Moon Child

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Moon Child

by dreamersreality

Summary

> *He saw the eyes first. Two glowing spheres of turquoise blinked an arm's length away. Something like a wolf stood before him—if wolves were the size of moose with thick pelts of sandy fur. The beast favored its hind legs more, resting the majority of its weight onto them. It was still as a statue, its attention fixed solely on him.*
>
> In the winter of 1923, Shane Hollander is unknowingly courted by a werewolf.

Notes

> PLEASE READ!
>
> It's here! For the few people that were patiently waiting, thanks so much! I hope you enjoy. For the ones just clicking through, this story is COMPLETED. I'm just editing for each chapter and then posting every couple of days. So, don't worry.
>
> I also just want to put a warning out there that this story does contain period typical racism. Nothing honestly explicit, but there are some word choices here that are outdated/offensive to East Asians in particular. Also there is a bit of ableist language and some complex feelings of a queer, neurodivergent character. But nothing major! Just a heads up.

Chapter 1

It was a bitter January morning. Snow had come during the night to lay a thick blanket over the mountain, and it hadn't yet stalled. Shane had bundled up in his warmest clothes, wore sturdy boots and fingerless gloves, and still felt the chill seep through his layers. He was crouched behind a skeletal bush, body trembling as he raised his rifle to eye-level.

Twenty meters away, a doe dipped its head to drink from a creek. The rest of the forest was quiet. Snow fell in thick bunches, landing heavy on Shane's eyelashes. He resisted the urge to brush them out of his face even as they crystalized his vision. He didn't want to startle the creature nor risk a painful death for it. He released a slow breath through pursed lips and waited for that elusive sense to tell him when to shoot. The doe was oblivious to its demise sitting behind a bush. Shane wavered briefly and reconsidered whether or not he required game. He still had meat in his stores; he could do with that a few more days. But Shane knew it was folly to plan on an unknown future. With that, he released the trigger.

A dozen birds took to the sky, and Shane stood to claim his prize.

The bullet had hit the deer between its eyes: a clean kill. Shane hummed to himself, satisfied with his work. This would feed him for a week or more. Stews and soups and roasted fatty cuts with potatoes. The wildlife was sparse in the mountains these days, the vegetation even more so. Shane would have to ensure no part of the animal went to waste.

He spent the next few minutes dragging the carcass to where he had tied up Daisy. The chestnut mare huffed at him as he neared.

"Yes, I know it's cold," he told the horse. "But I'll give you a carrot when we get back and you'll forget all about it, won't you?"

Daisy snorted. *Get on with it,* Shane could almost hear.

He lifted the doe with a heave and threw it over Daisy's back. He secured it with belts before covering it with a ratty blanket. As he finished the last of his ties, Daisy whined and stomped her feet.

"Hold on, girl." He lost grip as Daisy shoved away, pulling at her leash and causing the deer to nearly topple over. "Damn it." Shane caught and fixed it at the last second. "Daisy!"

A branch snapped behind him. Shane pulled the last tie taut and turned.

He saw the eyes first. Two glowing spheres of turquoise blinked an arm's length away. Something like a wolf stood before him—if wolves were the size of moose with thick pelts of sandy fur. The beast favored its hind legs more, resting the majority of its weight onto them. It was still as a statue, its attention fixed solely on him.

Shane Hollander was not unaccustomed to fear. He dealt with it every day in his career. But this—this innate sense of doom, the primal, ancient part of him that wanted to divide every

living thing into predator or prey—was something else entirely. He was going to die. He would be mauled to death and no one would find his body. How many months of silence would it take for his parents to realize?

The creature shifted, and Shane let out a pathetic, stifled whimper. He stumbled back against the tree he'd tied Daisy to and fell onto his hands, knees spread. The beast stepped forward, enough for it to lean close and sniff Shane's chest. It raised its head higher and sniffed at his neck.

His *throat.*

Shane felt as if he was the doe. This thing that had cornered him—Shane was at its mercy. He tried his best to stay still, praying fervently that the quaking beneath his skin would not translate as a threat in the creature's eyes. Shane's own eyes slipped closed. Here was the child's fallacy that said if he could not see it, it posed no harm to him. Shane would not be witness to his own slaughter.

The creature suddenly pulled away from him, huffing and pacing back and forth on the snowy patch. Shane was frozen as he watched it prance around. The absurdity was almost hilarious if he wasn't fearing for his life.

Then three things happened in quick succession. By some miracle, the beast's attention was caught by something in the forest, and with a hot rush of adrenaline, Shane reached around for where he kept his rifle strapped to his back, aimed, and shot at the first part of the beast he could hit. Its right shoulder exploded in crimson, and the beast cried out. Shane pulled himself up, tore off Daisy's leash, jumped into the saddle, then took off up the hill with a click of his teeth. A howl came from behind him but Shane shook Daisy's reins harder.

"Come on, girl!"

Paws thundered after them, followed by a pained howl. Shane glanced over his shoulder in time to catch the beast tumble head first into a bank of snow. He kept checking until they were around the bend and the beast disappeared from view.

As promised, Shane fed Daisy a carrot once he'd safely deposited her in her pen. His hand shook as he held up the carrot for the mare. His heart was still pounding in his chest, mind unsure if he was truly free of danger. He brought his other hand up to the golden cross around his neck and squeezed. Daisy, as temperamental as she was, was also incredibly perceptive. She stopped her lazy chewing to nicker at him.

"It's alright, sweetheart," he said, dropping his cross to rub her snout. "It's just another day."

But it wasn't, he thought as he gripped his gun all the way to his cabin door. He and Daisy had seen bears. They had spotted signs of wolves. They spooked elk, crossed foxes, and sang with birds. And despite the number of these interactions, very few involved being chased through the woods by something Shane was sure didn't exist.

He hung up his rifle on its ledge by the door and began to unbutton his coat. What sort of devil was that thing? Shane was a physicist first and foremost. His expertise did not expand much past the human body. But he had lived in these mountains for over a year now. He had farmed with his parents for much longer, was well read in matters of biology, zoology, and ecology. He may not know the names of every species on God's green earth—the number of bacteria alone was enough to make his head hurt—but he had a general sense of what should belong in this world and what should not.

What he'd seen was an anomaly.

The memory of the creature haunted him all throughout making breakfast. He envisioned its face more clearly now that he was not blinded by fear. Its ferocious maw and sharp teeth and prowling feet. What would it have done if Shane hadn't shot it? Was it circling his cabin at that very moment, waiting for a chance to pounce on him?

No, he told himself, it was hurt. It would go back to its den to lick its wounds.

And then? Shane should have aimed better. He should have killed it.

When he blinked out of his thoughts and realized he had somehow sat himself at the table with now cold porridge, he knew whatever manner of monster out there would not have left him even if he had been lucky enough to kill it.

After forcing himself to eat, Shane went to the washroom to splash cold water onto his face. The cramped room's dingy lighting gave his skin a sickly, jaundiced look. He stared at himself in the mirror, at the array of freckles over his nose, the black hair that hung below his ears now, and the shadow of bags beneath his eyes. He recognized himself less and less each time he gazed at his reflection, but still a part of himself hoped one day he would come to brush his teeth and the man in the mirror would be smiling brightly, teeth shining.

When he returned to the main room, he had at his desk and wrote a response to the letter he'd received from his mother yesterday:

Mother,

I am doing well. Yes, I am eating. It's harder to hunt for meat now, but I have plenty in my stores and my patients are giving folk. I leave many visits with a bread roll or fresh muffins. You know this. Food, although not lavish, is the least of my worries here.

I do not regret coming to the mountains. The people here are underserved, undereducated, and underrepresented. I see that I am making a difference and it pleases me. But it's lonely. My cabin is quiet and while they are very grateful—especially when I cure their children—afterwards…some of my patients seem to remember I do not look like them. Many have asked if I am a Chinaman. I do my best to explain who my father and mother are, why I look not quite Japanese and not quite European. They pretend to understand. They judge Father in their minds. This makes it hard. There are some who spare me no kindness even when I risk my health to serve them. They think I may harbor my own diseases, certainly.

But this is not new. You and I both know it's not an isolated characteristic of my career.

Daisy is good company, however. Thank you for letting me bring her.

Shane paused, contemplating if he should tell her about the terrifying encounter. He longed to do so the same way he'd used to crawl into his parents' bed after a nightmare. He sighed.

I hope to return for Easter. Tell Father to stay away from the jerky. I know he sneaks it when you're not looking.

I love you,

Shane

Pounding on the door woke Shane from a dream about endless chases and teeth tearing through flesh. It took him a few moments to register that it was still about mid-day and he had fallen asleep in his armchair.

"Doctor Hollander!" The voice was one he was familiar with, and one he'd half expected to hear today.

He threw off his blanket. "Yes, I'm coming!"

Hayden Pike was at the door, red-faced and panting. His brown hair was squished beneath his cap and his lips were cracked from the incessant wind that was blowing flurries off the snow piled in Shane's front yard. "Amber's fever is back."

The newest Pike family member had an ear infection. Shane had not been worried about it, but a returning temperature was not a good sign.

"Did you give her all the antibiotics like I asked?"

Mr. Pike blanched. "She was getting better."

Shane sighed. "It's alright." It was not, but it couldn't say that.

He put his coat on and followed Mr. Pike out the door. He stopped before the bulletin board he'd put up beside it and noted he was going to the Pike house for a non-appointment. The board wasn't always the best tool in letting people know where he was, but even if he was drawn away from the Pike house by another patient, a trail could be followed by word-of-mouth starting with his board.

He rode Daisy alongside him and his horse, listening to the panicked ramblings of a man who could not understand why not following a doctor's directions had backfired. Shane tried his best to be patient. It made sense to think if Amber was back to her happy self, there was no reason to continue medicating her. But Shane had *explicitly* told them to finish every drop of what he had given them. He would not have been dragged out of his house otherwise. And perhaps Shane was still rattled by his dream. As the two of them maneuvered through the dense foliage (a faster route as the roads between them were winding and poorly kept),

Shane's mind caught onto every snap of a branch, every sharp birdsong. He felt eyes on him the whole way.

The Pike house was bigger than his with two stories and an acre of land. They had built onto a flat patch, allowing for them to raise cattle. Shane was hit with a pang of homesickness at the sight.

Their German shepherd, Bunny, ran out to greet them.

"Down boy," Mr. Pike told the dog as they dismounted. He grinned at Shane. "He likes you."

Shane smiled back. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bite sized jerky he'd wrapped in a piece of cloth. "No, he likes this."

He threw Bunny treats as they walked to the door, the dog barking happily alongside them. Jackie was there waiting for them, Arthur clinging to her skirts.

"Thank you for coming, doctor," Jackie said. She was by far the most hospitable of Shane's neighbors. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

He shook his head and peeled off his coat. "I'll see her first."

The twins were knocking down blocks where he passed them by the fireplace. Ruby paused to beam at him. "Mr. Hollander!"

"Doctor Hollander," Jackie corrected. Then she kneeled by the girls to shush them when they began asking questions like "Did he bring chocolates again?" Shane was said to say he'd been in too much of a rush to grab some for them. Next time.

Amber was bundled up in the bassinet beside her parents' bed. Shane immediately began to unwrap her.

"She's been shivering." Mr. Pike hovered by Shane, frowning at him.

"We need to get her fever down. One blanket is fine, but all this will make it worse."

Mr. Pike nodded but the lines in his forehead remained.

After half an hour, Shane successfully managed to bring the child's fever done with a lukewarm bath. He sat with the Pikes a long time, educating them on the antibiotics he was re-prescribing them as well as information on how to prevent infections. They nodded along.

Jackie insisted he stay for dinner, and after nearly an hour of the twins squabbling at the table and Mr. Pike lamenting his worries for the winter and the blizzards that were to come, Shane was finally released.

"I should escort you," Mr. Pike offered. The sun was already setting, the sky a blended canvas of indigo and coral. It would likely be dark before Shane even made it back. It made the offer tempting. The thought of the beast still clung to his mind, and like a child he felt as if he would be in more danger in the dark as opposed to the light.

“Then who will go with you? At least I will have some light for most of the journey.” Shane nodded at Mr. Pike from atop his horse. “Good night to you, Mr. Pike.”

“Call me Hayden.” Hayden’s face flushed with his smile.

Shane smiled back. “As long as you call me Shane.”

Shane knew he had pushed Daisy more than he should have, but the relief he felt as they trotted up to the cabin was wonderful. There were still streaks of light in the sky, dusk putting up one last noble battle against night.

It was this fading light that allowed him to spot the dead rabbit at his door before he stepped on it in his rush to get inside. He stared with his foot still raised. There was gore around where its throat should have been, like something had torn it out with its teeth. Blood had dried around its neck and where it trailed down its belly and sides, staining its gray coat. The carcass lay perfectly in the center of his stoop. It had been meant to be found.

Shane let out a shaky breath, dropped his foot, and turned to face the forest. His eyes flickered along the tree line. There was nothing but the whining of the wind, and it was too dark to see far into the woods. He was close to convincing himself it was nothing when he spotted the same eyes that were littered everywhere in his dreams. To the right of him, turquoise shone in the dark.

He was moving faster than he could think. He stumbled over the rabbit and entered his cabin. He frantically locked the door and pulled the deadbolt across. Still in his coat and boots, he shut all his blinds, drenching his home in darkness.

In the morning there was another beside the rabbit.

Shane was going to do a check up on a boy who had sprained his ankle last week, but he halted the moment he opened his door.

A fox this time, a bigger sacrifice than the rabbit.

His stomach turned. Again he searched the trees, but today there was nothing to return his stare. He snatched up both animals and stomped out before his cabin. He made a great effort of throwing them into the woods.

Shane went back for his rifle. He strapped it across his back and went to bring Daisy out of her pen. The hour-long ride to the boy’s house felt like it took thrice as long. Being out in the open made his skin crawl. Shane hadn’t felt this way about the wilderness since he was a child. Medical school and his work had stolen most of his life over the past decade. He had forgotten what it was like to feel small in the elements, to remember that he was but a speck in nature’s indiscriminate workings. If the beast was still stalking him, the only protection Shane had were his rifle and Daisy’s speed.

He made it to the boy's house without mishap, although he was sweating up his back when he removed his coat.

"Are you alright, sir?" Mildred, the boy's mother, asked. She was one of those still cautious around him, and Shane felt wave after wave of her judgment hit him.

"Yes, I'm…" What would he say? He had come across a beast he still felt was hunting him? "I had a rushed morning," was all he could say. He did not look her in the eye as he followed her into the family room.

Gilbert was the boy, just turned eight this past summer. Shane crouched before him and moved his ankle this way and that, checking on his mobility.

"You've been keeping it raised like I asked?"

"Yes, sir." Gilbert leaned forward to peer at his hands. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure there's no swelling and that your joint here can still move. Does it hurt?"

"Only a little."

"Good."

Once he was finished with the appointment, another neighbor was already outside on his horse. Mr. Horning lived further down the mountain. He was a young man like Shane, but he had already started balding and brought a hat with him wherever he went. Which he supposed was still convenient most of the year. But Mr. Horning had his hat off and was rubbing his hand over his head. This was Shane's first assessment. There was a clairvoyance that came to medicine, Shane thought, an unconscious sense he'd developed over the years. Some of his peers said it was God working through them. Others said it was only pattern recognition or some sort of classical conditioning. Whatever it was, Shane knew today would not end well for Mr. Horning.

"I saw on your board you were here," Mr. Horning said. "Susan is worried the babe is coming."

"Then I must go." Shane mounted Daisy and took off. His worry for Susan blocked off any feelings he had about being in the forest again, even though he still felt those eyes on him. Susan was a first time mother, and if she was truly in labor, it was much too early. He could see Mr. Horning was anxious beside him, and Shane began to prepare speeches in his head for how he would respond if Susan, the child, or both were lost.

Susan Horning gave birth to a baby boy with a dusting of blonde hair. He lived for only an hour and before returning to God. Shane let the young couple hold the child whilst he sat outside their room, trying his best to drown out Susan's sobs. It wasn't the first time he had lost a child—or a mother, and he thanked God Susan was healthy although broken-hearted. He'd seen his fair share of births and all the unhappy consequences of it. He'd seen mothers

breached who died screaming. He'd seen mother and child introduced to one another and smiles all around, only for the mother to fall sick with fever and pass. He'd seen women go mad in the weeks following their labor, and on one unfortunate occasion, he'd learned a child he'd delivered had been thrown off a cliff by its own mother.

He'd seen and heard it all, and yet he found himself having to brush away his own tears. If only he'd gotten here sooner. If he had the proper resources of a hospital. Even a small clinic. Perhaps the boy could have lived longer or been given a name before he was taken away.

The bedroom door clicked open and Shane shot to his feet. "Mr. Horning—"

"Thank you, doctor." Mr. Horning was red around the eyes and nose, his mouth dry and cracking. He walked like his feet were lead, grief a heavy weight. "Thank you for everything. We are blessed to have you here."

Shane pursed his lips to keep his emotions under bay and nodded. "I'm so sorry for your loss. If there's anything you need…"

"Of course." Mr. Horning's eyes were beginning to well with tears again, and Shane took it as his sign to hurry and leave. He was grateful already to learn the Hornings were not the sort to extend their grief outward, but he would not test his luck.

It was late in the evening when Shane emerged from the Horning house, the sky a flickering obsidian. He whispered to Daisy, "One more ride then we'll be home, hm?"

The mare took his offered apple with a huff.

The journey back was long. Shane spent the time oscillating between the images of Susan's labor, ruminating on what he could have done better, and the chest-constricting fear he had of the hollowed forest. Everywhere he looked, the woods were a gaping mouth, broken branches acting as sharp teeth ready to pierce him. By the time they made it back, he was nearly trembling from how overwrought he was.

He led Daisy to her pen before heading to the washroom to bathe. He rinsed off the muck of the day and let a few tears fall for the baby whose name he still did not know. Afterward, he tucked himself into his night shirt and pants before starting dinner. The stew was simmering in the pot when a knock sounded at the door.

Shane's shoulders sagged, exhaustion creeping into him. At this time of night it had to be another emergency, but he was not ready to see another disaster. He tried not to drag his feet, but when he finally opened the door, he braced for certain horror (*Albert had fallen again and had completely broken the limb, Susan had descended into madness, or Amber's condition had worsened into sepsis*).

A stranger stood at the door.

It was a man about the same height as Shane with hair the color of roasted seeds that curled around his head and transfixing cerulean eyes. He had sharp features: a stern brow, a hardened jaw, and cheekbones that looked as if they had been sculpted from stone. He wore

thick, ratty jackets over pants, but his solid form was still visible beneath it. Shane instinctively felt the need to pull the door closer to himself, to guard his space in case this strange man attacked him, but then he looked into his eyes again. A softness there, a vulnerable light behind them that froze him in place. Shane had never been hypnotized. He knew there were physicians who allied themselves with practitioners like Sigmund Freud who delved into what he thought were bogus and dubious methods of care, but he'd read the articles and had understood such treatments had certain…effects.

He was the most beautiful man Shane had ever seen.

"Hello," the man said carefully. He waved a hand at the forest around them. "I am…lost." Something about his greeting felt rehearsed but Shane couldn't pinpoint why he thought so.

"Oh." Shane blinked out of his stupor to look around. He saw no horse or cart. How in the world had this man arrived at his house? It was not an easy journey up here, even on horseback.

"I wanted to ask for…" the man blinked as he thought. "Sanctuary? Yes, sanctuary. I can work for it, if you'd like." He had a thick Slavic accent. His English was nearly perfect, but in the sense that he must have only spoken it with other Slavic people who did not use it as their first language.

Shane looked into his house. He had one bedroom and a single armchair. Where would the man sleep? He supposed he could place his extra blankets on the floor. "How did you…or, actually, what's your name?"

"Ilya."

"Ilya." It could have been his imagination, but he swore the man's face brightened when he spoke his name. "My name is Shane Hollander. Doctor Shane Hollander. I serve the residents here on the mountain. I feel as though I have an obligation to give you…sanctuary, but I can't say I would be the best host. I'm out often, and I'm a terrible cook, as my mother tells me."

"I can do the work for you," Ilya said. Shane wasn't sure he had properly understood what he'd said. Besides, there was little work to do in his cabin. None that Shane actually found time to do.

"Would you like me to find time to take you to town? Or I can have someone escort you. There's work there, and if you're not satisfied with what they have to offer, there's a train station and you can head to the city."

Ilya stared at him and frowned. "I cannot go to the city."

"Oh." Shane stared back, a little bewildered. "So, how will you get back to your home?"

"I cannot go home. It is…not safe."

"Not safe?"

"My brother will kill me."

Shane paused for a long moment as his brain decided if he had truly heard what he thought he heard. “Why would your brother do such a thing?” And why did Ilya sound so calm about it? What sort of world did this man come from where it was normal to threaten the lives of your brothers?

“For inheritance. He is next in line for power in our clan. He thinks I will take it from him.”

Shane was disturbed. “Alright. So, you ran from home and got lost?”

Ilya smiled, teeth clean and white. And sharp. “Yes.”

Shane still could not understand what exactly had led this man to his door. He was worried he could be letting someone dangerous into his house; his explanation made no sense. Ilya must’ve lived on or near the mountain if he had been running, but using the word clan made it seem like he came from great wealth. Yet his clothing and mannerisms were akin to the rural poor Shane was used to serving.

His eyes, however—Shane could not look at them long.

“Alright. Come in,” he said finally. “Dinner is just about done.”

Ilya’s smile widened, and Shane ignored the way his chest constricted in response. “Thank you, Doctor Shane Hollander.”

“Would you like me to give you something to wear?” Shane asked. They were still hovering by the front door. He watched as Ilya’s eyes catalogued his home.

When Ilya dragged his eyes up to look at him through his thick eyelashes, the sort of sinful attraction Shane thought he had buried long ago reared its head. “You want me to wear your clothes?” Shock encased his words.

Shane felt the need to explain. “It’s nothing. You need something without holes in them, and it gets very cold here.”

Ilya stared at him a moment longer. “I am honored.”

Shane’s mouth fell. “Oh, it’s really no problem.” He wondered if things were done differently where he came from. He left the door quickly, however, and went to pull a change of clothes from his chest. He and Ilya were about the same height, but the man was bulkier, so he found clothes that were a little big on him.

Ilya beamed at him when he was handed the clothing. Then he brought the shirt up to his nose and took in a deep inhale.

Shane flushed. “It’s clean, I promise.”

Ilya stared at him curiously. “I know that.”

Then, without preamble, Ilya laid the clothes Shane had given him over the back of the armchair and began to pull off the clothing he had come in. Shane opened and closed his mouth, his protest getting buried before he could say the words. He could change in his bedroom, he meant to say. Or the washroom or quite literally anywhere else where Shane didn't feel like he was invading the other man's privacy. But Ilya swiftly removed the two jackets he was wearing, then the shirt. He brought his hands to the waistband of his pants and yanked down.

Shane caught sight of the nest of curls over Ilya's pelvis before he turned abruptly on his heel. "Um…" His words caught in his throat again. *God,* what was wrong with this man?

Or—

What was wrong with Shane? Could he not handle another man changing in front of him without blushing like a school girl? He frowned.

When the rustling behind him halted, Shane turned back to find Ilya standing there with Shane's shirt and pants on and his old clothing folded in his arms. Ilya smiled at him when their eyes met.

"I'll put that in with the laundry." Shane took the stack from Ilya's arms, ignoring how warm Ilya's hands were when they brushed against his, and dropped them in the hamper by the washroom door. "You can sit at the table now."

Dinner was odd.

The accompanied noise of another mouth that wasn't his own kept distracting him. And Ilya had an appetite. He finished his stew before Shane and was nearly through his second bowl by the time Shane took his last bite. As Shane watched the man shovel the food into his mouth, his inquiries from before came to mind.

"Do you come from Russia?"

Ilya paused, spoon halfway to his mouth. "Russia?" He tilted his head. "Yes, Russia. My family came very long ago."

And he still had an accent? "How long, if I may ask?"

"My father's father's father." Ilya sniffed and scooped the last of the stew into his mouth, licking his lips afterward. He looked like he could eat more. "There was war."

Shane tried to think of what war in Russia could have pushed them out, but without knowing the exact year they migrated, could not. Even so, he knew Russia had a tumultuous history. There would have been plenty of reasons to escape the country. "You must have found a very tight-knit community."

Ilya stared at him a few moments before Shane realized he didn't know what he was asking him. He rephrased, "You still sound like you just came here yourself, not your great grandfather. My mother immigrated here before she met my father, and then they had me.

She's taught me much about Japan but I still feel…distant at times. It's a common plight of the diaspora. But you still seem so *connected.*"

"There are many of us in our clan," Ilya said matter-of-factly. "We are strong."

"Hm. Is it just your brother? No other siblings or family?"

"No." Ilya's face went tight at the mention of family.

"No one who could defend you?" When Ilya shook his head, Shane asked, "Have you talked about this with the police?"

Ilya stared at him while he ran his tongue through his mouth. Shane had the sudden impression the man was going to lie to him. He wasn't always the best at reading people, but Ilya had been so open with him before that his face going hard was like a blaring alarm: the man wanted to hide something from him. Then Ilya said, "This is not police business."

"Okay." Shane decided he would not push anymore. He shifted the conversation awkwardly. "Well, I had a busy day, so I was going to wash up and head to bed. Is that alright with you?"

Ilya nodded, watching him intently. The wall he'd thrown up was lowered, but he was still noticeably alert in some way. Shane was reminded of the fact that a stranger sat in his home, and he knew nothing about him beyond his first name and that he was running from his family.

Was this a good idea? Was his commitment to altruism going to be the death of him?

Ilya's face fell. "I can sleep outside. With your horse."

"What? No." Shane stood. "I have plenty of blankets for you."

He gathered the dishes, washed them, then grabbed the extra sheets he had and laid them before the fireplace. Ilya stood by as he made the mock bed.

"Is this alright?" Shane asked once he was finished, still kneeling on the floor. "The pillow I got is a little small, so I can switch it with mine if you want."

"No." Ilya sat down before Shane could stand; their knees rubbed together. "This is perfect." Again, Ilya stared at the gifts with reverence, rubbing the soft material between his fingers. "Thank you, Doctor Shane Hollander."

"Shane is fine."

Ilya met his eyes. "Thank you, Shane."

Shane's forced down an embarrassing smile. "It's nothing. Good night, Ilya."

"Good night, Shane."

He was off to his room before the other man could see the scarlet blooming across his face.

Shane didn't remember falling asleep, but he opened his eyes to a darkened room in the middle of the night. He laid there for a moment, staring at the wall, and tried to stop his mind from grabbing onto a thread and keeping him up the rest of the night. And he was close to falling back asleep when a shift on the bed disrupted him. He glanced over his shoulder.

Ilya was sitting with his legs crossed on the bed, his back to him and staring at the door. The wave of fear that rushed through him was so violent, Shane nearly fell off the bed in his attempt to sit.

"Jesus Christ!" he gasped, clutching his blanket to his chest. "What the hell are you doing?"

Ilya had the audacity to look confused. "I'm keeping guard?"

"Keeping guard for what? The whole mountain is asleep. My door is *locked.*"

Ilya looked between him and the door, face a little pained. "I should not leave you without protection. My brother hunts."

"Your brother doesn't know where I live, does he?"

"No?"

"So, we're fine. You don't need to sit in here. You scared me."

At that last sentence, Ilya's brows furrowed to send a guilty shadow over his face. "I do not want to scare you."

"Well, then go back to bed."

Ilya left his bed like a kicked puppy and Shane spent another hour awake wondering why he felt guilty for kicking a stranger out of *his* bed. As strange as Ilya was, Shane didn't feel threatened, but for the life of him could not understand why he behaved the way he did. Surely it was not a cultural trait.

In the morning Ilya was quiet at the table. He said nothing as Shane sliced up sheets of bread and placed them on a plate. He only watched as Shane moved around the small kitchen. It was remarkably easy for Shane to work with Ilya there. He hadn't even enjoyed being in the kitchen at the same time as his parents. Ilya didn't speak at all until Shane addressed him.

"On the weekends I'm only open for emergencies, so I was going to chop some wood this morning. Can you help with that?"

Ilya took a moment to respond, and he did something that Shane may have unconsciously noticed but was for the first time fixated on: he tilted his head as if listening for something beneath Shane's words. "Yes, I will help you."

Shane blinked as he wondered what Ilya had been checking for before telling him, "Thank you."

After breakfast, Shane showed Ilya the stump behind the cabin that he used to chop wood. He went over to the pile of logs, squatting to pick one up and bring it to the stump. For whatever reason, perhaps stage fright at being watched, Shane stumbled back over an icy plot of snow and almost fell. He blushed.

"This never gets any easier," he said. Embarrassment flooded him when Ilya didn't let out as much as a chuckle. Shane was used to folks assuming he didn't know how to handle manual labor once they discovered he was a physician (one of many reasons) despite the fact he'd lived on a farm for more than half his life. Despite being almost three decades old, Shane hadn't quite rid himself of the urge to demonstrate his masculinity as proof of his manhood. He went to try again, but stopped when Ilya moved.

Ilya had no reaction but to walk over to the pile and pick up the log with one arm as if it weighed nothing. He pointed at the stump with a question on his face, like he was asking "Should I place this over there?"

Shane nodded slowly. He watched Ilya effortlessly make his way to the stump and place the log down. Then he picked up the axe and split the log into four. "Good?" he asked Shane.

"Two more should be fine."

Shane stared as Ilya finished chopping the rest of the wood. "You're very strong," he said.

Ilya gave him a toothy smile. "More to chop?"

"No, that's it for now. I was honestly expecting this to take longer…but I guess we can go inside and play cards or something."

"Cards," Ilya repeated to himself and nodded.

Shane explained the process of the game they were playing three times before Ilya seemed to have a good sense of how it went. Shane heated up some tea for the both of them, and their mugs sat steaming on the table between them. As Shane began to shuffle the cards, he caught Ilya looking at him from his peripheral. When he caught Ilya's eye, Ilya smiled at him. There was something about how blatant the man was with his attention that made the back of Shane's neck heat up. He smiled so completely, so warmly, as if he was truly happy to be in his presence. But apart from offering him shelter while he hid from…whatever was going in his home life, Shane couldn't understand why the strange man seemed so invested in him. As much trouble as he had understanding him sometimes, Ilya's interest was clear cut every time he looked at Shane.

It *was* only gratitude, wasn't it? Shane didn't want to think about what it would mean if it wasn't. Nor did he want to think about how he would respond.

"Yes?" Shane asked to interrupt his own thoughts.

There, Ilya's eyes glazed over for the briefest moment as he silently listened for what Shane could not hear. Then Shane watched as he translated what he wanted to ask in his head first. "Have you lived here a long time?"

Shane shrugged. “Not long. At least compared to most people. I have some patients who are second, third, and even fourth generation. I feel like an expat most days.”

“Expat?”

“Someone who lives in a country they weren’t born in. And even though this mountain is very much part of my country, the culture is so different from what I’m used to. I stand out a lot more here. It’s hard not feeling like I don’t belong.”

Ilya made an amused face, and Shane realized he already knew what the word expat meant; he’d just been asking why Shane felt like one. He went to apologize, but Ilya pushed on.

“Has anyone tried to hurt you?” Real concern spread through Ilya’s face, and underneath it a flash of something angry.

“No! They’re just not used to people like me.”

“Like you?”

“People who look like me. My mother is Japanese and my father is a white Canadian.” Shane was surprised Ilya hadn’t already commented on it, and he waited for the realization to hit him. But Ilya only nodded expectantly, waiting for his next words. “You know people don’t really like when we mix like that.”

Ilya stared. “I don’t understand.” Now this was real confusion, and Shane was grateful to have something he wouldn’t misinterpret.

“Mixing between the races?”

“Perhaps it’s difficult for me to see it the way you do. There is clan or not clan. But to not have war clans must mate together. My great grandfather did not marry the woman he was promised to. He married a woman from within the clan. Then there was war. They escaped when other clans joined the enemy clan to fight us. Or we would not be here today. Many died because he didn’t want to mate with a different clan. Your people…” he paused. “The people in this country are strange about appearances.

“Oh,” Shane said. “Well, I guess you can say people don’t like to marry between clans in Canada. So, many people here keep a distance unless I’m taking care of them.”

“You're a healer?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you heal them if they are not kind? You could leave.”

Shane swallowed. “I stay because they need me. I took an oath as a doctor, and I go where my help is needed most.”

Ilya stared at him. “You’re lying.”

“What?”

“You don’t stay for that.” Ilya’s voice did not waver, the resolution behind it firm but gentle. He believed Shane was lying the same way he believed the sky was blue. His assurance sent a wave of discomfort through Shane. How did he know?

“Well…” Shane began. “I suppose it’s not the only reason, but it’s the most important one.”

“Okay.” Ilya’s stare intensified.

Shane cleared his throat and divided up their cards. “Let’s play.”

After cards, they had lunch and then spent the afternoon lounging in different areas of the house. Shane sat at the desk he had squeezed into the corner of the sitting area, riffling through the recent medical articles he had mailed to him routinely. It stole most of his attention, but his mind still caught on the shifts Ilya would sometimes make. Ilya kept moving, restless. He poked around the cabin. He opened Shane’s cupboards, soft sniffs coming from him like a dog inspecting a new territory. He sank into the armchair and napped for about an hour before getting up again and rummaging some more. Shane thought he should be more offended, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when the man’s curiosity seemed so innocuous. Ilya went out at some point, too, to take laps around the house and peek into the pen where Daisy was kept (who immediately threw a fit and sent Ilya scrambling back to the house; “Animals do not like me much,” he whispered once he slipped past the door).

Shane had the sense Ilya wasn’t used to being stationary for very long.

“Would you like me to clean the snow in front of your house?” Ilya asked at some point.

“Oh.” Shane glanced out the window at the flattened path he hadn’t cared to clean. “Sure.”

Ilya shoveled a path from the door to Daisy’s pen and the storehouse.

He came up to Shane after. “Would you like me to sweep and mop? And I can put away the books you aren’t using.”

“You don’t have to, but if you want—”

Ilya swept and mopped. He put away all the textbooks he’d finished with, folded the blankets he had laying around, tidied up in the kitchen, and remade his bed by the fireplace.

Shane was deep into his books when Ilya appeared again, a cup of tea in hand, just like Shane had prepared it earlier for the two of them.

“Thank you…” Shane didn’t have time to accept the drink with his hands. Ilya leaned over him to place the cup on the desk. His arms ended up encircling Shane’s head, and for a moment, Shane was cocooned in Ilya’s presence. He cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

Ilya gave him a soft smile in return.

For dinner, Shane spooned out the rest of the stew from yesterday, which Ilya consumed heartily.

“What does your family do?” Shane asked.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “What do we do?”

“Do you run a farm?” It made sense. That was how people made money out here. Perhaps Ilya lived in the valley and had escaped up the mountain on horseback, lost the animal, then stumbled on Shane’s cabin. If the farm was big enough, it would explain why Ilya’s brother was so keen and ensuring the “inheritance” remained his and his only.

Ilya shook his head. “We don’t really have a *job.* My family acts as clan leader..”

Shane tilted his head, confused. “When you say clan, do you mean something more than your family?”

Ilya nodded.

“How many people are in your clan, then?”

“Two hundred and thirty-three.”

“Oh. That’s a lot.”

“Like I said—we are strong. How many are in yours?”

“I don’t belong to a whole clan. It’s just my family. My father, mother, and me.”

Ilya’s nose scrunched. “Why do you live apart from them?”

“Well, work, I suppose.” Shane’s heart did a flip in his chest, like it already knew what was coming.

“Lie.” Ilya sucked the spoon into his mouth before smiling around it in a way that made Shane’s stomach flip instead. “I think they are the reason you stay here, not to heal people.”

Shane frowned. “Perhaps.”

“Do you hide from them, too?”

“Of course not.”

“Lie.”

“It’s not a lie. It’s just easier being here. I get to do important work while I figure out my life. I’m still young. I have time.”

“What are you ‘figuring out?’”

“I don’t know.” Shane held up hand. “And *don’t* say I’m lying. You can say I’m trying to figure out what I want my future to look like, but it’s hard because I have no idea where to start. I’ve always had something outside of me to focus my attention on. It’s hard to not have that anymore.”

“Distraction.”

“Hm?” Shane tilted his head at him.

“You had distraction before, but here, in the mountains, all you have is you.”

It shouldn’t have cut through him as much as it did.

Shane stood suddenly. “Listen, I don’t know what you think you know about me, but it’s wrong. You’re running from your own family because you think they’re going to kill you. My parents would sooner die before considering doing something like that to me, so, no, I’m not hiding the same way you are. I’m not looking for *distractions.*” He dropped his bowl in the sink. “I’m going to wash up.”

He didn’t look at Ilya again before making his way to the washroom, but he found Ilya sitting in the same spot when he finished. Except all the dishes had been washed and put away. Ilya had also cleaned the kitchen and folded the blanket he’d been using in the armchair earlier. He sat there, watching Shane’s face as he noticed what he’d done. Like he was hoping for praise.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Shane said, now feeling like he’d thrown an underserved tantrum.

“You were angry.”

“I wasn’t angry.” Then, before Ilya could accuse him of lying for the fourth time that day, he added, “I don’t like talking about stuff like that. So, let’s just drop it.”

Ilya frowned but didn’t say anything else. Shane stepped aside to allow Ilya to enter the washroom after him. As he walked past, he lingered for a moment.

“What is it?” Shane asked.

Ilya blinked at him. He opened his mouth to answer, then shut it. “Nothing.” He went to escape inside.

At the last moment, Shane took him by the wrist. His skin felt like fire against his, like he would burn himself if he held on too long. He looked Ilya in the eyes. “I also wanted to thank you for all your help today. You definitely made my life a lot easier, and I appreciate it. Thank you.” He only realized how redundant his gratitude was once he finished his spiel.

Ilya didn’t seem to notice. His eyes widened slightly in surprise before his face relaxed again. Then, he brought his other hand to wrap around the arm of the hand Shane was holding him with. Firmly, as if reciting a prewritten vow, he said, “My heart bleeds and beats for you. It is yours to use.”

“Oh, I’m—” Shane didn’t know what to say. When had they gotten so close? His eyes—*hungrily, sinfully, unrepentantly*—dropped down to Ilya’s lips. What would Ilya do if he leaned forward? “That’s…I should go. Good night, Ilya.”

He was off before he could catch the man’s expression.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Finished editing this faster than expected! Whoopee to another chapter. Gotta rush to work now, lol.

Sunday passed much of the same. Since Ilya had already completed his tour of the premises (and most if not all of the chores), he spent his time scouring Shane's many books. He seemed fascinated by the diagrams of the human body.

When Shane's working hours began on Monday, he explained to Ilya at the door that he had a few appointments to head to, which he'd marked on the board in case people came looking for him. After, he would return unless someone pulled him away.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder at the forest. "It's not safe."

The beast came to mind. Shane realized that he hadn't thought of it once since Ilya had appeared. "I carry a gun with me. I'll be fine."

A shadow crossed Ilya's face, and his eyes flickered to the rifle he had slung over his shoulder. "That will not be enough for my brother. He is very strong, and he will bring his men."

Shane sighed and glanced at his watch. He was already running behind schedule from the extra time he spent during breakfast with Ilya. The man had offered to wash the dishes, fortunately. "I'm certain your brother wants nothing to do with me, Ilya."

Ilya held his eye. "He will come for you because he knows you are important to me."

"What?" Shane frowned. "I'm not…I don't think the unlikely chance of him spotting me in the woods will let him know you're staying here."

Ilya said nothing, but his worry did not lesson.

Shane grabbed him by the shoulder and gave him a little shake. "Hey. I've come across bears and wolves and…things I didn't even know existed. My gun worked on them. Your brother is flesh and blood, so the gun will work on him, too. I won't be far, anyway. You should be worried about yourself. Just stay out of sight, okay?"

Ilya nodded with his lips pressed tightly together. Before Shane pulled away, Ilya stopped him with a matching hand on his shoulder. He smoothed it up the side of Shane's neck and rubbed his thumb over his pulse. Shane stood there, speechless. Ilya hummed, tilted his head, and pressed a kiss to Shane's cheek. He pulled back just enough to meet Shane's eyes.

The wind howled.

Ilya laid his mouth on Shane's gently. His lips were feather light against Shane's, barely more than a graze. When he pulled back, he said, "I will be waiting for you."

"Oh, alright." Shane was half-dazed. "I'll see you soon."

When Shane brought Daisy out, he looked back at Ilya before mounting her. Ilya was still leaning against the door frame, watching him like he could do nothing else.

As much as he suspected Ilya's worries to be unfounded, Shane still tightly grasped Daisy's reins all the way to his first house. The forest was eerily quiet that morning, and every sound had him snapping his neck to look. He wondered how long it would take for him to forget about the beast (and it to forget about him). He understood it to be the illogical part of his mind that insisted he remained in danger, that the beast was still prowling, waiting for him to drop his guard. But if this creature—despite how devilish it had appeared—was a child of nature, then it surely adhered to the same rules all of its children were forced to follow. It would forget him.

Shane completed all of his appointments without issue and his confidence grew. His last check was on the Horning couple. He sat with Mr. Horning nearly an hour, spewing out all the knowledge he had on what went wrong with the labor, about how their son was too young to breathe on his own, his body too little to weather the elements. He made sure to tell the man it was no fault of Susan's, who was sheltered in their bedroom during the entire meeting. Sometimes things went wrong no matter how careful you were during the pregnancy. He encouraged Mr. Horning to wait some months before they tried again.

Shane was happy to return home after, and even more humored to find Ilya waiting by the door when he arrived. Shane blushed as Ilya stripped him of his coat and hung it on its hook. He removed his rifle more gingerly, frowning at the thing like it had done him wrong.

"That goes there." Shane pointed at the shelf above the hooks, thinking Ilya didn't remember.

Ilya blinked at him like he'd been drawn out of a dream. "Yes," he said, and placed the gun where it was supposed to be. "This is a strong weapon."

"It has its use. I don't like using it beyond hunting. For food, that is. Some like to hunt for pleasure and I never understood that. It's too violent for me, killing just to kill." Shane was talking too much. "Anyway, what would you like for dinner?"

Every day for the rest of the week, Ilya would see him off with a kiss and greet him with a touch. On his arm, his shoulder, his nape, anywhere he could reach first. Always eager, always with a relieved smile on his face as if he worried each time Shane left he would not return. Shane went warm during every embrace. It was nice having someone waiting for him at home, someone who was kind and attentive. He found himself thinking of Ilya when he first woke, wondering what the man would like for breakfast, if he was warm enough in his mock bed (he imagined inviting Ilya into his own more than any man should). He was aware their situation was unorthodox, was even unbecoming, but Shane surmised a few pecks were harmless. The Greeks had done the same all those years ago. Were they wrong to participate

in an antiquated sort of friendship? Like Achilles and Patroclus? Ilya was more European than most Shane knew. They must've done things differently.

He was being respectful. He was being a kind host.

Soon, Shane forgot what it was like to live alone. He forgot Ilya was, in many matters, a stranger and would have to leave one day.

Ilya's odd mannerisms only became more apparent the more time they spent together. He still smelled everything before he put it in his mouth. He smelled *Shane* quite often. Most often when he was fresh out of bed, stirring porridge at the stove or buttering biscuits, Ilya would stand behind him and drop his head on his shoulder. A few sniffs and he was gone.

Shane had wondered if Ilya was a bit touched at first. Many parents had come to him with concerns for children with odd rituals and turbulent sensitivities to seemingly everything the world threw at them. He selfishly spent much time educating these parents. He'd done his time with frustrated teachers who used canes, rulers, and humiliation to "fix" him before he ever understood what was wrong with him. So, in that case, Shane decided he would not judge Ilya too harshly if he had self-soothing habits he did not understand. He could only imagine what it was like growing up with his brother, and it surely influenced why he had run away the way he had.

And—

If Shane enjoyed the way it felt when Ilya pressed close to him, no one needed to know.

The shift happened seemingly overnight.

Their second weekend together, someone banged on the door with an emergency. Before Shane could go to answer, Ilya was on his feet in a blink of an eye, growling at the door.

Shane was so taken aback he could barely get out an, "Ilya?"

Ilya stopped abruptly, looking at him with wide, shameful eyes. He opened his mouth to speak but another knock came from the door. Shane had no time to wait for an explanation. He took his coat and followed the visitor to their house where he tended to an elderly woman who had fallen.

When he returned, Ilya was skittish. He hovered, then disappeared, then hovered some more. He seemed desperate to be close to Shane but scared of what Shane would say. Shane himself didn't know what to think of it. He had never met someone who growled like that. Certainly not one so animalistic. He began to wonder exactly what conditions Ilya had been raised in, remembering the clothes he had shown up to his door in. Lord, had he been harmed? Had what pushed him to flee been a beating? He hadn't seen any bruising on Ilya's body, but family wounds like that went so deep into one's soul that they rarely healed completely. His time at asylums had shown him the worst of what abuse could do to a person.

Guilt squandered his bewilderment.

“What’s your family like?” Shane asked over dinner.

Ilya looked confused in a caged sort of way, like he was trying to discern if their was a trick in Shane’s question. “My family?”

Shane tried to come across as casual with a shrug. “You have your brother? What about your parents?”

“Dead,” Ilya said, eyes visibly cataloging Shane’s face. “My father was a strict leader and a strict husband. My mother came from a different clan. She missed them very much and it made her unhappy. My father never let her see them. He thought there was another man, someone she wanted to mate with before they were betrothed. One day she poisoned herself and she was gone.”

“I’m sorry. How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“That’s young.”

“Yes, but every day I am grateful it was old enough for me to remember her. I can tell even Alexei misses her.”

Shane suddenly ached for his own mother. His shame kept him here, but he missed her laughs and the conspiracies they had behind his father’s back. He missed her hugs and her stern warnings to stop reading in the dark. He missed his *family.* “And your father?”

“My father died at the end of last year.”

“Was your father…strict to you, too?”

“He was strict to everyone.”

“Did he ever hit you?”

Ilya furrowed his brows. “No.”

“What about your brother?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“Why do you ask?”

How did Shane explain to him that he was behaving so absurdly Shane thought it was because he’d been abused? “I was wondering. It’s not every day I hear about family wanting to kill each other.”

“No, not each other. Just my brother. He is scared because many people in the clan like me more than him. He is worried there will be a coup, so he will kill me first unless I run far away.”

Shane paused. “Then shouldn’t you keep moving? It doesn’t seem like you got very far. If you got on the train you could go across the country. Or you could head into America where it will be harder to find you.”

Ilya played with his spoon and toyed with his bottom lip, eyes carefully tucked away. Then he slowly looked back at him. Shane felt the room hum with the energy between them. “I cannot leave you.”

This was not the first time Ilya had insisted he couldn’t leave Shane by himself, but it was the first time Shane listened. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. If you’re worried he might find us here, don’t you think we would both be safer if you kept moving? He would never know you were here unless you told him. Did you?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Ilya fell silent and dropped his eyes to his bowl again. Something about his demeanor changed, like he’d shut Shane out. Shane didn’t know what he was trying so desperately to hide from him, but Ilya had just told him he was putting himself in danger to remain by Shane’s side. He had sounded so resolute, so loyal to this notion that Shane needed protecting, that there was no where else in the world Ilya belonged than the cabin. For a moment, Shane considered again whether or not Ilya had proclivities for the same sex. Perhaps he had gained some sort of attraction to him beyond what was…appropriate. He might not have been taught that sort of behavior was wrong. Not like Shane had.

Shane had seen it himself. At six and eleven and twenty-two he’d seen the hatred for sodomy. He’d seen God strike down men. In college, a man had been caught bent over behind a tree with his pants down. The other man had managed to flee, but his friend—but *Anthony*—hadn’t been so lucky.

Although perhaps Shane was a hypocrite. He had *let* Ilya show his affections. He had told himself it wouldn’t lead anywhere. If Ilya now desired the impossible, it was Shane’s fault he did so. But Ilya had just met Shane. He was not obligated to stay with him.

“I want to sleep,” Ilya said suddenly.

Shane nodded because he could do nothing else as Ilya rose to go to the washroom. It was a quiet night, and Shane spent much of it staring at the ceiling, thinking about Ilya, about Ilya’s brother, and—when an owl hooted and the shadows thoroughly consumed his room—the beast.

Ilya was restless for the entirety of Sunday. He jumped at every creak of the house and couldn't sit still for more than ten minutes. Shane was grateful when Ilya said he was going for a walk after lunch, grateful to have the quiet to catch up on his readings. But Ilya was only more irritated when he returned. Shane tried to think of how to ask him what was wrong during dinner when he realized Ilya also *looked* different.

He didn't look sickly, not in the ways Shane had been trained to spot, but his features were more pronounced somehow, like the cut of his cheeks had been buffed on the sides with sandpaper. His eyes, typically a brilliant blue-green, were now stormy in color. His jaw was tense. His teeth—

His teeth.

Ilya opened his mouth to shovel food inside, and Shane caught another glimpse. The edges of his front teeth seemed to glisten in the light and his canines hung down further than he remembered. Everything about Ilya felt like a sharpened blade.

Shane twirled his spoon, frowning. "Are you alright?"

Ilya glanced at him but didn't stop eating. He was on his second bowl. "Yes, fine. Do you have any meat?"

"I dry most of it to store for when I really need it. So, nothing fresh."

Ilya hummed and picked at his teeth. "Okay." Shane stared. It was another second or two before Ilya noticed. "What's wrong?"

He held onto the question for a breath before asking, "Did your canines come in that long?"

The words were barely out of Shane's mouth before Ilya was up and heading to the washroom. From the angle Shane was sitting at, he could see Ilya lean into the mirror and open his mouth. Ilya's face darkened.

When he returned, Ilya shrank in on himself.

The next morning Ilya was back to normal. Shane was relieved to say the least. Again Ilya was sending him off and greeting him at the door. He sat on the side of the armchair with him, observing his readings while he did. He learned Shane's tastes enough to cook for the both of them. It was quiet. It was comfort. It was—a feeling Shane discovered only came with company—home.

Then there were the twigs. He found them often in Ilya's hair. He would pick them out, and Ilya would beam at him. And there was mud. Mud on Ilya's shoes, mud tracked around the house in the mornings after he'd already cleaned before bed. Ilya was leaving in the middle of the night, and he didn't know what for.

By the end of the week, Shane's curiosity took hold.

It was late Saturday night when Shane heard the front door open. He shot out of bed and pulled on his shoes. He hadn't undressed before getting into bed for the convenience of slipping out right after Ilya. Still, by the time he was out of the house and hobbling behind, Ilya was far ahead of him, and the distance only increased. Shane almost wished he'd brought Daisy with him, but the mare would've made too much noise.

Shane patted the side of his coat he'd slipped his father's pistol into. He didn't carry it often but sometimes when he was roaming on foot he preferred a smaller weapon. The feel of the unforgiving metal underneath his clothes soothed him. The full moon was the only illumination in the dark forest, allowing him to make out the faint outlines of Ilya's footfalls.

Where was he going in such a hurry? And so fast? Maybe he had been meeting with his brother? Was Ilya trying to convince him he would not try to steal his inheritance from him? Or perhaps…Shane's mind went down a dark route of collusion.

None of his theories were true, of course.

Ilya finally stopped in a moonlit clearing and began to strip off his clothes. Shane knelt behind a bush some distance away. He had made sure to stay far away (not that it had taken much effort to do so), a part of him worried Ilya would be able to sense him if he came any closer. But he needn't have. There was an urgency to Ilya's movements as he stripped, like he was seconds from bursting and all he'd been focused on was getting away from the cabin so he could do so.

When Ilya was fully bare, his entire body slackened. He tilted his face toward the sky, and from the angle Shane was watching from, the man's profile was like carved porcelain in the light. Shane was so taken aback by his beauty that when the cracking echoed around him, he took no notice. It was only when Ilya began to tremble, when his head jerked to the side and his limbs began to bend at unnatural angles did he pay attention. Shane, horrified, watched as fur began to sprout along Ilya's body. As his spine curved and forced him onto all fours. As his face morphed into a snout and pointed ears. He grew and grew and grew.

Shane blinked, and the beast stood in Ilya's place.

The beast—*Ilya*—reared his head back and howled into the night.

This wasn't right, Shane thought. What was this? What had he seen? His mind spun explanations to life, each going further and further into the realm of nonsense. He'd surely been bewitched or was sleep walking, dreaming up horrors that didn't exist. A man transforming into a wolf? It was a myth and nothing more.

But no, this was real. Shane pinched himself and blinked and shook his head but there Ilya still stood, now grooming himself; his coat was the same burnt blonde as his hair. His behavior and all the questions it had aroused in Ilya made sense now. The scenting and the growling and territorialism. It had all been manifestations of *this.* And what was this? What was Ilya?

A monster. Shane had let a monster into his home. Shane had *fallen asleep* with a monster in his home. And he had kissed it, too—had yearned for it.

"Oh, God," he whispered.

Ilya's head snapped up. Even through the rows of trees and beneath the cover of darkness, Shane knew he had been spotted. Ilya launched onto his feet, making a sudden and frightening charge at him.

Shane's legs would barely work. He scrambled back on his hands and feet, breaths coming out in panicked pants. "No, no," he pleaded.

The beast was coming closer.

Shane reached into his coat and pulled out his father's pistol. He pulled the trigger before he could think.

The bullet hit the beast in the same shoulder Shane had shot at the first time. It rolled to a stop, whining and whimpering and pawing at the wound. Shane got himself onto his feet with great difficulty. He backed away slowly. He was without Daisy, he remembered. He would not be able to outrun the thing no matter how much he tried.

The beast caught him moving but did not follow. It stared up at him from where it was crumpled on the forest floor. Its eyes—

Ilya's eyes.

Shane froze. Ilya had such translucent eyes, and Shane could see all the anguish that laid within them now. Something akin to betrayal flashed back at Shane. Or, when he looked deeper, rejection. This was Ilya he had just shot. The same man who had waited by the door for him every evening, had hung his coat up for him, and had held the same rifle that had injured him with care only because it was Shane's.

"I—" What should he say? "I didn't mean…"

He stepped forward, but Ilya stumbled back, ran through a gap between two trees, and disappeared.

When Shane returned to his cabin, he laid back in bed and remained there for hours into Sunday morning. He didn't eat until dinner time, and even then he only had a bit of bread. He couldn't bring himself to be productive, couldn't shake off what he had seen. What he had *done.*

Fortunately for him, he had no appointments on Monday. But still, for the first time since he'd moved to the mountain, he placed a new message on his board:

Closed. Emergencies only.

He made tea and sat in his armchair. After an immeasurable amount of time passed (he hadn't opened his blinds), he read the letter he'd received from his mother that morning.

Shane,

Oh, I do believe you eat, but I can't trust that you allow yourself to indulge. I am excited for Easter just so I can make you something proper. Ham and turkey and gravy and all the fine things you enjoyed as a boy. I don't like you living so far away. I never did and I never will. A mother needs her children close. The people who told me I was only supposed to raise you until you left the nest were feeding me lies. Every day I think about you. I wonder if you've had your tea already, if you have tough cases or rude patients. But still I am filled with pride for how far you've come, of the work you're doing even if it's stolen you from my side.

Your father misses you. I know his letters are sparse, and I hound him to write. And he does try, dear. He tries. But you know he's never been good at putting his thoughts to words. He's a man of action. And while you're away he can't build you treehouses or mend your toys. It's why he can't wait for you to marry. Surely you'll move closer after that.

And I admit you're much better than me, helping people who think you lesser than. I couldn't do it.

Stay safe. I can't wait to see you.

Love,

Your Mother Who Desperately Wishes For You to Come Home

Marriage. He'd thought of it so confidently for years. Marriage was like growing a beard or getting big enough to fit into his father's shoes. It was something that happened on its own, a genetic code waiting for its moment. The right woman would come along. Pretty but not distracting. Perceptive and confident but not strong-arming. Kind and maternal even if aloof at times—just like his mother. He would fall in love slowly but surely. His parents would approve. They would begin to have children after a year or two. And then…that was that. Simple. Shane hadn't expected much else.

Until Anthony. Until Ilya.

He was still holding his mother's letter when he began to cry.

He didn't see Ilya Tuesday or Wednesday. By this point, his concern began to grow, and it metastasized into physical discomfort. The body did that sometimes, he reassured himself. It created psychosomatic sensations when under stress. But Shane had never experience something so visceral. He felt like there was a hole in his chest. All because Ilya was not at his side.

Shane didn't rush between appointments anymore. He scanned the tree line, trying to spot blue eyes or golden fur. There was nothing.

A part of him felt shattered.

There was a moment, however, when he was coming back home after sunset and caught a glimpse of fur through the trees. But the color was too dark, and it was gone before he could get a better look or call out.

By Friday morning, the ache in Shane's chest was keeping him up at night. He couldn't sleep. All he could think about was Ilya. Was he safe? If his brother was like him—if his entire *clan* was like him—how would he be able to defend himself?

How could Shane apologize?

He rose early in the morning, grateful to have another day free of appointments. Daisy was easily lead out of her pen with an apple, and after a bit of sweet talking, he pushed her into a trot.

Shane had an idea. He wasn't sure if it would work; he wasn't even sure if the message would get to who he wanted it to. It would only work under the assumption that Ilya hadn't completely left this side of the mountain.

I cannot leave you.

Shane wandered the mountainside until he found something worthwhile: a fox. It was sniffing underneath a bush when Shane shot it. He took it, brought it back with him to the cabin, and cleaned it. Then he wrapped it in one of his shirts that had become Ilya's and took it to a spot behind the cabin. Ilya liked to patrol in that part of the woods. So, he found a place beneath a tree and laid it to rest.

When Shane went back the next morning, the fox was gone. In its place was a rabbit, throat freshly gouged. A smile slid across his face. He picked up the rabbit gently and brought it back with him to the cabin. There, Shane skinned it, cut it, and roasted it for his dinner.

He jolted awake that night, mind already racing like someone had taken a frayed thread and yanked. He scanned his room and found nothing, but couldn't bury the need to get up and investigate. He went to the front door and stepped outside still in his night clothes. The wind was biting against his skin, but Shane could barely feel it. He searched the forest for those eyes he'd longed to see for the past week. For a moment, he only saw darkness. Then out of the shadows came Ilya in wolf form. He had his head close to the ground as he shuffled closer, like he was walking toward a cornered animal. Shane held his hands out palm side up, letting Ilya know he was unarmed.

Ilya lifted his head at this, raising himself to his full, glorious height. Shane couldn't help the slight gasp that left his lips at seeing Ilya so close. As he neared, he realized that even on all fours Ilya was taller than him. If he was looking at him from afar, he might have even thought he was a moose.

When Ilya was close enough, Shane brought his hand up to his face. He trailed the backs of his fingers against Ilya's jaw, shivering when a blast of heat hit them after the man huffed. Ilya's eyes shut. He stood still as Shane stepped closer and ran both hands along the back of his head. Shane wove his fingers through Ilya's dense but soft fur, smoothing along his nape and anywhere he could reach. Ilya leaned forward and bumped his head against Shane's shoulder, giving him more space to work his hand.

This way, Shane was able to whisper into Ilya's ear, "Forgive me."

Ilya's ear twitched, and he let out a long, deep whine. There was a crack. The fur on Ilya melted away, and the burn in Shane's arms, stretched as they were, diminished as Ilya shrank and shrank and shrank. Then there Ilya was, naked in Shane's arms, smiling at him so sweetly again.

Shane's vision blurred beneath a misty veil. "I missed you."

"You hunted a fox for me." There was awe in Ilya's voice.

"I did."

"And you took my rabbit."

"I did."

Ilya leaned forward and nuzzled his nose against Shane's.

Ilya sat at the kitchen table while Shane traced his fingers over his over chest. He stood between Ilya's knees. There weren't any marks on Ilya's body from either of the bullets Shane had put into him. Alongside his shame, Shane was remarkably curious.

"How?" He brought his eyes up to meet Ilya's, who was already watching him intensely. Ilya's hands rested on his hips.

"We heal very quickly when we are healthy."

"I've never seen such a thing. When I saw you that day…I thought you were some sort of devil. Something unnatural."

"Hm. That word comes from this, no?" Ilya tugged at the cross around his neck. "Your god?"

"Yes."

"We do not believe in devils nor men in the sky."

"What do you believe in, then? How do you explain how you came to be?"

"Long ago, the moon fell in love with a man. But she was so far away, and all he could do was sing to her every night. So, after much difficulty, she came down to meet him in a form

that could walk the earth. But she came as a wolf. He recognized her, and they mated. Their son was the first werewolf. We are all descendants of him."

"And what happened to the moon?"

"She went back after her lover died of old age. Once a month she turns black to mourn him."

Shane smiled. "Sounds romantic."

Ilya dropped the cross, dragging his hand down Shane's front. Shane shivered. "Mates are very important to us. We mate for life. The only thing that breaks that bond is death or a very painful divorce. Sometimes we meet people our body recognizes as potential mates and we imprint on them. We can choose to court them, and the other person must decide if they will accept or refuse their offer. I wasn't sure how to court a human. I didn't know much beyond what I was taught about your kind. Some things felt like rejection, but the initial bond was still there. I think you felt it, too?"

Shane blinked. "Oh, I think I did." The way he felt every time he looked into Ilya's eyes. The pain during his absence. They must have been symptoms of this…imprinting. Shane fought the urge to grab a pen and jot down everything Ilya told him. He wanted to map it out, to understand it like he did everything in his practice. If this was natural for Ilya's people, it was surely another form of science, was it not?

Ilya squeezed his hips, capturing his attention again. "You can send me away—officially. That initial bond from my side will break away and you can go on with your life. I will create a trail away from here so my brother doesn't find you. And then I—"

"I don't want you to leave."

"You don't?"

Shane shook his head. "I want…" *I want you.* It took all the courage in the world for him to admit it.

Ilya rose slowly, his muscles rippling in the dimly lit kitchen. When he was fully on his feet, their noses were almost touching, and their breaths mingled with one another. Shane's eyes fell to Ilya's lips. "Want what?" Ilya asked.

"You. I *accept* you." Something clicked into place. A pop in his ears, a buzzing gone quiet, his awareness of Ilya before him a lighthouse in stormy waters.

Ilya's eyes widened just the slightest before he leaned in and kissed Shane. It was a soft press, a sharp inhale coming from the both of them as they held on to each other. Shane's hands went into Ilya's soft curls. Ilya's arms wound around Shane's middle. They parted just enough for Shane to nuzzle Ilya's nose the same way he had done to him. Ilya let out a pleased sign before kissing him again, this time with an open mouth. He licked past Shane's lips, slotting their mouths together languidly. Shane moaned shamelessly. He hadn't done this in so long. Just the simple touch between their lips made his entire body tremble with arousal. He wanted more. He wanted everything.

Shane dipped a hand to caress the valley between Ilya's crotch and hip. "Can I?" he whispered.

Ilya stumbled back into the chair and spread his legs. "*Yes.*"

Shane fell to his knees between Ilya's legs, mouth filling saliva. He had no class with it. He dove forward and licked between Ilya's balls. They jerked back. Fascinated, Shane wove his tongue all over Ilya's scrotum, sucking Ilya's balls in and out of his mouth. He dug his fingers into where he was grasping Ilya by the thighs. The muscles clenched beneath his hold.

"*Shane.*" Ilya dug a hand into Shane's hair. He gathered a handful and tugged.

Shane took Ilya with one hand and slipped his tip into his mouth. He sucked. The salt of Ilya's precum exploded on his tongue. Shane groaned at the taste, at the feel of Ilya heavy in his mouth as he slid further and further down his shaft. The hold in his hair tightened once Shane reached the bottom of Ilya's cock, nose pressed against the curls at the base. The scent of him filled Shane's nose: strong and musky and slightly earthy. Then there was something underneath it all, something that grew stronger when Shane focused on it. He realized it was *Ilya's* scent. Not the scent of his skin or his sweat but the scent he was born with. A crisp, summer night. The wind carrying the aroma of cinnamon from an open window.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head. Shane felt like he was high. He bobbed his head deeper and faster, took as much of Ilya as he could each time and drank up every noise of satisfaction Ilya made. He was hard in his pants just from the sensation of Ilya in his mouth. He'd always enjoyed the exhilaration of making another man feel good this way, as shameful as it had felt. He loved the tremble in his partners legs, the sighs and the moans and the sweet words. Oh, how Shane loved to earn praise, to be told he was doing something right. There were no rules to pleasure, no complicated guidebook he needed to follow. All he had to do was close his eyes and act.

Ilya pulled him off and tilted his head before before dipping down to kiss him. This one was filthier than the first. It was almost all tongue. A hungry, relentless breach of Shane's mouth. Shane used his grip on Ilya's thigh as an anchor as the other man kissed him. The feel of Ilya's mouth on his—his *tongue*—was indescribable. All sensation but the static between him and Ilya fell away. All he could hear were the gentle smacks between their lips. All he could feel was the tensing of Ilya's quads beneath his hands, the slick slide of Ilya's tongue against his lips and tongue and teeth, Ilya's breaths against his face.

Ilya threaded his fingers through Shane's hair as they parted with a line of spit between them. Shane pushed forward to follow Ilya's lips but was stopped with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Can we go to your bed?" Ilya asked.

Shane answered by standing. Together they stumbled into the bedroom, trading kisses all the way. Shane couldn't imagine spending his time doing anything but kissing Ilya. Now that he'd had a taste, he wondered how the hell he was supposed to go back to work after this. He

had found their departures sweet when he'd left Ilya behind for appointments, but the thought was unbearable now. He never wanted to leave Ilya's side. Never.

Ilya pulled off Shane's clothes one-by-one. When he finished, Shane shyly went to place his hands in front of his crotch, but Ilya stepped forward and took them, laying them on his own shoulders. Ilya's eyes trailed downward over Shane's body so appreciatively Shane felt himself grow warm.

"Have you done this before?" Shane blurted.

Ilya's raised a brow. "Haven't you?"

"I have a few times. There was this wild scramble with a man from a city bar when I was seventeen. He was too old for me, but I was curious and far from home. Afterwards, I was so guilty I could barely look my parents in the eye for a week. And then there was Anthony for a little bit in college. *Then* I got scared when we were almost caught. And…well, Anthony *did* get caught with someone else. So, that's over now."

Ilya tilted his head. "Caught? What happened to him?"

Shane chewed his lip. "He's dead. They beat him so bad they gave him a contusion, his pressures went up, and they didn't get him to the hospital in time. So, he died."

"They beat him because he was caught mating with someone?"

"They beat him because he was caught with another man."

"I'm sorry that happened to you." Ilya's voice was somber, and he pulled Shane closer with hands at his waist. It was the first time he'd told anyone else about this, Shane realized, and it was also the first time he'd been comforted. He blinked away the tears that threatened to fall. He didn't want to ruin this moment because of something that had happened so long ago.

"I didn't love him," Shane said. "We were only friends at first to share notes, but then at some point we both realized we liked men, and we would…help each other sometimes. But I was always so scared during it. I could never forget what people would think if they knew. How wrong it would look to them."

Ilya's face screwed in deep confusion. "What's so bad about it?"

Shane was floored to find he didn't have an answer. He knew it was bad. He'd known since the first time he'd taken notice of other boys that he was doing something wrong, but all of a sudden he had no explanation for those feelings. It was how most moral arguments were made, weren't they? *It's just wrong. It's unnatural. It's against God.* Shane had carried this with him for so long that having someone truly ask him why was like asking him to explain why the ocean was blue instead of clear. There was a reason, he was sure, but he'd never thought to question it.

"What's so bad about this?" Ilya held him still by the chin, then dipped forward to kiss him. It was little more than a peck, but Shane's head was immediately clouded. "Or this?" Ilya used

the same hand to pull his head to the side. He pressed his lips to the crevice between Shane's shoulder and neck, then another to Shane's pulse, and with kiss by kiss, he traveled up Shane's neck, leaving tremors in his wake. "Is this wrong?"

"I don't know," Shane said helplessly, eyes screwed shut. "I—"

Ilya sucked somewhere below his ear, and a jolt of pleasure flashed up his spine. Shane couldn't help but dig his nails into Ilya's shoulders, but the other man didn't flinch. He kept going, sucking marks all over Shane's neck. A thought formed in a distant part of his brain that people would see these bruises on him at work. Everyone knew Shane lived alone. Questions would come, but for that moment he did not care.

Ilya gathered a bit of flesh and teased it between his teeth. He sighed. "In my culture, we bite to show a bond between mates has been sealed. The magic the Moon left for us, it lets us leave a permanent mark on our mates. Even when people divorce, the scar is still there, just faint. It is…euphoric for us, but I worry it might be painful for you. I don't have much knowledge about mating humans."

Shane pulled back to look Ilya in the eye. "It might be painful," he said, rubbing his thumbs over Ilya's collarbones, "but a bite is a simple wound, and wounds heal."

"I do not want it to be painful for you." Ilya's face was so torn with concern, Shane had to lean in and kiss him.

"We can worry about that later, can't we?" Shane held Ilya's face, felt the prickly stubble growing in that he hadn't gotten to shave yet. "…I want you." He kissed Ilya again until the man melted. Ilya pulled them close so their fronts were pressed tightly together. Shane's cock was trapped in the soft hold of Ilya's hip, and the pressure against it made him moan.

"How?" Ilya asked against his lips. "How do you want me?"

Shane brought Ilya's hands around his body to sit on his ass. "Here."

A soft growl, and then Ilya was pushing him toward the bed. Shane dragged himself back until he was laying on the pillows. Ilya crawled after him, eyes set on Shane with focused intent. He kissed Shane from the bottom up. Over his ankles, his shins, his thighs, his belly and chest, and then finally his lips. They kissed for a long time. When one of them thought to pull away, the other grazed their lips again and the the kiss would continue. Shane didn't know how long it had been when Ilya took him by the wrists and pinned them on either side of his head. He grinned down at Shane, a mischievous gleam to his eyes.

Shane couldn't help but laugh at him. "What?"

"As much as I would like to kiss you forever, there are other things you would like to do, no?"

"Depends on what those things are."

“Well…” Ilya moved his hands to push Shane’s legs up by his calves. Shane took hold of them behind the knees and watched, jaw slack, as Ilya settled onto his stomach and began to lick at Shane’s hole. Shane’s head fell against the pillow again as Ilya’s spread his cheeks apart and licked deeper. It was the sort of deep, comforting pleasure that settled over Shane’s body like a weighted blanket. Then Ilya pushed inside him with his tongue, and Shane moaned.

Ilya worked on loosening the ring of muscle with his tongue, and when Shane was slack, he lifted himself onto his knees. He raised his brow. “You have oil?”

Shane flushed. He didn’t use his lubricant often, but now and then he liked to put his fingers in himself. He dug through his night stand for his jug of Vaseline and handed it to Ilya. Ilya didn’t tease him, only smeared an ample amount on his fingers before bringing them to Shane’s entrance. He circled him there, a low hush under his breathe as he calmed the muscles that had tensed again.

“Did you do this part before?” Ilya raised his eyes to meet him. Shane thought for a moment he was looking for some glory in taking Shane’s virginity, but there was worry in Ilya’s expression.

Shane smiled. “Yes, but it’s been a long time.”

“Okay, I will go slow.”

“Please don’t.”

Ilya blinked at him. “It might hurt—“

“You don’t have to rush but…I don’t want it slow.”

Ilya’s eyes flickered in recognition. “Okay.” He slipped the first finger in. It entered smoothly, the work done by Ilya’s mouth making it an easy glide. Still, Shane released a long breath to relax himself. He didn’t want to waste too much time on prep—as they would if he kept letting excitement get the better of him. A pot of arousal was brewing in his gut, and with each passing minute the need for Ilya to be inside him only grew.

“Another,” Shane said. “I can take another.”

Ilya slipped another in without argument. The slight stretch made Shane groan. Ilya’s fingers were thick, and he crooked them in a way that they massaged his walls with every pull in and out.

“That’s good,” Shane whispered. His eyes wanted to shut, but he forced them open, even the tiniest sliver, so he could watch Ilya watch him. Ilya was flitting between his face and where his fingers were jammed within him.

Ilya laid a hand over Shane’s cock and against his stomach, holding him down as he began to push his fingers deeper, curling them as he stroked against his prostate. Shane let out an embarrassing keen. He looked at Ilya, expecting him to make some sort of comment about

how loud he was being, to tease him for it or ask how much louder he could get. But Ilya swallowed his noises up like a hungry fiend, only staring at him for a second before returning his attention to pleasuring Shane. He slipped a third finger inside, and Shane suddenly felt so full of Ilya, he couldn't imagine what it would be like when he got his cock in him.

"Hurry." Shane reached blindly for Ilya, who pulled out his fingers and lined himself up in front of Shane's entrance. "Okay, okay," Shane whispered more to himself. His heart was racing, and he found it difficult to breathe.

Ilya laid a hand right over his heart. The slight pressure of it, and the weight of Ilya's concerned gaze, forced Shane to take a breath.

"I'm okay," Shane promised.

Ilya hummed. Then without preamble, he slid all the way inside. Shane let go of his legs to grab Ilya's shoulders with a gasp.

This was what it was like to be full. Here, with Ilya all the way inside him, his hole stretched like a rubber band, his breath knocked out of his chest, the possessive way a part of Ilya made *space* for itself within Shane. It was overwhelming. Shane was making some sort of noise, but his thoughts were so muffled he could barely hear himself. He felt as Ilya leaned down on his hands to kiss all over Shane's face, whispering something in Russian.

When Ilya began to roll his hips, Shane slid his hands down to hold onto Ilya's back. He tried to return Ilya's kisses, but his whimpers kept crossing the space between them. And Ilya was smiling like a drunken fool, biting Shane's lips and kissing it after with every grind into Shane.

"This is what it's like to mate," Ilya whispered. "This is new to me, like it's new to you. You are my first, Shane Hollander."

Shane could barely speak. All he could do was nod helplessly. "More."

"More?" Ilya touched his forehead to his.

"More."

Ilya's speed increased until his balls were slapping against Shane with every thrust of his hips. Shane held onto Ilya's nape, gasping as he took it. He lost control of himself again, head tilting back. He moaned. Moaned when Ilya's cock began to brush against his prostate, when Ilya lowered his head to pant and lick at Shane's neck. Ilya was whispering those words again, and Shane felt so far from him.

"What are you saying?"

"Hm?" Ilya's face was still buried in his neck. He was dragging his nose across the skin, inhaling like something about Shane's scent was driving him forward.

"Tell me. I want to know what you're thinking."

Ilya drew his head back to rest his forehead on his again. His obsessive pace slowed some, but it was worth it when he began to speak. “You feel so good. I can feel you, here, in my chest and all around me. Can you feel it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the bond.” Ilya’s eyes glazed over. “You are so beautiful. She has blessed me.”

“She?”

“The Moon.”

A breathy chuckle left Shane’s lips. “You worship the moon, then?”

“Of course. She brought you to me. That is cause to worship.”

Shane’s response was lost. His body locked up with impending orgasm. “Bite me,” he said. If Ilya did it when he came, it wouldn’t hurt as much.

He watched in amazement as Ilya’s canines descended at the statement. Ilya shook his head. “It’ll hurt—“

Shane turned his head to the side and urged Ilya closer. “Please. I want to be—I want to be close to you.”

He heard Ilya sigh before he sunk his teeth into Shane’s shoulder. There was fierce pain at first, a burning in his shoulder that made him cry out. But before he could settle into the discomfort, he was swept away by an overwhelming and oppressive sense of weightlessness. He was going to fall, or he *was* falling. Distantly, he felt his arms and legs wrap around Ilya’s torso like some desperate attempt to pull himself up. All it did was heighten the sensation. And then he hit the bottom of the cavern he’d fallen into, and a mound of white-blazing pleasure took him. All his nerve endings flooded with it. He was crying.

“Oh, God,” he cried out.

Ilya pulled back. Crimson stained his teeth. He craned his neck to the side. Without question, Shane bit him back. Ilya’s entire body tensed before he broke out in tremors. He whispered something like a prayer as he shook above Shane. Shane made sure to hold him, to not release the bite until Ilya’s trembling died down.

As he did, everything fell away.

There was a thudding in his head, the rush of wind in his chest, and as Shane stared into Ilya’s eyes, he realized it was Ilya, living and breathing within him. Shane could feel what Ilya felt. The awe in him was Ilya’s mirrored back.

Ilya dropped onto his elbows and kissed him.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Here's the last bit! Thanks for waiting!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the morning, Shane had to fight his way from underneath the sheets to get breakfast for them, which Ilya consumed ravenously. When their meals settled, they took a pet nap bare to the world with only sunlight as cover. The warmth of their bond, of Ilya's soul nestled aside his, was all Shane needed to be lulled to sleep.

When they woke, Ilya greeted him with a kiss, which developed into more, of course. Before Shane knew it, his cheek was pressed against the bed, hands gripping the blankets as he arched his ass into the air. Ilya slid in so slowly it was cruel.

Shane made a desperate sound at the back of his throat. When Ilya was fully seated, he ran a hand down Shane's back and gripped his hair. He rocked his hips just so, grinding into the part of Shane that was still sore from last night. It felt like a shock through Shane's whole body, the same feeling he got when he hit the wrong part of his elbow on a hard surface. It was just on the edge of too much, too painful. But that small margin gave way for that delicious scratch on a itch Shane couldn't ever reach on his own. He panted against the pillow as Ilya drove into him over and over.

"Just the way you like it. Right, zajka?" Ilya teased. He sounded breathless, like it was an effort just to get those words out.

Shane only groaned in response. His body was working toward finishing faster than usual, but he still squeezed a hand between his hips and the bed, palming at his cock. He began to push into his hand and then back into Ilya. Ilya matched his rhythm perfectly, slamming down as Shane came up. They were both moaning and cursing in intermittent bursts of Russian and English.

"I'm gonna cum," Shane announced right as his orgasm rocked through him. Ilya followed right after, dropping down to lay his chest against his back as he pumped Shane full of his spend.

After, when they had bathed, dressed, and eaten dinner, they laid together in Shane's bed face-to-face. They had shut the curtains by then, and the only illumination in the bedroom came from the small lamp Shane's father had gifted him when he'd first moved to the mountain.

Shane traced his thumb over the swell of Ilya's lips. "What's your clan like?"

“Beautiful.”

Shane smiled. “How beautiful?”

“Very beautiful. They’re all I’ve ever known. I care for them very much. It’s why I left—to make sure harm didn’t come to them if I protested against my brother. War would’ve destroyed everything.”

“That was an honorable thing for you to do. And kind.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched like he couldn’t quite agree.

“But you still miss them.”

“Very much.”

“I’m sure there are people who miss you, too.” Shane let his hand travel to Ilya’s nape, where he played with the soft curls there. Ilya’s eyes fluttered at the touch. “Is it only your brother in charge?”

Ilya’s eyes went toward the ceiling as he thought. “Well, we have three leaders, officially: the tidemaster, tidegiver, and the tideholder. The tidemaster is the one who is in charge like you said, and the tidegiver and tideholder act as his general and his advisor.”

“Did your brother select those people already?”

“Yes.”

“And he didn’t pick you for either of those roles?”

Ilya shook his head. “There were many people on that list before he would ever consider me.”

Shane was filled with a hurt he knew couldn’t just be his own. He laid his hand over Ilya’s chest. “I’m sorry he treats you like that.”

“He wasn’t always cruel. I think he may have even loved me once, just like he loved my mother. He loved her very much, I know that for certain. It was just the two of them for so long before I came along. When my father chastised him, my mother was his safety. Then she died, and my father was always so focused on me even though Alexei was the intended tidemaster-in-waiting. But I was too young to change things or have a say.”

“And now he wants to kill you?”

A morbid smile crossed Ilya’s face. “And now he wants to kill me.” He laughed, and Shane mirrored him even though he knew he shouldn’t have.

“Maybe…” Shane said. “I don’t know, I haven’t thought much of leaving the mountain, but maybe we can leave together?”

Ilya's eyes softened, and laying this close to his face, Shane felt as if he was being drawn into a cerulean pool. "You want that?"

"Yes."

Ilya crossed the breaths-width of distance between them and pressed a long, bruising kiss into his lips.

Shane woke from a creak at the end of the bed. It was only as he raised his head that he saw that Ilya had been the one to wake from the noise, and him waking thus woke Shane. And then he saw who was standing in their room.

In front of their open bedroom door, a man stood. He was tall, broad, and dark-haired. And he was naked.

"Alexei?" Ilya shot up in bed.

Alexei didn't acknowledge Ilya. Instead, he kept his eyes on Shane, head tilted curiously in a way that spoke of danger rather than interest. He was visibly assessing Shane in his own home without a care, like he had no reason to be cautious.

"Who are you?" Shane and Ilya were dressed, but he still felt the need to pull his blanket up as if he were naked, the soft material some sort of barrier between him and the stranger Ilya recognized.

"My brother." Ilya swallowed. Then he said something in Russian, a question.

Only Alexei's eyes slid to regard Ilya. He spoke back in their shared tongue, voice like cold metal. It was only then that the rest of Shane's mind awoke and an awful realization struck him. This was the man Ilya had been running from, the one who had threatened his life. He was in Shane's *house.* The high of the past day had utterly consumed him. He'd forgotten why Ilya was here in the first place.

How had Alexei found them? How had he broken into the cabin without either of them hearing? Shane tried to think of something while the brothers conversed in clipped Russian, the tension like a knife against Shane's throat. He'd never thought anything wrong with keeping his rifle in the main room. His cabin was so small, everything seemingly accessible, that he'd thought in the event that he would need to defend himself from a person and not an animal in the woods, he would have time to grab it. But this idea had been formed on the basis his attacker would still be trying to get into his house, not be standing in his fucking bedroom.

But—even if Shane on his own was no match for a wolf man—it was two against one. If Ilya could get his brother away from the doorway, he could get his gun and even the odds a bit more. He didn't know how Ilya would feel about him pointing a gun at his brother, but the murderous gleam in Alexei's eye told him they wouldn't have much of a choice.

Shane shifted. He wanted to send some sort of signal to Ilya, anything that would get the other man to understand what he wanted to do, but then he heard noise from behind Alexei. The man had been blocking the door the entire time, and Shane had been so focused on his presence he didn't think to try and look through the gaps left. But as Shane searched for the source of the noise, he saw shadows moving.

His heart dropped. "How many people are in my house?"

Again, only Alexei's eyes shifted to Shane. He didn't answer, only said something in Russian Shane knew wasn't for him because it sounded like a command. Alexei stalked to the right, leaving the doorway open, and letting three burly, naked men file into the room.

Ilya was on his feet, snarling. One of the men stepped toward Shane.

Everything happened at once.

Ilya transformed, golden fur erupting from his body as his bones crunched and restructured themselves, the force of the shift so sudden and intense Shane felt the wave of it against his chest. Ilya lunged at the man who had moved, and then everyone else in the room, save Shane, transformed.

Shane tumbled out of his bed as his room became very crowded. It was like a massive wall of fur as they fought. Shane couldn't tell them apart in the moonlight. They moved too quickly. All he could make out were the jaws snapping, claws slashing, and the growing wounds that were appearing on the same blur of gold.

It ended just as quickly.

Ilya was thrown toward where Shane was kneeled on the ground. His body transformed back automatically. He was naked again. The shreds of his cloths bunched underneath Shane's knees. Shane reached for him, gingerly circling the scratches on his body. They weren't deep, but the exertion of fighting against three other wolves had clearly exhausted him.

Ilya moved, making to propel himself back onto his feet, but Alexei clicked his tongue and wagged his finger like Ilya was a misbehaving child.

When he spoke this time, it was in English. "I don't think so, Brother. I don't think you want us to rip you apart in front of your mate, do you?"

Ilya froze.

"Yes, that's what I was thinking. I am thinking we go back together. Nicely. I won't kill your mate if you make the journey easy for us. Otherwise we will turn around and rip his throat out."

Some combination of a sob and snarl came out from between Ilya's clenched teeth, his fangs descended fully. He hung his head. The defeat came off of him in waves.

"Don't do it." Shane laid his hand between Ilya's shoulder blades. "Don't let them take you. Not for me."

Being a practicing doctor meant Shane was well acquainted with the many ways a person could die. He'd seen the freak accidents, the factory workers who'd worked too long a shift and had fallen into the wrong machine. Those ones always appeared at the hospital half-mangled and already laid upon Death's scythe, who was only waiting for a doctor to make the declaration. He'd seen the sudden faint spells that dissolved into seizures and coma and then that eternal stillness which came from a body that heaved and groaned but lacked a spirit. Shane was astutely aware of all the ways he could die on the mountain alone. He wasn't *not* afraid of death, he just knew too well how swiftly it could take a person. How it was the only certainty humanity had.

If he had to rely on that certainty for Ilya, he would. He only wished he'd been able to see his parents one last time.

Ilya shook his head. "No."

"What?"

Ilya sat back on his heels and looked up at his brother. Even like this, on his knees surrounded by men who would kill him in a heartbeat, he looked powerful. He looked like his brother needed to bring three people to subdue Ilya. And all of a sudden Shane understood why Alexei was so hasty to end Ilya's life.

"Don't hurt him and you can take me," he said. "You can have your trial."

A trial?

A smile crawled across Alexei's face. Oh, a *trial.*

"I'm glad to see you are still as bright as you've always been," Alexei said. He snapped his fingers and his men jerked forward to drag Ilya onto his feet. They were out the door faster than Shane could think.

Shane raced to follow. "No, wait!"

A hand sank into his hair and pulled hard. Shane was yanked to a stop, neck bent at an awkward angle as he tried to stand upright where Alexei was bearing his head back. He raised both hands to scratch at the ones holding him, but Alexei's grip was like iron.

"Alexei!" Ilya shouted. "You said you would not hurt him." He had one man holding his arm, another holding the other, and the last man grabbing onto his hair in a similar way to how Alexei had Shane. The two of them were being presented like scruffed kittens in the dark, both struggling to break out of their prisons.

Alexei bared his teeth at Ilya before turning to Shane, mouth molded in a frustrated frown. "You. Stay. Do not follow or we will kill you."

"*Alexei!*"

Shane swallowed. "Let him go. We'll leave the mountain. He doesn't want your title. He won't take it from you."

Alexei's face was so close he could see the ripple of thought across his countenance as he stared down at Shane. He could feel the breath across his face when Alexei huffed. He clicked his teeth. "You are stubborn. A strong mate—better than Ilya deserves."

"He des—"

Alexei promptly raised his foot and slammed it down on Shane's shin.

Shane dropped onto the floor before the pain came. Alexei let him go easily, swishing his fingers together like he was rubbing off dirt. It took Shane a moment to understand why his body had crumpled underneath him, why he was suddenly on the ground.

And then he was screaming. He screamed so loud the sound reverberated in his head, the notes of his pain bouncing around his skull, amplifying with each passing second. He could hear nothing but the echoes of his own sobs. His guarding hold around his leg told him the part Alexei had stomped on was snapped clean. The hit had been landed so swiftly and with so much power that his bone had simply…broke. There was no protrusion through the skin, but Shane could feel the way his shin went boggy in the middle, the shifting in his limb as his bone wobbled out of place in two pieces.

He screamed and screamed and didn't hear what was shouted between brothers, didn't hear the struggle as Ilya was dragged out of the cabin.

He only felt a tug on his chest like a line being drawn, the other end moving further and further away.

Shane came to with Hayden Pike's face hovering above his own.

"Oh, thank God," Hayden said. He was kneeling beside Shane where he was still laid on the ground, hands hovering over his body like he wasn't sure to touch him or hold back lest he make whatever this was worse.

Shane blinked. Sunlight was streaming through the window. He didn't know what time the men had come for Ilya, but it had surely been hours. "I need to go," he mumbled.

"What?"

"I need to…"

"Your leg, Shane. Dammit, what do I do?"

Shane raised himself up on his arms. After a few deep breaths, he assessed his leg. "Can you go to my storage closest? I need a splint, bandages, and I have a general first aid kit, too."

Hayden was moving before he finished. He crossed through the main room to the closet, picking out things to show Shane for approval. "What the hell happened? Jackie baked this morning and wanted me to bring you some bread. And then I get here, your door's open and

you're just lying there. You're freezing, by the way. I don't know if you can take a hot bath with your leg like that but—"

"It's okay, Hayden. Just give me…" He held his hand out for the supplies.

Hayden stumbled back over, dropping everything beside him. He watched as Shane gingerly grasped his leg and forcibly set it. Shane took a moment to breathe before opening the first aid kit and cleaning his leg. He placed the splint against it and wrapped the bandages.

"Shouldn't you go to the hospital? I can take you there."

The thought of riding all the way to town made Shane's chest hurt. Besides, he had somewhere else to go. "No, I have something to do first."

"What?"

"Would you help me up, please?"

Hayden pulled him up. "Where are you going?"

Shane didn't answer. He put on his coat, grabbed his rifle and extra bullets, and limped to Daisy's pen. He didn't question the fact he was able to even stumble, all he knew was that he needed to *move.*

"Shane!" Hayden ran after him. "If you're going to the hospital I'll go with you."

"No, there's something else I have to do." Shane rode off before Hayden could follow.

Shane didn't know where he was going, but he knew how to get there. He felt Ilya like a compass, the warmth of him in his chest increasing the closer and closer he got to his destination.

Ilya's clan lived in the valley near the mountain. What amazed Shane for a moment was that he had never questioned whether people lived in this valley, and he had never gone there. He couldn't even remember wanting to go here before. But as he led Daisy down through the foliage, he sensed some door unlock. When he neared the tree line that surrounded the community, buildings materialized before him as if a veil had lifted. Lob cabin buildings dotted the land. They surrounded a massive one in the center. That…that was where Shane's heart was telling him Ilya was being kept. But alongside the homes, he could make out dozens of people traversing between them. Children sprinted, weaving through the legs of the adults closest to them or running up along fences with preternatural agility. There were a few wolves walking the paths.

There must've been wolves patrolling the woods, too. Shane gripped his rifle tighter. He would have to leave Daisy behind to get closer. He didn't know what he would find inside that house, or how exactly he would get Ilya out, but there was a biological imperative that he go after him. It wasn't a question. He couldn't let Alexei kill Ilya, not when they could just leave instead.

Shane tied Daisy to a tree, fed her an apple, and began to look for the clearest path to the main house. The more he searched, however, the more he realized it was going to be very difficult to find one. And his right leg was already growing stiff. He wasn't supposed to be walking on it and he knew it. But Shane brushed all the doctor thoughts aside to focus.

The buildings weren't evenly spaced. A tighter cluster of them were laid not far from Shane. He kept to the alleys, within the dark hideaways as he watched people pass. Most of them looked like Ilya, white and Slavic, but a few people stood out. There was one woman he saw with a group of children trailing after her. She had dark, curly hair and warm skin.

Part of him expected the people to *smell* him, to sense there was someone who didn't belong, but no one so much as glanced in his direction. By some miracle, the made it to the back of the large house. Without precursor, he rushed for the door and slipped inside. As big as the house was, the inside was free of people. There was only the faint murmuring of people from a higher level. Shane's heart told him to go down.

He found a basement door and slinked down the steps. When he reached the bottom, he was surprised to find a hallway of bedrooms, not cells. He stopped before the first one and tried the handle.

Locked.

Before he could curse himself, a voice floated through the door. "Shane?"

His heart leaped. "Ilya!"

"Shane, you need to leave!" Ilya's voice was pitched with fear.

"No, I can get you out! I can shoot the handle to break the lock, and then—"

"You think a wooden door will stop me? This is just for look, Shane. The second I step out of the house, every warrior in the clan will know."

"We can run, can't we?"

There was shuffling on the other side. Ilya was pacing. "I could feel you getting closer. I didn't want to think you would come. But you have to leave."

"And what? Let your brother kill you?"

There was silence for a moment. "There's a way of things. Order."

"Order is to murder our brothers?"

"If I fight back there will be war! People will pick sides and all the effort my people did to rebuild our clan will be for nothing."

"You don't deserve to die for your brother's paranoia! Not when I…not when I just got you." God, Shane was crying.

“Shane…please don’t cry. Everything will be okay. It will be hard at first, but the pain won’t last. You will find a new mate.”

Shane shook his head. “If I didn’t take so long to accept you…to accept who I am—“

“No.”

“We could’ve left the mountain already. We could’ve gone anywhere but here.”

“I need you to leave, Shane. *Please.*”

Footsteps came from the stairs before Shane could answer, and he couldn’t muster enough energy to find an unlocked room to hide in. Alexei and two men came around the corner.

“I had a thought…” Alexei said as he neared. “A mate bond this fresh, there’s a chance you would follow even with a broken leg. You can barely feel the pain, can you?” When Shane didn’t respond, he laughed. “It’s fine. This was just to show Ilya. I could leave his mate behind, but he would still come and try to start problems. I will have to kill you both for conspiring against me.”

The door began to rattle as Ilya yanked at the doorknob over and over. “He has nothing to do with this, Alexei! Nothing!”

Alexei’s face hardened. “I will put you both on trial, and that is that.”

The door shattered as Ilya burst through, splinters of wood flying everywhere. He walked up to Alexei, the two guards with him tensing as he approached, and growled into his face. “You let him go.”

“Did you not see what happened last time?”

“Lock him in a room. Have someone guard him at his house. Anything until the trial is over. It’s not fair for him to be here, too.”

“Not if I say you’re both conspiring against me. He is your mate, after all. You should have thought about that before you put your teeth in a human.”

Within the span of a second, Ilya lunged at Alexei and the two guards yanked him back. Alexei smirked at him.

“Go and sit in your room like a good boy. I will even let your mate stay with you, and then I will call for you when the trial begins.”

Ilya struggled against the guards holding him, but defeat quickly set in. Shane was speechless. This couldn’t truly be happening, could it?

“You should duel.”

Everyone in the hall froze at the voice. Alexei stepped aside to reveal the curly-haired woman Shane had seen earlier. She was standing at the bottom of the steps, hands clasped behind her

back patiently. Her voice had been soft, but her eyes were like ice as she stared at Alexei.

Alexei sneered at her. “Svetlana. You are not allowed down here.”

Svetlana continued on like Alexei hadn’t spoken. “As children of Grigori, the two of you both equal claim to the clan. Ilya can duel you, and the victor will take over the clan. No fighting. No war. Just you or him. Simple fix, no? And since you already want to kill him, it should be even better for you Alexei.”

Alexei’s expression wavered for a moment. “I do not need to *duel* anyone—“

“I challenge you.” Ilya’s voice was breathless. “I challenge you to a duel.”

Alexei stared at him. “You have no right to challenge me.”

“He does, actually,” Svetlana said, voice just as light as it was before. “A fair duel can be called for at any time by anyone. You must either accept or decline.”

The two guards were watching Alexei, faces carefully blank. Shane knew from then on that if Alexei denied this duel, he could kiss his position as leader goodbye. The people would always doubt him if he wasn’t confident enough to take on a challenger. Alexei seemed to realize this. He gave Svetlana once last glare before waving a dismissive hand in the air as if the whole situation only vaguely bothered him. “Sound the alarm. Let’s get this over with.”

It wasn’t until Shane was sitting in a chair at the edge of the circle that Shane realized Ilya could die anyway. But instead of some distant death from behind a locked door, he would have to watch Ilya be ripped apart. His stomach turned as the two men stepped into the circle. Hundreds of people formed the circle of about ten meters in diameter. Some sat atop roofs or stood on top of cars. A large portion of them were blatantly watching Shane. If it were any other situation, he would have been twitching out of his seat at the attention. But Ilya was trading words with Svetlana, preparing to fight his own brother to death.

Shane had no sense of either of the brothers’ talents. He couldn’t predict what was to come in the way his brain so desperately needed. He needed histories, he needed statistics and evidence and current statuses. Was Ilya injured? He had to be in a worse state than his brother, who hadn’t had to put his body on the line while his warriors had detained Ilya. And no matter his opinion on if Alexei was a *good* tidemaster, he was one for a reason. He came from a long line of them. He’d likely been trained for this, raised with the expectation of having to be the strongest no matter what.

Could Ilya overpower him? And if he could, could he kill his own brother?

Shane saw it in Ilya’s face as the coaches fell away and left the men alone in the circle. His mouth was a hard line, all the angles of his face primed toward concentration. But Shane had gotten all the experience he needed in reading Ilya—it was all in his eyes, and Ilya’s eyes were glazed over in the sort of shell shock soldiers stepping off war ships had.

They circled one another. Alexei had lost all his indignation he'd had having to answer to a duel. He was observing Ilya now with practiced calm. He was taking this serious. Ilya was strong enough that Alexei felt the need to assess the situation before attacking. That was good.

Ilya watched him back, right hand twitching at his side.

The circle was dead silent, breaths held as everyone waited for the first strike.

Alexei quirked his head to the side, tsked, and lunged. Mid-jump, he transformed. Ilya dropped low and rolled out of the way before he could take a claw to the chest. As Alexei skid to a stop and turned at the edge of the circle, Ilya transformed as well. Shane's heart began to beat faster as the brothers began to stalk one another again. Alexei's wolf, an imposing, bent canine with a midnight black coat, snarled at Ilya. Ilya didn't match his intimidation, but his lips pulled back to reveal his teeth. Alexei then snapped his own teeth at him, stepping forward as if to startle the other man. Ilya didn't fall for it, however, instead bracing each time Alexei fake-lounged.

One of Alexei's warriors shouted something in Russian, pumping his fist in the air. *Kill him,* Shane imagined. *Kill him swiftly for daring to challenge you.*

But the moment dragged on.

It came to Shane suddenly. Alexei didn't want to kill Ilya either. Sure, it was obvious he wanted Ilya dead, but *he* didn't want to kill him. Time slowed as Shane sat at the edge of the circle, the jeering of the crowd a glitching radio in his head. His stomach was in his throat. He didn't know how he'd gotten there. He was supposed to be taking appointments, making checks on children of parents who hovered cautiously around him, desperate for care but so perturbed it came from *him.* He was supposed to be on exile in a strange and desolate land, hoping the cold would fix him, that the inevitable loneliness would make him grateful for anyone, even if it was someone who wouldn't make his soul blush. Even if he had to close his eyes to bear grandchildren for his mother and father. That was supposed to be his life. Not watching the man he'd fallen in love with over the course of three weeks turn into a wolf and fight his brother.

And the thought of him not surviving shouldn't fill him with such dread.

As if with the snap of someone's fingers, Ilya and Alexei jumped at each other. The sound of vicious growling, the tearing of flesh, and spilled blood flooded the air. The cheers of the crowd grew, the wall of bodies seemingly shifting and growing as everyone huddled closer to see better.

Already Shane knew Ilya was losing physically. For everyone scratch Ilya landed, Alexei snagged two. Whatever hesitation Alexei had had earlier was replaced with brutality. He dug his claws into Ilya's side and drew back. Blood splattered over the ground.

Shane leaned forward to get out of his chair, some indescribable force within him driving him to stand and intervene.

Someone pushed him back down with his shoulder. He looked up to find an older women with light blonde hair. She shook her head. “This is a duel honored by the Goddess. You cannot stop it.”

You cannot stop it.

A loud whimper drew his attention. Ilya was shuffling away from Alexei and bleeding profusely from his shoulder. Alexei followed after him, taunting him with snarls and barks. Alexei’s warriors were nearly howling in delight. Alexei would win this, they were sure of it.

Alexei passed in front of Shane and with it Ilya’s gaze. He locked eyes with Shane for a moment that felt like a lifetime. Then something in Ilya’s body language shifted. He shook off the wounded limb like it was a scratch and not a gash and began to match Alexei’s prowling. He kept glancing away from Alexei’s face, and it took Shane a minute to realize he was looking at one of Alexei’s legs.

Shane watched Alexei, too. It was barely there, but Alexei’s right hind leg was dragging just the slightest bit behind the rest of his body. Ilya must’ve nicked a nerve at some point. But it left Alexei’s entire right side open. Shane saw the resolution in Ilya’s eyes when he decided what had to be done.

With a snarl, Alexei lunged at Ilya, paw raised in the air. Ilya moved quick as lightning, quicker than he should’ve been with his shoulder. He twisted his body beneath Alexei’s body, came up on his weak side, and clamped his jaw around Alexei’s throat.

A hush fell over the group.

Alexei was fighting, swinging his claws everywhere as he struggled to get out of Ilya’s hold. But Ilya did not let go. His face twisted in pain, eyes welled with emotion, but he did not let go. Alexei’s warriors were yelling. Some had their hands on their head. They knew it was over. Alexei’s most vulnerable part of his body was between Ilya’s teeth. His fate was Ilya’s decision now.

From high above on one of the roof tops, Svetlana shouted something at Ilya. A command.

The brother’s stopped jerking about for a moment, the both of them listening to Svetlana’s voice. Alexei’s body stilled—the fight leaving his body—right as Ilya tore his throat out.

The bits of Alexei scattered across their battle filed. Blood and flesh and tiny viscera. The crowd heaved as one, the loss of their leader rippling through them.

Alexei did not die immediately.

He lay on his side in a pool of his blood, flank rising up and down with his body’s last attempts to pump oxygen and blood. Ilya had turned back into a man. He crouched behind his brother and held his head. People began to look away uncomfortably, blood lust gone. This was a private moment. Shane knew, too, but he couldn’t drag his eyes away.

Ilya cradled his brother's head as silent tears rolled down his face. He was resigned, had been since he'd decided to use his brother's weakness against him and end it all. But there was grief there. Grief for what could have been. Grief for what had instead occurred. Alexei was already halfway gone. He did not react to his brother's embrace except to look toward the sky.

After Alexei was officially denounced dead, people carried him away for cleaning. Shane struggled to stand, wanting to go to Ilya, but Svetlana reached him first with a robe. She whispered to him, and whatever she said was enough to motivate him into squaring his shoulders and wiping away his tears. There was clear history between them, an intimacy bred off of years spent together. Shane looked around, caught returning stares, and realized there was so much he didn't know. So much he hadn't been here for. This community *knew* Ilya. There were people here—like the woman who had stopped him from getting up during the duel—who remembered what Ilya's cry was like as a baby. Most of the people here had interacted with Ilya's father on a regular basis. Even Alexei, who had planned to kill Shane just as he had planned to kill Ilya, hadn't always been cruel and paranoid. Some people remembered that, too.

Now that Ilya was safe, Shane wavered. Should he still be here? This was a private moment.

His leg ached.

"Shane." Ilya was standing before him, and Shane didn't know when he had been approached. He felt awfully nauseous. "We need to take you to the healer's house."

Shane shook his head. "You have to prepare for the funeral."

Ilya wrapped his arm around his shoulders. "You are unwell."

"You have scratches all over your body. And your *shoulder.* God, your shoulder."

"My shoulder will be almost healed by nightfall. Yours will not."

Shane was distracted from gathering a reply when he felt another warm wrap around his waist. He looked done to see Svetlana's smiling face, so much softer than how she had first appeared to him in the basement hallway. This must've been how she was with the clan's children.

"I wish we could have met on happier terms," Svetlana said. Her accent was crisp, and Shane wondered if she studied English more than anyone else. Her smile grew as if she saw his question in his eyes. "I am one of our clan's ambassadors. I make frequent contact with the human world. I tell the leaders and the rest of the clan everything they need to know about what's happening. I tell them about the human wars, the spats, the good inventions to bring to our community, and I also chaperone people when we need to buy special food and supplies."

"Svetlana is daughter of my father's tidegiver," Ilya said. He kept his eyes on the path as they walked to the healer's house. "We grew up together."

“Yes, I have many funny stories if you wish to hear.”

Shane decided he would have to take her up on her offer.

The healer gave him a drink for his pain he was sure contained some sort of opioid. But he had no complaints as the ache in his leg began to lessen and a resounding calm spread through his body.

“You should rest here while we bury Alexei,” Ilya said. He was sitting beside Shane’s cot and gently sliding his fingers through Shane’s hair. He seemed intent on making Shane fall asleep, and Shane was certainly feeling like doing so.

“No, I should be with you,” Shane mumbled. “I should meet the people important to you. I should—”

“The only thing you should be doing is resting.” He leaned over Shane, eyes growing soft and pained at the same time. For some reason, seeing Ilya here, surrounded by his home, made his image go sharp as if Shane had been seeing him with blurry edges this entire time. While Ilya had been doing his best to hide who he was from Shane, Shane had missed out on the chance of truly knowing him. “You’ve given so much of yourself for those people. It’s time you let someone else take care of you, too.”

Shane didn’t have anything to say to that, because he fell asleep.

Shane woke after sunset, and after a bit of coaxing, got Ilya to take him to Alexei’s grave. Ilya promptly denied his request for crutches, however, and got him a wheelchair instead.

There was a small clearing at the edge of their village that had become a cemetery of sorts. The werewolves didn’t use headstones, Ilya told him.

“All people return to the Moon’s sister, Earth. Headstones are useless. The spirit returns to the heavens and the body is eaten by Earth. What headstone protects is nothing but bones, the leftovers. But it has nothing of what makes you person.” Ilya wheeled him around the clearing. “When someone dies in our clan, we bury them beside the last one who died in a circle. The last person was my father, so Alexei got to go beside him. But they will reunite with Moon.”

They had buried Alexei beside his father. Grigori Rozanov had been clan leader for thirty-seven years. Alexei had barely lasted three months.

Ilya paused long enough for Shane to turn and look at him. Ilya had his knuckles pressed to his mouth, physically holding back the noise that wanted to escape him as fresh tears streamed down his face. This Shane wouldn’t sit down for. He dragged himself up and wrapped his arms around Ilya.

“They’re all with the Moon,” Ilya said after several moments of shaky breathing. “Alexei, my father, and my mother. I don’t think I ever got to say a proper goodbye.”

Shane's heart hurt for him. "Not even to your father?"

Ilya shrugged. "Maybe. But my father wasn't himself when he was dying. He forget everything. How could I say goodbye when it could not be received?"

Dementia. Ilya's father had died from dementia.

"I'm sorry."

This only reinvigorated Ilya's tears, and the sobs he tried to hide could not be kept silent any longer. He buried his face into Shane's shoulder and cried.

After, Ilya led him to his room in the main house. Shane wanted to look around, but Ilya nudged him toward the bed instead. "You rest."

As they lay side by side together, Shane thought about how much it had destroyed Ilya to have lost his family on such shaky terms every time. "I think I have to go back home."

Ilya turned onto his side to face him. "Yes, there must be things for you to take care of at your cabin. And your patients will wonder about you."

"No, I have to go back to my parents' house. I haven't seen them in so long—couldn't bring myself to face them." A selfish part of Shane wanted to ask Ilya to come with him, to shoulder some of the terror with him. He was going to tell his parents who he was, and he didn't want to do it by himself. But Ilya had his clan. It was a precarious time, and he had to be a leader.

Ilya took him by the chin and turned his head to face him. "What are you thinking in that pretty head?"

Shane couldn't help the twitch of his mouth. "You have your clan. I wanted to ask if you could come with me, but you have to be here."

"Yes, this is my clan, but I won't lead. I've already asked Svetlana if she will take my position and she agreed. She will be a much better tidemaster than I ever could have been. But she asked me to be her tidegiver, and I said yes. This still gives me freedom to go with you and come back."

Hope filled Shane's chest. "Okay."

Ilya rubbed his thumb along Shane's chin and smiled. "Okay."

Shane settled against Ilya's side and let sleep slowly take him. Tomorrow, he would worry about how he would cleave himself from the mountain, how he would journey across the country and tell his parents in person what he'd been hiding for so long. But tonight, Shane would sleep beside the man he loved.

His mate.

Chapter End Notes

You can engage with me on tumblr! dreamersreal1ty

I am also outlining a new hollanov fic where Shane and Ilya are exes who attend a witchy phd program and are currenting running against each other to be student prefect, a highly sought after and prestigious title. This won't result in any drama, mess, or stress fucking at all.

I plan to update that one as I go!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!