

my diary's full of your name on every page

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by [veiledhints](#)

Summary

The common assumption is that people must be lining up to participate in his studies. You may meet your soulmate sounds seductive on its face, after all. But once participants learn what that actually entails: years of blind dates, weekly blood draws, constant monitoring, endless poking and prodding... The fantasy collapses. Hope is appealing. Commitment to the process is not.

After watching too many participants quit before meaningful data could be collected, Shane did the only thing that made sense: He became the lab rat.

It went on for years. Painful ones. Suffering for the sake of knowledge. Maybe that's the bargain science demands. Shane is one of the most successful researchers in the field, but he isn't alone.

Dr. Ilya Rozanov has been there the entire time.

Notes

it's been like. literal years. half a decade? since i wrote fanfic...anyway, when you're inspired to write fanfic, you just have to do it. i really don't make the writing rules, but it's true. and like, what??? i was just NOT going to write about the gay hockey show????? like, be so for real.

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

“The academy is very pleased to announce that the recipient of this year’s grand prize will go to Dr. Shane Hollander for his continued research in the field of neurobiological pair-bonding.”

Shane distantly knew that after the last word, he was to stand up, walk the sixteen steps to the stage, climb the stairs, accept the honor, and proceed to give a speech. He was to thank his research partners, he was to thank his donors and backers, and he was—most importantly—to thank his mother and father for their tireless efforts. While all of this was ringing like an alarm in his head, the only thought that seemed fixed enough to grab onto was the image of his rival’s face the previous night.

Up against the wall of his laboratory. With pink bruised lips. Staring at Shane with lust-laden eyes.

The bet flashes through his mind, unwelcome and vivid. A stupid thing, really—careless bravado traded back and forth after too many late nights and too much proximity. Whoever didn’t win the award would give the winner whatever he wanted. *Whatever*, Ilya had said, voice low and amused, like he already knew where Shane’s thoughts would go.

And they went there immediately. Down dangerous, humiliating paths. Scenes Shane had no business imagining during an awards ceremony, of Ilya on his knees, on his back, mouth—God. There was only one person who ever pulled this kind of nonsense out of his head.

Usually, Shane was single-mindedly focused. Or as Rose, his research assistant, likes to say “obsessive and weirdly fixated” on his research. Truthfully, you don’t get where Shane is without being single-minded, but after a recent breakthrough, Shane has been even more obsessively focused on his findings.

The common assumption is that people must be lining up to participate in his studies. *You may meet your soulmate* sounds seductive on its face, after all. But once participants learn what that actually entails: years of blind dates, weekly blood draws, constant monitoring, endless poking and prodding... The fantasy collapses. Hope is appealing. Commitment to the process is not.

After watching too many participants quit before meaningful data could be collected, Shane did the only thing that made sense: He became the lab rat.

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Dr. Ilya Rozanov has been there the entire time.

Not *with* him—of course not. Never with him. Ilya Rozanov has made it his personal mission to beat Shane to the conclusion first. And the conclusion is simple, incendiary, career-defining: that soulmates are not metaphorical. They are biological. Measurable. Real.

This would normally be a welcome thing in research. Two brilliant minds working to further their field. Yet, the day Shane accepted the grant to research in Montreal, Ilya was granted a similar opportunity in Boston. The science world was filled with articles: *Who Will Answer the Question First? Russia versus Canada*

Shane found it all pretty ridiculous. Ilya Rozanov had his own thesis and his own methods of research. Although, sure, they both technically were asking the same question, Shane hated the idea that he *should* hate Rozanov. It was impossible to hate Rozanov. Impossible.

Though, sure, Rozanov never made it easy to like him as a person. He was... an asshole. Cocky, self-assured. A celebrity in the middle of the science world. He constantly made headlines: “*Scientist Joins President for Dinner*” or “*Russian Scientist Gains Popularity*” or “*Russian Scientist Makes Waves in Controversial Field*”. Shane preferred to stay out of the spotlight as much as possible and do his research in private. Controlled. Quiet.

The first time Shane met Rozanov, he’d been smoking outside a Cambridge bar, framed by a dim tunnel glowing amber under flickering lights. Snow spiraled through the air, caught and released by the wind, like a shaken snow globe. Shane hadn’t planned to find him there. It just happened to be the route back to his hotel.

He recognized Rozanov instantly. The day had been packed with Harvard-hosted panels, academic theater thinly veiled as funding pitches. Rozanov had been on one of them. He had been the only other neuroscientist openly discussing the possibility of biological markers for mating. Shane had known others existed in the field. He just hadn’t expected the other side of his coin to look like *that*.

Blond hair. Sharp smile. Something almost unreal about him.

Shane’s first coherent thought had been, *You’re a doctor, and you’re smoking?* He’d nearly said it, too, until Rozanov smiled at him, crooked and unapologetic, cigarette hanging from his mouth. Something snapped then. A clean, violent crack inside Shane’s head. His vision sharpened. The world slid abruptly into focus.

Now, as the announcer looks to Shane in the front row, Shane can only see Rozanov’s face, his gold chain, and his curly hair. It clicks then. In the worst possible moment.

Rozanov is Shane’s...

Shane’s mother nudges him with her elbow and he snaps out of it, smiling quickly and shaking his head. He climbs up the steps and says thank you or something to the crowd. He can’t remember what he said. This is a great honor for him, a career highlight, and he can’t even remember the words that came out of his mouth.

Belatedly, Shane makes his way off stage. People congratulate him. They shake his hand. He clutches the plaque to his chest. He wishes he was back in his lab so he could run a test that would disprove this new working theory.

First of all, if it’s true, that means Shane’s theory is correct. Pair-bonds exist. Maybe he should take a moment and think about how great—

No. The second part.

Rozanov is his mate. *Shit.*

— — —

In all of the moments that he has shared with Hollander, Ilya has never taken his time. He always wants to slow everything down, to stretch the timeline until it thins and frays, to pocket a few extra seconds that he can live off of until the next time they meet, but it never ends up that way. Hollander knocks on the door and whatever willpower Ilya thought he had dissolves instantly, like it had never really been there at all.

Hollander has this dopey, soft face that Ilya can't help but find irresistible, which is deeply concerning. Ilya has never been drawn to soft. His usual lineup of suitors has been models with sharp cheekbones, movie stars who know exactly where the camera is at all times, politicians who enjoy the danger of being seen with him. People who are practiced, curated, impressive in ways that look good on paper. Hollander, by contrast, looks like someone who forgets where he put his phone and apologizes to furniture when he bumps into it.

And yet.

They are both scientists, technically cut from the same cloth, but they move through the world in opposite ways. Ilya likes to share his findings. He likes the lights, the interviews, the talk shows where hosts lean forward and laugh at his accent and call his work groundbreaking. Ilya likes telling the world that he is working on a way to find your soulmate. This is sensational. This is hopeful. This is something people should know about.

Hollander doesn't see it that way. Hollander worries about expectations, about the damage of promising something that could ruin people if it went wrong. He talks about ethics and responsibility, about how fragile hope is once you put it into the public sphere. Maybe he's right. Maybe telling the world would send everything spiraling. Ilya has considered that possibility, turned it over in his mind more times than he would ever admit.

The problem is that Ilya has known for a long time now that the theory works.

He's known since 2007. Boston. Outside of Harvard, the air sharp and bright, his cigarette going out in his hand as Hollander appeared beside him in the tunnel, no more than ten feet away. The bond cracked inside Ilya's head so loudly that for one terrifying second he was certain something physical had gone wrong, that his spine had split clean in half or that his brain had finally betrayed him.

For months afterward, Ilya told himself that was all it had been. Just a simple medical anomaly, a burst vessel, stress. He ran tests. He had scans done. CT, MRI, even an X-ray, as if bone could explain what had happened. Anything to prove that it hadn't been the bond snapping into place, that fate hadn't chosen this moment, this man. Because there was no

possible universe in which this boring Canadian was Ilya Rozanov's soulmate. His soulmate was supposed to be a woman, for one thing. And for another—well, that part he'd never quite been able to articulate, but it certainly wasn't supposed to be *Hollander*.

And yet here they were.

Tonight, after Hollander won the award, Ilya's body had begun to buzz with anticipation, a low, restless hum under his skin. They had made a bet that whoever won would be in charge for the night and they had been seeing each other on and off for long enough now that Ilya liked to keep things unpredictable. Sometimes he added a costume, just to watch Hollander flounder. Sometimes he made Hollander take control, knowing how rare and careful that confidence was. He liked to watch him think, liked how deliberate he became when he was nervous.

Tonight, though, felt different. Quieter. Charged in a way Ilya didn't quite want to name. What would Hollander ask of him, now that he had won?

At 9:01, a soft knock came at Ilya's door.

Hollander pushed into the room past Ilya, walking straight for the edge of the bed.

Maybe Hollander was going to ask for a foot massage? It was not out of the realm of possibility. Ilya quickly thought through the scenario, and no, he wouldn't mind.

"Congratulations," Ilya says, hoping to break Hollander out of his trance. "I knew you were going to get it."

Hollander's eyes flick up to meet Ilya's. There's a moment where Ilya feels like something else may be going on in his little Canadian head. Something dangerous.

"Yeah," Hollander's voice is quiet. He kicks at the carpet. "Thanks."

"Come," Ilya commands, holding out his arms. He needs to get his hands on Hollander immediately. He stands with clear effort and comes into Ilya's arms. Ilya is ravenous suddenly, unable to keep his cool.

Although knowing that someone is your mate is a lovely thing, there is also such a thing as *unreciprocated bonding*. It's a working theory. One that Ilya has created and has done many years of research on. Being with your mate is a glorious, otherworldly experience. It's nirvana. Ilya is so satisfied after he is with Hollander that he feels like he could fly, literally. When Hollander is in his arms, when Hollander submits to Ilya... But, pair-bonding is tricky. If Ilya told Hollander the truth about them there could be a pressure for Hollander to reciprocate the feelings. There could be *unwanted* pressure to give himself to Ilya even if that was something Hollander doesn't want, would never want. It could lead to resentment, unhappiness, it could lead to the bond failing. Ilya would rather live in purgatory with Hollander if it meant that he could steal these moments with him. No, he'd never tell Hollander the truth.

Tonight though, Hollander feels different. Warmer? Is that possible? He feels closer to Ilya than before. Ilya could melt into him. Hollander's heart is beating like he's running a marathon, yet they're only standing and making out.

Ilya pulls away for a moment and gazes down at Hollander's pale face. "What's wrong with you?"

Hollander's brows knit together. "I'm fine," he snaps.

Ilya's brows raise. "You seem fine, *da*."

Hollander breaks away and swallows hard. "Just get on the bed and shut up."

Ilya grins, scurrying towards the bed. "Shall I keep my clothes on?"

Hollander shakes his head. "Off, slowly." Ilya licks his lips and begins to take his button-down off like a stripper. He watches Hollander's eyes follow the movement of each button as it reveals more of Ilya's chest. His own eyes trail down to Hollander's trousers where he can see Hollander is ready, but there's still something on his face. His expression seems to be veiled, almost anguished.

Maybe he thought that Ilya would win the award and now he feels guilty? Hm. Ilya will have to ponder this after he is done with Hollander.

— — —

Shane's eyes trace along Rozanov's jaw, down the strong line of his neck, over the little brown moles that dot his chest like a constellation he's halfway memorized without meaning to. It feels like there's a rope tied around his throat, and every time Rozanov shifts—forward, back, even just breathing—the rope tightens another inch. Shane's chest aches with the effort of pulling in air. The room is so acutely Rozanov it's overwhelming: the sharp, clean smell of him, the muted colors, the body laid out in front of Shane as if it's waiting to be mapped. The dizziness comes on fast, a low, unsteady sway that makes the edges of the room blur.

Is this what it's like? To find your pair? To be this close and feel it settle not just in your head but in your bones, in your pulse, in the awful, undeniable certainty of your body?

The thought that follows is sudden and wretched. If he and Rozanov hook up tonight, it won't just be sex. It will be different. Defining. Something that can't be walked back or softened with excuses. Something that clicks into place and stays there.

Shane stumbles backward, colliding hard with the mini fridge. The impact rattles bottles inside and jolts him fully into motion. It can't happen. Maybe it could—maybe it even should—but no. No. It can't. He can't let it.

Rozanov lifts himself onto his elbows immediately, concern sharp in his eyes. "Hollander?"

“I can’t—” Shane says, the words scraping out of him. “I have to, um. I have to go.”

“Now?” Rozanov asks, already moving to get off the bed, and Shane’s chest tightens with panic at the idea of him getting any closer.

“Yes,” Shane says quickly, edging toward the door. The rope around his neck feels unbearable now. “Sorry. Goodnight.”

The hallway is empty and quiet when he finally shuts the door behind him. Shane leans back against the wall and lets himself breathe for real. It’s the first full lungful of air he’s managed in the last twenty minutes, and it rushes in almost painfully, but it feels thin, unsatisfying. When he’d been in there with Rozanov, he’d felt like he might pass out from his head spinning, from the pressure of it all. Out here, the absence is just as dizzying, a hollow ache where something dangerous and necessary had almost taken hold.

What would that even mean...Ilya Rozanov is his pair? The one he was made for on the molecular level. Ilya Rozanov was made for *him* on the molecular level.

— — —

Ilya returns home the following morning to a Boston that feels wrong for February. The air is unusually balmy, heavy enough that his sweater clings to his lower back like a wet rag by the time he reaches his building. He’s uncomfortable and unsatisfied, the two sensations feeding off each other as he unlocks the door to his laboratory and steps inside with a simmering, unfocused irritation.

He mutters a greeting to Svetlana without slowing down and makes a beeline for his computer, shrugging out of his sweater and tossing it aside. The routine is familiar, grounding. He sits, cracks his knuckles, and pulls up the data entry interface, ready to log the collected observations from his night with Hollander.

Hollander’s body temperature was higher than average.

There seemed to be something he was holding back. Perhaps he is finally realizing that I am the better scientist.

He pauses, fingers hovering over the keys.

Ilya does not log the third thought: *Hollander’s bond felt tighter.*

Something about cataloging that last observation feels different, heavier, as though naming it would give it weight and permanence he’s not prepared to deal with. The omission leaves a sour taste in his mouth, and his mood curdles further.

Above all else, Ilya is a scientist. He prides himself on objectivity, on entering data without pretense or emotion. This is an active study, one that cannot afford to fall behind schedule simply because some of the results are inconvenient. That said, this particular detail of the

research has never been public knowledge. How does one explain that they've been quietly stockpiling data points from their unrequited pair-bond for the last seven years?

It's strange on multiple levels. One: he's been seeing Hollander for seven years. Two: he appears to be, against all logic and preference, made for that boring Canadian. And three—most troubling of all—he's fairly certain this is no longer just chemical. Whatever started in his nervous system has long since seeped into something messier. Emotional. Persistent.

Ilya picks up his phone and scrolls until Hollander's chat appears. The last message is simply a room number, a familiar shorthand between them that now feels oddly loaded. His thumbs move before he can stop them.

when can i run into you again?

He stares at the words, then deletes them. It feels too forward after Hollander's abrupt exit the night before, too much like pressing on a bruise. Maybe the sensible thing is to ignore what happened. Maybe Hollander had been overwhelmed by the award, by the attention, by the sudden weight of being seen and panicked.

Still, one thought keeps circling, sharp and insistent, refusing to be dismissed.

Why did Hollander look like he'd heard the same crack that Ilya had heard seven years ago?

— — —

The following weeks are pure agony for Shane. The days crawl by with a kind of deliberate cruelty, each one indistinguishable from the last. He feels like he's wearing a scarf at all times, wrapped once too many times around his neck, the fabric slowly tightening thread by thread until it feels inevitable that something will give, that his head might simply pop off if he breathes wrong.

For the first few days, he does what he always does. He looks for logic. He buries himself in tests, pulls long nights that blur into mornings, forgets to eat. His body becomes an afterthought, something he drags along behind his mind. On day three, he thinks he's onto something—some explanation that doesn't involve destiny or inevitability or Ilya Rozanov—but the data turns on him. His heart rate spikes when he looks at photos of Rozanov, not as an anomaly, not as a fluke, but as confirmation. Clean. Replicable. Undeniable.

Based on several—*several*—rounds of testing, Dr. Ilya Rozanov is Dr. Shane Hollander's biological pair-bond.

Shane stares at the computer screen until the words blur. The data doesn't care how he feels about it. It doesn't soften or hedge. It simply *is*. He tries to understand how he could possibly have gone this long without realizing. There have been moments with Rozanov that hovered so close to becoming something, moments that lingered despite their circumstances, despite

Shane's insistence on rational explanations. He'd told himself it was stress. He'd told himself the flutter in his stomach when Rozanov smiled down at him, or called him a good boy, was just adrenaline, just letting go and being present.

Had he really been seeing Rozanov for seven years and never once let himself think deeper than that?

The pressure he sometimes felt at the back of his skull resurfaces now, sharp in memory. Had that been the bond, nudging him forward, trying to orient him? His fingertips ache suddenly, as if they remember something his brain refused to catalogue. They remember the feel of Rozanov's skin. They remember his hair.

Fuck.

That first night in Boston comes back to him with startling clarity. The crack in his skull. The sudden, almost frightening clarity that followed. He'd thought the world looked brighter, smelled better, as if someone had adjusted the saturation. It hadn't been the city. It had been Rozanov. Just being near him. The tunnel had been dim before, oppressively so, and Shane remembers hesitating at the mouth of it, anxiety clawing at his chest. Then he'd seen Rozanov, and the tunnel had lit up, like something ancient and automatic had snapped into place. On the walk home, the dimness had returned.

Proximity.

Shane reaches for the bottom drawer of his desk and rummages until his fingers close around a familiar spine. He flips through the journal quickly, landing back in January of that year. His own handwriting greets him, steadier than he feels now.

I came across Ilya Rozanov walking home. The strangest thing happened during our encounter. I heard a crack in my head but it wasn't bad—it felt like seeing color for the first time. Lights grew brighter around us. As I was walking home, the lights dimmed again. So strange.

Shane exhales harshly.

Proximity is part of the fucking equation now?

He shoves the journal back into the drawer and scrubs a hand down his face just as a soft knock sounds at the door. Rose steps in carefully, like she can sense the fracture lines in the room.

"Hey," she says gently. "I just need to remind you that you have a flight to London tonight. That big conference about relationships. I'm sure you remember, but it's at three and your—"

"Fuck," Shane says, jolting upright. He nods too quickly, too hard. "Thank you. Thank you."

Rose nods back, then presses her lips together. "Dr. Rozanov will be there."

Shane shoots her a look. "Okay," he says, dragging the word out like it might break if he rushes it.

“Okay,” she continues, unimpressed, “well. You’re on the panel together.” She plants a hand on her hip.

Shane nods as if he hasn’t just remembered—*all at once*—that they’re supposed to sit side by side, answer questions, talk beforehand about the panel like nothing is wrong. Like the data hasn’t detonated his entire sense of self. Whose idea was this?

A sheen of sweat pools at his back, warm and unmistakable.

— — —

“Are you going to tell them that you’ve found nothing?”

Rozanov’s voice is low and gravelly behind him, close enough that Shane can feel it more than hear it. He jumps in his seat and spins around, heart slamming, and glares up at him.

“Yeah,” Shane says flatly. “I was going to admit that I’m a failure in front of an international audience. Thought I’d really lean into it.”

Rozanov’s mouth curves into a smirk, slow and infuriatingly pleased. Shane bites his lip hard, forcing the grin threatening to break free back into his mouth. Rozanov drops into the chair beside him and passes over a coffee like this is the most natural thing in the world.

All at once, Shane’s shoulders loosen. His heart rate slows. His breathing evens out, like someone has quietly removed a gun from the back of his head.

Proximity.

The realization lands with a thud. He hates that he notices it. Hates that his body responds before his brain can intervene. Does Rozanov feel this too? No. Surely not. If he did, things wouldn’t be this...carefully unspoken.

“Rozanov—” Shane starts.

“Ilya,” he cuts in immediately. “I think it’s time we start calling each other our real names, no?”

Shane’s heart jumps. Color blooms behind Shane’s eyes and across his cheeks. “You want me to call you... Ilya?”

Ilya’s face morphs for a nanosecond, but Shane catches it—relief or ecstasy?

“Yes, Shane, I do,” Ilya says, his gaze dipping to Shane’s mouth for a dangerous, lingering second.

Shane looks away abruptly, stares at the far wall, acutely aware of his body betraying him in the most inconvenient way possible. You’re getting hard because he said your name? Get a grip. Jesus.

“I wrote some talking points,” Shane says quickly, hauling the moment back to neutral by sheer force of will. He shoves his journal toward Ilya without meeting his eyes. “Just some things I think we can both agree on.”

Ilya hums as he takes it. “List is very short.”

“Well,” Shane says with a weak chuckle.

He watches Ilya read, nodding occasionally when he agrees with something. Shane lets himself look, really look—his curls falling forward, the precise clean shave, the thin gold necklace that always peeks out from under his collar. His gaze drifts to the base of Ilya’s neck, memory flashing unbidden: fingers there once, mouth there once, a mark left behind that had taken days to fade.

Ilya’s expression tightens slightly as he reaches the last point.

“A cure?” he asks. “You want a cure?”

Shane swallows hard. No, he doesn’t. He realized on the plane to London that he’d live forever like this. He’d live in agony forever, just knowing that Ilya was there with him on the planet. But maybe other people would want a cure. Maybe they are paired with someone they hate or is dangerous?

“There’s a million different reasons why someone may...not want to be bonded.” Shane shifts his weight in the chair.

Ilya studies him now, eyes sharp, searching. “Would you?” he asks quietly. “If it was possible. If you had a pair. Would you want the option to leave?”

Shane’s brow furrows. The truth presses up hard against his teeth—*I’d rather die than live without this bond to you*—but diplomacy gets there first.

“I can’t make that decision. To not study it just because I wouldn’t want it personally, is not...” Shane fades off considerably less strong than he started.

Ilya nods once, as if that settles something. “Me either, but is good idea for press.”

Shane frowns. He should have known it was an angle—a sensational topic to get the media interested in them this weekend.

“You’re an ass.”

“What? I’m just getting to know my co-panelist.”

Shane suppresses a smile again as he reaches for his journal, their hands skim over each other. Time morphs into long seconds of contact. Then Ilya moves his hand away.

“I think we should go,” Ilya says sweetly. “Big crowd waiting for me and you, Dr. Hollander.”

— — —

Shane has been through this enough times now to know how it goes after these conferences. Because they're researching the same thing, they're always invited to the same cities. Copenhagen. Boston. London. It creates a pattern that Shane pretends not to notice until he's already inside it again.

Panels during the day. Polite distance. Glances that linger a second too long.

Then night.

They end up in one of their hotel rooms, always undecided until the last minute whose it will be. They hook up. Shane leaves Ilya's room quietly, efficiently, like an assassin slipping back into the dark. Every time, he walks away with a new hollowed-out space in his chest, another small, precise wound he tells himself will close on its own.

Tonight is different.

Tonight he feels like there's a live wire threaded through his hands and feet, vibrating just beneath his skin. Like if he doesn't see Ilya he might combust. Burn through the hotel room, through the building, leave nothing behind but ash and glowing embers where his restraint used to be.

The text comes without warning. *I'm here.*

Before Shane can talk himself out of it, before he can line up all the reasons he shouldn't, he's opening the door and letting Ilya in. The heavy, suffocating weight of missing him evaporates instantly, chased out of the room like it never stood a chance.

They just look at each other.

Then Ilya closes the distance in two long strides.

The kiss is hard and desperate, all teeth and breath and pent-up need. Shane sways under it, dizzy, as Ilya's hand maps his neck and back like he's reacquainting himself with familiar territory, like he's been thinking about this just as much.

"Please," Shane hears himself say, the word slipping out before he can stop it.

"What do you need?" Ilya asks against his mouth, voice low and controlled in a way that makes Shane ache.

"You," Shane says, the answer immediate, terrifyingly easy. "I need you."

Ilya doesn't hesitate. He lifts Shane with practiced ease and settles him onto the bed, surprisingly gentle about it. From above, Ilya looks unreal. Almost like a statue come to life.

Broad shoulders, solid presence, the kind of assurance that fills the room without effort. Shane's chest tightens with the thought that flashes unbidden through his mind.

This man is mine.

The realization hits like a slap.

No. He's not.

"What's wrong?" Ilya asks, already catching the shift. Shane can't answer. Ilya's hand comes up, fingers firm on his jaw, tilting his face upward. "Shane."

Shane's vision blurs, his throat thick. "Nothing," he says, even though it's obvious he's lying.

Ilya's thumb strokes along his jaw, slow and grounding. His face gives nothing away, smooth and unreadable, and Shane hates how badly he wants to know what's going on behind it. Maybe Ilya is bored. Maybe he's tired of Shane's constant starts and stops, his inability to just let things be.

Then Ilya speaks.

"How long have you known?"

The words slice cleanly through him.

"What?" Shane asks, his voice trembling despite his best effort. "Known what?" He hates himself for playing dumb, but shock has taken over, driving the wheel.

"Say it," Ilya says, calm and commanding.

Shane wrenches his jaw free and turns away. There are two options. He could lie and blame jet lag, stress, the pressure of the conference. Or—

"Tell me you know what we are," Ilya says quietly. There's no anger in it. Just certainty.

Shane tries to lie. He really does. He forms the words in his head, feels them line up behind his teeth. They never make it out.

"A month," he whispers to the floor. "After the award ceremony."

"Ah," Ilya says, shifting to sit beside him on the bed. "I was right."

Shane's head snaps up. "You knew?"

Ilya nods once. "Yes," he says simply. "For long time."

The wire inside Shane hums, tight and electric, as the truth finally lands between them.

A million questions crowd Shane's mind all at once. *What do we do now? Do you feel the same way? Is it agony for you, too?* But they scatter the moment Ilya takes his hand and lifts it, presses a soft, reverent kiss to Shane's knuckles.

“I was just as surprised as you,” Ilya says quietly. “I thought I was dying for a while. The snap in my head was so violent—I waited for it to finish me.” He exhales, thumb tightening gently around Shane’s hand. “I ran many tests. Over and over. I knew all along, though.” His grip firms, anchoring. “I knew it was you. I knew you were my pair. It just took some convincing.”

“I ran tests, too,” Shane admits, the tension finally breaking into a soft, incredulous laugh. Ilya laughs with him, low and fond, and for a moment the weight lifts. “That night in Cambridge?” Shane asks.

“Yes,” Ilya says without hesitation. “That night.”

Between them hangs the same shared realization, heavy and unmistakable: *All that time. All of it wasted.* And yet, somehow, also necessary.

Ilya studies Shane’s face like he’s committing it to memory, like he’s been doing so unconsciously for years already. Shane wishes briefly and selfishly that this could be normal. Simple. Something that could be explained away with a sentence or two.

“I wouldn’t change anything, Shane,” Ilya murmurs, and it sounds like a confession he’s been holding onto for a very long time. Maybe it’s meant just as much for himself.

“Me either,” Shane says, the certainty in it surprising even him. “Never.”

Ilya’s smile spreads slowly, radiant and unguarded, and for the first time since Boston—since that crack, that sudden flood of color—Shane feels the pressure ease instead of tighten. Not gone. Just settled.

The scarf loosens.

And for once, nothing feels like it’s about to break.

End Notes

i love this silly little show!! tysm for reading!

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