overwhelming feeling of fullness inside of him. His body welcomed Ilya in with no resistance, eager to fulfil the craving of being fucked and stuffed with his alpha's length. As soon as Ilya bottomed out, Shane dug his nails into Ilya's back and let his brain shut off so biology could take over and accept the rough pounding he was about to receive. Through the haziness in the back of his mind, Shane listened to, felt, and watched himself get fucked by his alpha.

Ilya's grasp was tight and unrelenting along with the punishing snap of his hips into Shane's body over and over. He could hear the vulgarity of Ilya's skin slapping against his slick

coated hole, he could feel the stretch of his body around Ilya's growing knot, he could see the pitch-black fierce expression on his alpha's face as he stared down at the sight of his cock working its way in and out of Shane's pliant body. In the few instances where Shane dialed in, the pleasure was consuming in all the best ways.

His balls were tight and heavy from the desire to release, his skin was dripping with sweat from exertion, and his throat was raw from the noises he'd been releasing as he grasped Ilya with all of his strength. The sounds slipping from between his lips were a mixture of broken cries, desperate moans, and pathetic whimpers. When Shane could form words, they were wretched and dirty in ways that he'd never say normally.

Fuck me harder. Wanna feel you so deep. Put a baby in me, alpha, please. Don't stop. Just like that. Come on, please. Fuck. Alpha. Yes. More.

Ilya collapsed on top of Shane, a heavy weight that pinned him to the fur below, and practically snarled as he shoved his cock as deep as he could possibly manage within Shane's body. Shane could feel Ilya's knot slip in and out and in and out until it swelled too much and remained trapped inside. The stretch was insane—too much yet not enough—and then Ilya's teeth were sinking into the mating gland on Shane's neck beneath the rows of beaded necklaces while hot spurts of cum filled Shane's trapped hole to the absolute brim. Shane's eyes went wide at the combined sensations of pain from the canines buried in his skin and the cooling balm of cum stuffing his body to the point of barely-there discomfort.

His own cock shot ribbons of milky cum across his abdomen and the sharp sting within his gums reminded him that he had to fulfill part of the bond too. So as Shane jerked from his own release and pleasure at being knotted by his alpha, he tipped his head forward, opened his mouth with trembling lips, then bit as hard as he possibly could into the sweat-soaked skin of Ilya's neck over the alpha's mating gland. Ilya let out a choked grunt, giving one last meaningful thrust into Shane's body, then relaxed completely on top of the omega in a heap of gasping breath and trembling muscles.

Shane slowly released his teeth from Ilya's skin and let himself melt into the fur with the steadying weight of his mate on top of him. His mate. *His mate.* They were bonded—officially and fully bonded to one another—and Shane could feel the subtle changes already within his biology as his scent shifted to make room for Ilya's, his emotions mingled with that of his alpha's, and his heartbeat syncing to the same tune as the man on top of him.

Eventually, Ilya pushed himself up and began to carefully maneuver them to a position where he was the one on his back against the fur and Shane was curled up against his chest on top of him. Ilya reached up to card his fingers through Shane's hair with one free hand while the other gently stroked the side of Shane's hip in slow, delicate sweeps. "Was too much?" Ilya asked when it seemed like enough time had passed for clarity to briefly return to their sex-addled brains. Shane shook his head immediately with a tiny yawn.

"No. Just what I needed," Shane whispered back.

"Sleep," Ilya murmured. "Won't be long until next round."

Shane knew it was true. Their short moment of lucidity and comfort would pass, Ilya would slip out of him when his knot deflated, and Shane's cramps would hit again with need for filling. For now though, he could accept the invitation Ilya had extended to him to sleep and tuck his face into the crook of Ilya's neck where it was warm and safe and comfortable. He closed his eyes and felt the soft rumble of happiness build within him, a gentle sound that came only when omegas felt wholly content. He fell asleep to the sound of his own purring and Ilya's steady heartbeat beneath his ear.

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The next twenty-four hours were filled with nothing but cum, slick, moans of pleasure, mixed sweat, and knots. They fucked like animals with Shane face down in the fur and Ilya pounding into him from behind, Shane on his side facing the fire and Ilya molded to his back with his hips driving forward, and Ilya on his back with Shane bouncing heavily on his cock. There was no surface untouched, no position undiscovered, and no drop of cum wasted. Their breaks in between weren't long and only allowed for quick naps or hurried gulps of food and water before the next wave inevitably hit. It wasn't until the sun started to break over the horizon on the following day that Shane felt somewhat normal.

The cramps began to subside, his skin cooled significantly, and the mark on his neck had scabbed over fully. He yawned as he woke from the last bit of sleep he'd managed to get and blearily blinked at the soft light of the world around him. There was still a rather significant amount of snow outside of the cave when Shane turned his attention to the mouth of their natural shelter, but it had melted throughout the prior day's sunlight and no more of it had fallen from the sky overnight. It meant that he and Ilya could trudge through it if they wanted to get cleaned up or hunt for something more substantial than what they had been living off of during the flash cycle.

Shane curled a little bit closer to the solid chest in front of him and took a moment to assess his body and how he was feeling after what he had just been through. His lower body was a little sore from the thorough fucking he'd been subjected to countless times, though that was to be expected, and his neck stung if he twisted or pulled at the skin an odd way with each movement of his head, but he didn't feel bad. He felt mostly dirty and gross, that was for sure. Shane's hand drifted down to his belly to feel the flatness there and hoped that something, anything, had taken from his and Ilya's shared cycle.

It wasn't unheard of to immediately be gifted with a baby just from the first heat alone with a new mate, but Shane wished more than anything that he would be one of the lucky few to fit into that niche category. He hummed softly at the thought while a small smile tugged at his lips and a yawn escaped him again from exhaustion flowing through every fibre of his being. They'd been averaging naps that only lasted about twenty minutes or so between each round and his body was born out from exertion. When his mate began to stir across from him, however, Shane suddenly felt very much awake.

He loved this. He loved when Ilya woke from sleep and immediately found Shane's eyes. There was nothing more gratifying than being the first thing sought after when Ilya rose from the depths of unconsciousness and dreams. Shane reached up to cup the side of Ilya's face and stroked the facial hair there tenderly, an action he'd started to perform each time they went through this routine, and it was Ilya's turn to make a soft sound of approval before hazel eyes met Shane's and an expression of pure affection spread across the alpha's face.

"Good morning," he greeted softly. "I like you."

Shane laughed and pressed his forehead against Ilya's before leaning in to kiss the alpha, slow and tender. "Good morning. I like you too," he whispered back when he finally pulled away. Ilya sucked in a steadying breath as he slowly came to and glanced around the cave that had been more or less defiled for the better part of a day. When he seemed to realize that the flash heat was mostly over and that Shane wasn't in immediate need of a knot or cum, Ilya sat up in the rather nasty bear fur and turned his attention to the outside where Shane had also looked.

"You want a bath? Clean us and our blanket we've been on?" Ilya asked mischievously. Shane blushed heavily when his mate wiggled his eyebrows at him suggestively and decided that it was probably for the best that they trek out into the snow and do exactly that. His skin felt excessively grimy and he really didn't want to ruin the nice courting gift Ilya had given him before accepting the mating bond. He nodded as he stretched out his limbs in all directions and groaned in appreciation for the relief that flooded his body, then slowly made his way to his feet as Ilya had.

They dressed languidly, their arms and legs feeling as heavy as stones, and laughed at the sight of one another in their fatigued states. It would be interesting to venture out into the knee-high snow and find the hot spring that had started it all between them, but it was a journey that they were both willing to make and in desperate need of partaking in. As Shane laced up his boots around his soiled legs with a grimace, he let his eyes drift to the hide bag beside the unkept fire that had been pilfered for quick food items. He could see the small pouch of beads within his bag and let his eyes flit over to Ilya who had been watching him from where he was also tugging on his boots.

"I will make your necklace when we return. And I would like mine too," Ilya said, immediately catching on to Shane's thoughts.

"You don't have to wear it if you don't want to. It's just a silly tradition in my family," Shane assured with a blush once he finished wrapping the leather laces around his right calf. Ilya cocked his head to the side to observe his mate, then strode forward so he could pull Shane close by the curve of his waist.

"I want to. You're my mate and I want to honor you and your family in this way. I will wear your necklace if you will wear mine," Ilya declared firmly. All Shane had to do was search Ilya's eyes to know that the alpha was being genuine. There was no humor there, only fondness for Shane and the idea that Ilya wouldn't wear what Shane had made him, so Shane nodded quickly and bashfully ducked his head. How he'd gotten so lucky to have this man as his mate, he didn't know. He simply curled himself around the alpha's abdomen, welcomed

the doting embrace he was starting to become addicted to, and thanked the universe for gifting him with Ilya Rozanov.

Chapter 4: No Matter Where We Go

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane all but moaned as he sank into the hot water of the spring, letting his eyes close and his head tip forward while warmth engulfed his grubby body. Ilya had brought the chunks of soap with them in his travel bag that Shane was eager to use, but for now, he simply allowed himself to stand in the natural liquid and do nothing but enjoy it. He could hear Ilya slipping in behind him and the feeling of strong arms wrapping around his torso from behind was all too welcome. Shane hummed in approval and melted into Ilya's silhouette as the alpha took most of his body weight, holding him up where he stood on the silt below.

"How do you feel?" Ilya murmured into his ear as he slowly began to rock them from side to side. Shane sighed and pulled away from Ilya's embrace so he could turn and look up at his mate instead through drooping eyelids.

"Relaxed. Nice. Warm," he supplied in small chunks. Ilya just grinned and reached up to push some of Shane's black hair behind his ear. Shane tucked his face into Ilya's chest once comfortable silence consumed them and allowed himself to be manipulated this way and that when Ilya eventually grabbed for the soap in the nearby bag. He swayed in his balance as Ilya slowly washed him, scrubbing away the sweat, blood, cum, slick, and overall grime that had coated his skin for the past day or so from the flash heat. Ilya's attention was tender and focused as he bathed the omega meticulously.

They wouldn't be staying in Patria much longer now that they were officially mated to one another. There was some time where they could pack up their things, work their way back through the continent to the land bridge, and camp out to share private moments with one another before a longer journey awaited, but Kanata was waiting for them along with a life of their own. Shane wouldn't say that he was raring to go—he quite enjoyed this small moment with Ilya in the hot spring—but he was excited about bringing Ilya back to his homeland and truly beginning the next part of their future together.

When Ilya pulled away the hunk of soap he'd been using to clean Shane with, deeming him soiled no longer, Shane took the bar from his alpha's hands and returned the favor. Ilya was so strong. Shane ran the block of soap over the dips and planes of his alpha's body and appreciated the sight in front of him that now fully belonged to the other half of his once fractured soul. The gashes across his chest from where the bear had gotten him looked rather raw when Shane carefully washed around them, but he was a little relieved to find that no new blood spilled when he gently brushed the soap over the scabbed wounds.

Ilya grunted softly just once, though he remained firm where he stood while Shane continued to bathe him. Shane made sure he scrubbed every nook, cranny, bump, and ridge of Ilya's body until his hands eventually found their way to Ilya's golden curls that lay matted against his forehead and neck. He lathered up his hands before sinking his fingers into Ilya's hair once the alpha finished laughing at him because he had to bend down for Shane to reach. Shane just swatted at him playfully before he began to clean his mate's hair in the final step

of ensuring they were both fully decent. In a way, it was sad to watch the natural water of the hot spring turn slightly cloudy with their dirt. It meant that their mating was over, solidified and certain, and there was no need to remain on Patria anymore in their cozy cave they had consummate their bond in.

Shane had Ilya and Ilya had Shane.

Ilya dipped under the surface of the water once Shane pulled his fingers away with a small nod. He could detect the shift in his scent from pure happiness to something muddled with sadness and knew that Ilya would catch onto it once he returned to the world around them from beneath the surface of the hot spring. Sure enough, Ilya rose back to his feet, flicked his hair away from his eyes, then turned his gaze to Shane with an expression of gentle concern.

“What is it? You’re sad,” Ilya said softly.

Shane slid his hands up over the wet skin of Ilya’s chest, mindful of his injury, and pressed his forehead in between Ilya’s pectoral muscles. “I’m just upset it’s already over. I wish we could spend weeks or months here and hide out in our cave and do nothing without anyone to answer to. I don’t want to share you yet,” Shane admitted. He nibbled on his bottom lip before lifting his head to meet the soft expression of his alpha’s eyes. Ilya gently cupped the side of Shane’s face with one calloused palm and trailed his gaze trail over Shane’s eyelashes, freckles, lips, then neck. When he finally landed on the bite mark he had left behind in Shane’s skin beneath his beaded necklaces, he smiled and dipped his head in acknowledgment.

“We could, if you wanted. Maybe a month. Hide away a little longer. But we have people to meet and a home to build and a future to start eventually. We will make something new for us. We will build a place to do nothing in and answer to no one with. We can fill it with things we love, like a baby or boring knitwork,” he teased, just to make Shane laugh, “and it won’t feel so bad to leave this place behind after.”

Shane nodded and knew that his mate was right. He could smell the change in Ilya’s pheromones, the smokey and rich scent shifting to something comforting and warm, which also appeared desperate to soothe the sorrow of having to leave.

“There is something I can make here for you. Something that will travel with you always no matter where we go,” Ilya tried next, jerking his head in the direction of the hide bag they’d brought. Shane knew that his alpha was talking about the beaded necklace and couldn’t help the burst of excitement that rushed through his veins at the idea of watching Ilya put together the warble display he’d be donning for the rest of his life. Ilya easily recognized that Shane’s mood had shifted to something joyful, however, as Shane’s heartbeat picked up inside of his chest and Ilya’s heart was quick to match it because of their bond. Ilya just chuckled at him and leaned down to press a slow, reassuring kiss against Shane’s lips before pulling away to wade over in the direction of the bag.

“Is probably going to be very bad. Very sloppy. I apologize,” Ilya said as he rummaged through the bag and pulled out the pouch full of multicolored beads along with the fine leather cord that had already been precut for the width of someone’s neck. Shane pursed his lips together to hold in his humor and reclined against the side of the hot spring as he

watched Ilya begin to shuffle through all of the tiny beads a little smaller than a grain of rice, muttering to himself as he went. “It can be any pattern?” Ilya asked when he slid the first red bead onto the cord.

Shane nodded slowly and crossed his arms over his chest, watching with a fond expression while Ilya just huffed and continued to dig through the pouch. He let his eyes trail over the dripping golden curls on Ilya’s head, the scabbed over mark on his neck from Shane’s teeth, the smattering of beauty marks across his tanned skin, and the little drops of water that clung to the body hair across his chest and below his belly button. Shane let one of his hands slide down to his own flat abdomen and idly stroked the muscle he found there.

Ilya had treated him well during the flash heat—more than well. He’d been attentive to all of Shane’s needs, whether that was food or an orgasm or sleep or a knot. Shane knew that, if any alpha would be able to get him pregnant after one flash heat, it would definitely be Ilya Rozanov. *His mate.* He grinned to himself at the thought and began to think how first introductions would go with Ilya and his parents. Shane knew his parents would be excited, that they’d welcome Ilya into the family with zero hesitation, and he could already fantasize about sharing meals, telling stories, and overall spending time with them. Ilya would fit in great.

He might not have had the best upbringing with his own family, but he would get Shane’s family now and a family of their own soon if they were lucky. Shane cocked his head to the side and let his eyes drift to the hidebag slumped on the snowy forest floor beside the hotspring. Inside of it, nestled at the very bottom somewhere, was the necklace that Shane had originally made for Ilya. They would exchange them once Ilya had finished making Shane’s and never remove them again—even in their deaths. They would be symbols of their relationship on display for all to see along with the permanent bite marks on his skin.

In accepting Ilya’s, Shane would have to remove the others.

A new life would be started once he clasped Ilya’s necklace around the column of his throat. No longer would he be Shane, son of Yuna and David Hollander and born as an omega. He would be Shane, mate to Ilya Rozanov of Rus. And, eventually, others would join it. Shane, a father to one or more. Shane, a grandfather to hopefully many. With a steadying breath, Shane carefully reached up to the beaded cords around his neck and slowly began to unclasp them, pulling them away to leave a rather unsettling feeling behind of nakedness. He couldn’t remember a day in his life where he hadn’t worn his family displays, and now, here he was, waiting for a new one to wear as it was being crafted before him. Shane gently folded the necklaces together before wading over to the hide bag that carried their things from the cave to the hot spring.

“I’m almost done,” Ilya informed when he noticed Shane was moving towards him.

“I know. I’m just putting these away and grabbing yours,” Shane assured as he gently bumped his hip against Ilya’s to scoot the man over a bit. Ilya paused in what he was doing and watched as Shane slipped the old necklaces into the bag, then dug a little further to retrieve the one he had made for Ilya. White, blue, and red, Shane tugged the necklace out and unfurled it across his palms with a slight frown. “I made it for you using the colors of

Rus, but… I know you don't exactly have fond memories of it and you don't want to go back. Should I…?" Shane trailed off as he nervously glanced up to meet Ilya's soft expression.

Ilya cautiously set the necklace he was creating down on the bank of the hot spring before reaching out to cup the side of Shane's face with an affectionate swipe of his thumb over Shane's cheekbone. "It was the necklace you made first for me. I will wear it because you made it. But if you want to make a new one with the colors of Kanata, where we will be growing together, I will wear that too. I will wear whatever you want, Shane Hollander," Ilya declared tenderly. Shane bit down on his bottom lip and looked at the beads in his hands. Without a second thought, Shane snapped the cord and watched as the colors of Rus went tumbling into the murky water of the hotspring, disappearing from sight.

"I'd like to make you a new one," he decided. When he met Ilya's eyes again, all he found was intense devotion in his alpha's gaze. Ilya dipped his head in acknowledgement at the conclusion and tilted his head towards the small bag of beads that he was still pulling from to finish Shane's necklace.

"Then I think I would like to invite you in making a necklace with me. For us."

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Shane sat on the grassy hill where their makeshift tent had been set up and let his eyes sweep over the sparkling waters of the vast Atlas Sea. A warm breeze tickled his cheeks, licking over his cool skin as the mid-morning sun shone down from above through a break in the rolling clouds. He sucked in a small breath with a smile and closed his eyes, allowing himself a brief moment of quiet before Ilya inevitably woke and came to sit with him outside. The sound of waves crashing over the sandy shore below echoed in his ears along with the shrill crying of gulls in the distant sky. The long, wispy blades of thin grass brushed against his ankles and wrists where he was reclined on the ground, but Shane didn't mind the tingly feeling left behind from their feather-soft touches. It was comforting to know that they were back on soil belonging to his home country.

Only a few more days of travel left and they'd be within his tribe's territory, reunited with his family that he had left behind nearly seven months ago. It had been two and a half months since he and Ilya had left the island—they'd decided to stay for another two months in Patria despite being mated just because Shane hadn't been ready to go yet and Ilya was a sucker for doing anything Shane wanted—and now they were almost finished with the journey back to Ottawa. Shane was ready. He was ready for them to build a permanent home amongst his people, to create a place just for them that they could retreat to.

The sound of the tent flap opening behind him made Shane pull away from his thoughts and bring himself back into the moment. He blinked slowly, adjusting to the light he had shut out before, then turned his head to smile at Ilya when his mate sleepily stumbled over to him and sat down heavily behind Shane's folded form. Ilya wasted no time circling his arms around Shane's waist and resting his chin on Shane's shoulder, content to simply wrap himself up in

the omega he loved and sit for a while. Eventually, Ilya's warm hands slid to the slight bump of Shane's abdomen and a content sigh slipped through his lips to tickle the side of Shane's cheek.

"How is she?" Ilya asked, his voice raspy with sleep.

Shane grinned and leaned into his alpha's touch as the other man gently slid his hands in circular motions over the distended skin. "You're so set on it being a girl," Shane teased. A pause, then, *"She's* fine." Ilya snickered at how easily Shane gave in before he tilted his head to press his lips against the omega's jaw. Shane just huffed and questioned, "How are you so convinced? What makes you think it'll be a girl?"

Ilya hummed at the thought and let his nose move to the side of Shane's neck where his fully healed bite mark remained scarred into his skin. He brushed the tip of his nose over the raised white marks and nudged the black, red, and white beaded necklace Ilya had made for him in the hot spring. It would remain a part of Shane as much as Ilya's bite mark would. Their necklace exchange had been sentimental all those months ago in the hot spring and Shane could remember it easily, as if it were only yesterday. Ilya had carefully clasped the mix-matched beaded necklace around the base of his throat, Shane having done the same to Ilya once his alpha bent down, then had practically swept him away from the naturally hot water to go have a repeat performance of what they'd done during their shared cycle in their tucked away cave.

Shane wasn't sure if it was the flash heat and rut, the coupling that came after the nostalgic swapping of bond displays, or the copious amounts of sex that occurred every other day for two months across Patria that got him pregnant. He didn't really care. As soon as they had put the pieces together that Shane was carrying their baby within him, everything had changed in their plan to hide out a little longer and the need to return to Kanata outweighed all else.

"You have the same sweetness in your scent that my brother's mate had when she was pregnant with their daughter. Is subtle. But it's there," Ilya explained casually. Shane nodded and turned his attention back onto the ocean spreading out in every direction in front of them, watching as the cerulean waves lapped at the white shore before retreating back into the vast water. He sighed in heavy contentment and leaned further into Ilya's embrace as his mate continued to stroke the small swell of his belly with a doting touch.

They would be surrounded by his parents, old friends, and familiar faces soon enough, so Shane felt no pressure in that moment to move from where he was sitting in his spot on the hill. He simply enjoyed the peaceful moment between him, his mate, their slowly growing child, and the Atlas Sea. "Hey," Ilya called in a hushed tone after a few syrupy sweet moments passed between their easy lounging and the tranquil world around them.

"Hm?" Shane mumbled, his eyes starting to feel heavy again due to the comfort he was wrapped up in. If he really wanted, he could fall asleep yet again in Ilya's arms and he knew the alpha wouldn't wake him. Shane was absolutely certain that Ilya would hold him for as long as he needed to without any complaint because that was just the kind of alpha he was mated to—selfless, devoted, and gentle.

Ilya pressed feather light kisses against the mating mark once more before whispering, “I love you.” Shane couldn’t help but grin at the soft declaration that Ilya had started saying as soon as they had figured out Shane was pregnant. When his expected heat cycle didn’t come the first month after their consummated bond, or the month after that, they knew that Shane was pregnant and their bond to one another was solid.

They had been mated and consummated their bond while in Patria, that much was true, and they knew that they were made for one another thanks to the universe itself reuniting their fractured souls, but love was something that had to grow between them regardless of the circumstances. Shane knew he was meant for Ilya and Ilya was meant for him, but that hadn't meant that they had said the three words to one another immediately—it had been a slow and easy thing that Shane happily accepted just as Ilya had. His mate was strong, genuine, funny, sweet, protective, and kind and Shane genuinely couldn’t imagine spending the rest of his life with any other alpha, or having any other man be the father of their baby.

So Shane had let himself freely fall for Ilya and had no problem now tilting his head back, placing his hands over Ilya’s on the small bump of his stomach, and murmuring back, “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this, commented, given it kudos, everything. I am going to take a small break from uploading as I have two Hollanov fic ideas I'd like to put together and write a few chapter first for before making them public. I can't wait to share them with you once I'm ready :) xx

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