the heart is hard to translate

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the heart is hard to translate

by catknives

Summary

Shane is twelve when he realizes he can understand Russian.

Or, in a world where you can understand whatever language(s) your soulmate speaks, it takes Shane and Ilya an embarrassing amount of time to realize they're soulmates.

Notes

Title from *All This And Heaven Too* by Florence + The Machine. Which is also kind of the theme song for this fic, so give it a listen if you like.

This is a mix of show and TV canon, and also plays around a little bit with the timeline. Soulmate AUs will do that to timelines.

Also this is not beta read, so please forgive any mistakes. My beta reader is me in the future rereading my fics.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane is twelve when he realizes he can understand Russian.

He's at a hockey camp in Vancouver, his first one so far from home. He's buzzing out of his skin with excitement and pride, because getting in shows that he's good at hockey. Not just Ottawa good, but *good* good. Like, internationally good.

There are kids from all across the world at the camp. He meets a boy from France named Pierre, and is excited that he can speak the same language as someone from so far away. But then Pierre laughs and makes fun of his accent, and Shane isn't as excited anymore.

There's only one other kid from Ottawa at the camp, Brian Guthrie, but he and Shane play for different clubs and aren't really that close. Plus, he's obsessed with showing off to the Swedish players that he can understand their language, and Shane decides that Brian Guthrie is tacky.

So what, Brian Guthrie understands Swedish. It's not like he can *speak* Swedish, which would actually be cool. He just has a soulmate who speaks Swedish. Sorry if Shane isn't impressed that some random Swedish girl speaks Swedish.

Three days into the camp, he goes to face off against Pyotr Sokolov, one of several Russian campers. Unlike Shane, Pyotr has already hit puberty, so he stands at least a foot taller. They're supposedly the same age, but Pyotr practically looks like he could be his babysitter.

"Wow, wasn't the under 10 camp last week?" Pyotr laughs as they face each other. *"How old is this kid?"*

"I'm twelve," Shane answers. He's pretty sure Pyotr was making fun of him rather than genuinely asking, but it's hard for him to tell sometimes.

Pyotr looks up at him in confusion, and Shane is even less sure now whether or not it was a chirp. Did he not expect Shane to answer? Pyotr's confusion works out in Shane's favor, though, because he wins the face-off. He ends up scoring three goals in the game, and he feels like he's on top of the world.

Later, as he unlaces his skates on the bench in the locker room, Pyotr approaches him. He still looks confused, which makes Shane feel confused. He knows he hasn't hit a growth spurt or anything yet, but surely he doesn't look *that* young?

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" Pyotr asks. Shane furrows his brow.

"Is this some kind of trick question?"

"No. Can you understand what I'm saying right now? And what I said at the face-off?" Pyotr asks again. For someone asking such a weird question, he sure sounds annoyed.

"Um, yeah?" Shane confirms. Pyotr's eyebrows raise, and Shane feels like he's missing a crucial piece of information here. "Why does it matter?"

"Because I'm speaking Russian."

Shane drops his skate, the loud clatter as it hits the ground causing several other boys to look their way. He nods at them, and soon enough no one is paying attention again. Good.

"Because your soulmate, yes? I am guessing," Pyotr says, in heavily accented English this time.

Holy shit. *Holy shit.*

Shane has a soulmate. His hand flies to his right ear, to the skin right behind where a soulmark would appear. Could appear, apparently, if he's lucky enough to meet her, and fall in love with her.

One in a hundred, they say. About one in every hundred people has a soulmate. The odds are not in anyone's favor, and yet somehow they worked out for Shane. But, shit, she speaks Russian? Does she live in Russia?

"Hollander, hello, are you okay?" Pyotr asks, and Shane realizes he's gone nonverbal. He needs to stop doing that. His mom is always getting on his case about it.

"Yeah, sorry. It's just a big thing to find out, you know?" He laughs to cover his sudden burst of insecurity.

"*I guess*," Pyotr shrugs, switching back to Russian. *"I don't think I have a soulmate. Or if I do, she must speak Russian."*

Now that he's heard Pyotr speak English, Shane realizes the difference. He can't believe he didn't notice Pyotr was speaking a completely different language at first. It's different than when someone speaks French, because he also speaks French, so his brain just switches to French mode when he needs it to.

But with Russian, it's different. He can understand everything Pyotr says, but it's weird, almost like he's reading subtitles on a foreign film. Except there's no subtitles, it's just his brain. If he thinks about it too hard he'll get a headache.

He can't *speak* Russian, he knows that. He's pretty sure the only Russian word he knows is "vodka." If Pyotr asked him to repeat anything he said back, he wouldn't be able to do it. It's an odd feeling.

Pyotr turns away, probably bored of the way Shane's gone quiet again, and a strange anxiety rushes through him.

“Pyotr, wait,” he calls out. Pyotr turns to look at him, his smile looking a little forced now. Shane rushes towards him, hushes his voice so no one else can hear. “Don’t, uh, don’t tell anyone, okay?”

Pyotr looks at him like he’s crazy, but he nods. Relief floods through him. He isn’t sure why he doesn’t want anyone to know, but something about this feels private. Pyotr walks away then, and he and Shane only interact a handful of times for the rest of camp.

When he gets home, he lays in bed and tries to picture his soulmate. He doesn’t know how to imagine someone as Russian, so he just imagines a generically pretty girl wearing one of those Russian fur hats he’s seen in movies.

His stomach feels uneasy with the image, but he can’t pinpoint why.

Shane doesn’t think about his soulmate for a long time.

He buys a book about learning Russian when he’s fifteen, but finds it to be ridiculously difficult. When he looks it up online, he reads several articles about how—ironically—understanding a soulmate’s language can actually make it more difficult to learn, because your brain keeps trying to translate the foreign words instead of letting you learn them. He gives up after that.

He doesn’t tell his parents about his soulmate. Every time he tries to picture her, he gets uncomfortable and anxious, and he doesn’t feel ready to answer the hundreds of questions his parents would inevitably ask. His mom would probably make him sign up for some sort of study, god forbid.

When he plays in the World Juniors at seventeen, he considers his ability to understand Russian a secret asset more than anything else. The players don’t know that he can understand the little things they say to each other.

When he finds Ilya Rozanov smoking outside the rink and struggles to explain the no smoking rule, he briefly curses himself for giving up on learning Russian so quickly.

“Sorry,” he laughs, awkward. “I don’t speak any Russian.”

“Is okay,” Rozanov replies, unimpressed. “I understand English.”

“Right, yeah, of course. I wasn’t trying to comment on how well you speak—”

“No, not speak. I understand English. My soulmate speaks it,” Rozanov interrupts, and Shane feels as if the ground falls out from under him.

Ilya Rozanov has a soulmate. Why does that information feel like a tectonic shift?

“Oh wow, I—that’s cool.” The words seem to slide out of Shane’s mouth before he’s even fully aware of them. “Do you—do you know her? I mean, do you—”

“I have not met her yet, no,” Rozanov replies, easy. Like sharing this sort of information is nothing new. Like it’s just another detail about him.

Shane isn’t sure what to say, after that. A small part of him is annoyed when he realizes that Ilya apparently understood everything he said about not smoking and clearly ignored it.

“Do you have one?” Ilya asks, taking another drag of his cigarette.

“A cigarette? No, I don’t smoke, and even if I did you’re not supposed to smoke here,” Shane replies, annoyed. Ilya has the audacity to laugh at that.

“No, not a cigarette,” he smirks, putting his cigarette out on the No Smoking sign. Shane doesn’t know whether he should be pleased that he’s no longer smoking or annoyed at the blatant disrespect of the rules. “A soulmate.”

Shane startles. No one has ever asked him that so bluntly. It’s actually considered rude, in some circles. Then again, Rozanov clearly doesn’t give two shits about rules.

Should he share that he has a soulmate, too? He’s never told anyone before, not even his parents, but Rozanov looks oddly invested in his answer. Maybe even hopeful. But Shane is terrible at reading people’s emotions, so who knows.

He’s not sure what exactly it is that makes him tell the truth. There’s something earnest in Rozanov’s eyes, something that makes him feel like this secret will be safe with him.

“Uh, yeah, I do,” he answers, voice shakier than he’d like. “Haven’t met her yet, but she’s out there somewhere.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows raise at that, but he doesn’t say more. That curiosity is still there, like there’s something Shane isn’t saying. Technically there is, he guesses. But something stops him from sharing that his soulmate speaks Russian. He doesn’t want to examine it too closely.

“Don’t tell anyone, though,” Shane rushes to add. “It’s, uh, not something I like people to know about.”

“Ah, there goes my best gossip,” Rozanov replies, monotone. “Was going to tell all of Russia that some random hockey player in Canada has soulmate.”

Shane laughs, anxiety easing just a bit. They maintain eye contact, Rozanov’s smirk fading into a shy smile. It’s freezing cold, but Shane feels warm in Rozanov’s presence. As soon as the thought hits, the anxiety comes back in full force. He has to get away from here.

“I, uh, my team.” He jerks his thumb over his shoulder, as if he’s expecting the entire Canadian team to be standing behind him. “I should—it was nice to meet you, though. Good luck with—yeah.”

He dashes away before Rozanov can reply. Which is a good thing, probably, because even though he can understand English, Shane isn’t sure he actually managed to say anything coherent.

He doesn't see Rozanov again until the day of the draft, and he's so pissed about being second pick that he doesn't even get a chance to say much more.

When they chat later on the floor of a hotel gym, sharing a water bottle, Shane can't help but feel drawn to Rozanov. He licks his lips after taking another swig of water, chasing any taste of the other man left behind. He's a little disappointed that he only gets the taste of his own sweat. Rozanov hasn't stopped watching him for a single second.

"Did you find her yet?" Rozanov asks, breaking the silence.

"Who?"

"Your soulmate," he answers, like it should've been obvious. Shane feels anxious, suddenly. He doesn't really like to think about her.

"No, not yet. I had a girlfriend up until recently but, uh," he pauses. He doesn't want to say that he knew Jessica wasn't his soulmate because she didn't speak Russian, so he just says, "it wasn't her."

"Ah, me neither. She's probably in Canada, though," Rozanov shares, and the piece of information feels intimate. *Like we shouldn't be talking about this*, Shane thinks. He continues the conversation anyway.

"Oh yeah? How do you know that?"

"She speaks English and French," Rozanov sighs, like he's disappointed about it. Shane's stomach does something weird at that. "Canadian French, I think. Hard to tell, is weird."

Shane wants to say that he understands, that he's tried with limited success to figure out if his soulmate is from Russia or from another Russian-speaking country, but that would require him to share more information about her, and he doesn't want that. He doesn't want her here, in the space between them. The thought terrifies him a little.

"I should probably get back to my room," Shane says, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice. He thinks he succeeds. Mostly.

When he gets to his room, the back of his ear itches. He wonders if it means his soulmate is thinking about him, wherever she is. He kind of wishes she would stop.

When they meet again almost a year later for a commercial shoot, enough time has passed that Shane feels more relaxed. He and Rozanov can't stop laughing, and when the shoot ends he sort of even laments the fact that they'll have to go back to being rivals soon.

And then Rozanov approaches him in the shower, and he isn't sure how they can possibly go back to being rivals. He wants to forget it ever happened, maybe even to never see Rozanov again.

And yet he tells Rozanov his room number. And answers the door when he knocks. And slides to his knees so easily, taking Rozanov's cock into his mouth. He's never done this before, but it scares him how much he likes it.

He almost whines when Rozanov finishes, because he doesn't want to stop. But then Rozanov is returning the favor, and Shane feels hot desire race through him in a way it never has before. He finishes embarrassingly quickly, but he doesn't care. He's never had an orgasm that good.

They laugh together, after, and it feels natural. Easy.

"So, you're not gonna tell anyone about this, are you?" Shane asks, just to be sure. It's a strange echo of the words he'd said before, when he asked Rozanov to keep his secret about his soulmate.

"Me? Yes, Hollander, I'm going to tell everyone," Rozanov says, looking annoyed.

"Because no one can know," Shane continues. He can't look at Rozanov right now, spread out on the bed like some sort of sex god. It makes his brain go fuzzy.

"*No shit,"* Rozanov replies, and Shane freezes. He said it in Russian, which means Shane isn't supposed to understand. He suddenly overthinks his facial expression. Is his face giving away that he understood? Rozanov goes on, though.

"Hollander, look, I'm not going to tell anyone, okay?"

"Okay," Shane agrees.

Rozanov leaves after that, and Shane still can't look at him as he gets dressed. He looks at the ceiling for a bit, then at Rozanov's belt when it's time to say goodbye. Anywhere but in his eyes.

"Holy shit," Shane says to himself once Rozanov leaves. He isn't sure when they'll see each other next, or if there will even be a repeat of tonight's activities. Who knows, one of them might find their soulmate before then.

His stomach turns. Somehow, even here, she worms her way in.

Shane lays in bed, still naked, mind spinning out about his soulmate. Will he have to tell her one day that he hooked up with Ilya Rozanov? Or that he wants to do it again?

Well, he hasn't met her yet. So she'll have to forgive him for doing some—experimenting in the meantime. It doesn't mean anything. She's a foregone conclusion. She's his soulmate, so he knows that he'll love her eventually, but right now the thought of her still makes him feel a little sick to his stomach.

It's probably just nerves. He's going to love her. He has to.

When he sees Rozanov again at the All-Star game, Shane feels inexplicably nervous.

As they sit for the press conference, he lets his mind slide into the same place it usually goes when he has to do press. He puts on a smile, laughs at the jokes, and pretends like he loves being there.

When a particularly complicated question gets thrown Rozanov's way, Shane can see him trying to formulate a response. It occurs to Shane for the first time that Rozanov has done what he never managed to do, learn his soulmate's language.

He can tell Rozanov is struggling to find the words to answer, so he jumps in. Rozanov looks at him gratefully, and he feels a tap to his foot as their shoes line up. It feels like every nerve ending in his body is centered on that point.

It feels impossible to resist later, when Rozanov gives him his room number.

As he makes his way to Rozanov's room, he thinks again of his soulmate. He definitely hasn't met her yet, though it would be hard to tell.

Despite centuries of study, no one has been able to exactly discover what makes a soulmark finally appear. Some couples get them immediately, and others don't appear until years into a relationship. He's even heard of some couples who develop theirs at different times.

No, he definitely hasn't met her yet. He doesn't know any girls who speak Russian. So that's that. She's out there somewhere, waiting for him. And he's here, in an elevator, on his way to (hopefully) hook up with Ilya Rozanov again.

He pushes down the feeling of guilt. He doesn't owe her any loyalty, not yet. This stuff with Rozanov doesn't mean anything, anyway. They're both just biding time until they meet their soulmates.

When he gets inside Rozanov's room, it's only a matter of seconds before they collide, lips bruising, Rozanov's tongue insistent in his mouth. It feels exciting in a way none of his kisses with his exes ever have.

After they make plans to fuck in Montreal, Shane is more than happy to take Rozanov's cock into his mouth again. He's been practicing on the dildo Rozanov made fun of him for, and after several extremely embarrassing attempts he is glad no one saw, he feels like he can try out the new trick he learned.

His first attempt at deep throating an actual cock is less than successful. Rozanov is bigger than his dildo, unfortunately, and it takes Shane a few moments to move past the embarrassment of choking on Rozanov's dick.

His second attempt is significantly better, if the way Rozanov is cursing is any indication. He feels a hand in his hair, guiding his head, and loses himself to the pleasant buzz in his brain.

"Fuck, never had a mouth this good before," Rozanov grunts in Russian. Shane is almost positive he would not have said that if he knew Shane could understand him. He preens at the praise silently, both because he doesn't want to give any indication he heard it and because his mouth is otherwise occupied.

Later, as Shane sits against the headboard and comes down from the fuzzy afterglow of the amazing blowjob he got as a reward, Rozanov turns to him.

“Thank you again, for earlier. Sometimes is hard to find the words in English. I am slow learner.” Rozanov sounds almost self-conscious, and Shane simply refuses to let that be.

“No, no. Your English is really good. I know it’s hard to learn a language that your soulmate speaks.” Shane is afraid to say more, but he lets the implication hang there. That maybe he has a soulmate that speaks another language, too.

“Yes, well, is also for my soulmate, so,” Rozanov says, like it’s obvious that he would learn English for her. Shane feels the same guilt from earlier seep through him. He hasn’t learned Russian; he gave up. Why did he give up?

It occurs to him, then, that maybe Rozanov could give him some insight on his soulmate. They’re not the same person, obviously, but they do speak the same language.

“Do you hope that she’s doing the same? Learning Russian for you?”

Rozanov considers the question before answering.

“I guess maybe. I know she will understand me no matter what language I speak. But sometimes it is nice to have conversation in Russian,” Rozanov says, looking sad for a moment. “I only speak Russian with my father and brother. It would be nice to speak it with someone who—”

He cuts himself off, looking away from Shane. He takes a deep breath.

“Someone who what?” Shane asks, voice gentle.

“Nevermind, is not important. It would be nice, but I would not blame her if she did not.” Rozanov says. Shane hopes his soulmate has the same mindset.

“You speak French, right?” Rozanov asks, like he’s just remembering it.

“Yeah, I do. I don’t use it as much as English, but I’m fluent.”

Rozanov nods at that, considering his answer. Shane is confused for a moment, before he remembers. *Rozanov’s soulmate speaks French.*

“I can’t, like, teach you or anything. If that’s why you’re asking,” he clarifies. He’s very good at learning, but not so much teaching. In any subject.

“What? No, I don’t want you to teach me French,” Rozanov replies, sounding put out. Shane feels stupid suddenly.

“Would you want your soulmate to learn French?” He asks.

Shane thinks about it. Honestly, while he would like to have a language in common with her, he doesn’t really care whether it’s English or French. Maybe it’ll even be Russian, if he can

get his ass into gear and actually learn the damn language.

“I think as long as she spoke English or French, it’d be fine. I don’t need her to speak both,” he answers. Ilya nods, but doesn’t say anything else. Shane takes it as his cue to get dressed and leave.

They exchange phone numbers, and Shane can’t keep the smile off his face as he rides the elevator back down to his floor. Two weeks, and then Rozanov will fuck him. He tries not to feel guilty about the thought that crosses his mind next.

He really hopes he doesn’t meet his soulmate in the next two weeks.

He doesn’t meet his soulmate in the next two weeks. He also, notably, does not meet Ilya Rozanov, due to bad weather.

He doesn’t see Rozanov again until the NHL awards, and even then it’s hard to track him down. He has to get through crowds of people congratulating him for Rookie of the Year, but as his eyes scan the room, he doesn’t see Rozanov anywhere.

Eventually he gives up looking and resolves to get some air. The shot he did with Scott Hunter is maybe affecting him more than he thought.

It figures that that’s where he finally runs into Rozanov. He looks pensive, staring at the Vegas skyline as he smokes a cigarette.

Their conversation is tense in a way it hasn’t ever been before. Rozanov seems on edge, and when he yells at Shane that not everything is about him, Shane feels about two feet tall.

He knows not everything is about him. It almost never feels like it’s about him, not really. It’s sometimes about the idea of him, of what he can do or sell, but it’s never about *him.* Shane.

For the first time, he finds himself wishing she were here. His soulmate. Maybe she would see through the Shane Hollander brand, to the lonely, anxious person underneath the hockey gear and sponsorships.

He realizes he was maybe subconsciously hoping Rozanov could also see him. It seems a silly thing to want now. They are so different. Rozanov is heading back to Russia for the summer, and he has three more commercials to film before he can escape to his cottage.

“I guess I’ll, uh, see you next season?” He offers his hand for a shake, telling himself that this is probably for the best. He should distance himself from Rozanov, put an end to whatever this thing between them is. It can’t go anywhere.

When Rozanov pushes him against the wall and crushes their mouths together, Shane can’t help but kiss back. He doesn’t understand what went wrong tonight, but this he does understand. Desire, want.

It takes him a moment to remember where they are, and when he does he pushes Rozanov back. What is he doing? He just resolved himself to end this thing between them, and now

here he is sticking his tongue down Rozanov's throat?

He storms away, waves off the "see you next season" Rozanov calls after him.

Whatever, it's bullshit. He has a soulmate anyway, and he should really focus on finding her. His stomach turns. Maybe he should just focus on hockey for now.

In the two years between that kiss at the NHL awards and the next time he and Rozanov hook up, Shane does not find his soulmate.

He does find some things out about himself, however. Primarily that he really, really likes being fucked. Specifically by Ilya Rozanov, unfortunately. He'd always thought people were exaggerating about how much they love sex, but he thinks maybe he gets it now.

They continue hooking up over the next two years, and the whole time Shane feels like there is an expiration date on this. One of them is bound to meet their soulmate, and then it'll be over for good.

But every time he meets up with Rozanov, he finds himself drawn more and more to him. Each clandestine hookup is like another hit of a drug he's only getting more and more addicted to. He tells himself dozens of times that he's going to end it, but he never manages to do it.

It all comes to a head in Boston, when Ilya asks him to stay the night. It's a bad idea, he knows it's a bad idea, but he agrees to it anyway.

And, fuck, it's really good. Not just the sex, which is, as always, stellar. It's also that he finds Ilya easy to talk to in a way that most people aren't. And it doesn't escape his notice that Ilya stocked up on ginger ale before he came over. It's a small gesture, but it feels important

As they lounge on the couch, watching hockey, Shane feels like they're in a universe of their own making. Tomorrow he will start searching for his soulmate again. Today, he can have this.

Ilya, of course, takes the opportunity to bring her up.

"Have you found her yet?" He asks, looking at the TV as if he's asking about the weather.

"No, uh, I haven't. Not yet," Shane answers. He's immediately uncomfortable.

"There is a girl I like here very much, Svetlana," Ilya says. Shane feels inexplicably annoyed at that.

"Oh? Is she your, uh, your soulmate?" He asks. Is it possible Ilya found his soulmate? And if so, why did he invite Shane over?

It would be a pretty shitty thing for Ilya to do, he thinks. Uncharacteristically shitty.

“No, no, nothing like that,” Ilya clarifies. Shane hates that he feels relieved. “She is old friend from Russia. Sometimes we fuck. But her soulmate speaks English, too. So we both know it will never be more than that.”

Shane has absolutely no idea where this conversation is going. If Ilya is trying to imply that the same is true for him and Shane, he doesn’t need the reminder. He’s known the whole time that they’ll never be more than this.

“And you’re not looking for your soulmate?” he asks. *Say no,* he thinks. *Say no, so I can feel less guilty that I haven’t been looking at all.*

“Mmm, I think I will find her eventually,” Ilya replies with a sigh. “But you know me. I’m lazy.”

There’s that self-deprecation again. Shane kind of hates it when Ilya talks about himself like this, especially when it’s so incredibly untrue. Ilya learned English for his soulmate. That’s the opposite of lazy.

“I don’t know that side of you at all,” Shane says. He hopes that conveys all that he feels about this. The smile Ilya gives him in return is soft in a way it never is for the cameras. Shane finds he likes it better than the rest.

The oven alarm goes off, and Ilya grabs their tuna melts. As they eat, Ilya brings the subject back to Shane’s soulmate.

“Are you looking for her?” He asks. “Your soulmate.”

Shane nearly drops his can of ginger ale. How is he supposed to answer that? He can’t tell the truth, obviously.

“Oh, yeah, sure. When I have time,” he says noncommittally. Ilya doesn’t appear to be buying it.

“I never hear about you with girls,” he says. It’s not an accusation, but it still makes Shane uneasy.

“Yeah, well, that’s private. Same reason nobody knows I have a soulmate,” he shrugs. Ilya nods at that, and Shane still isn’t sure he’s being convincing.

Ilya’s phone rings, putting Shane out of his misery. Ilya excuses himself to the other room. The tuna melt turns sour in Shane’s stomach as he quickly realizes he can hear Ilya’s conversation. Ilya isn’t being quiet, but that's because he thinks Shane can’t understand. Shane really, *really* shouldn’t be hearing this.

It sounds like something is wrong with Ilya’s father. He’s gathered bits and pieces over the years, and knows that Ilya’s relationship with his family back in Russia is tenuous at best. He suspects it’s worse than Ilya lets on, and this phone call only proves that.

When Ilya returns to the couch, Shane isn’t sure what to do. He should tell Ilya he can understand Russian, right? It’s long overdue, and now it’s reached the point where he’s

invading Ilya's privacy.

But it seems like a bad time. He looks shaken, and Shane finds that instead he wants to make sure Ilya is okay.

"Are you okay? It sounded like something was going on with your father," Shane says carefully.

Ilya looks at him intently, then, searching his eyes. Shane isn't sure what exactly he's looking for, but he keeps his face purposely blank.

"Ah, you speak Russian, now?"

Fuck, Shane should really answer that honestly. Something stops him, though. Maybe it's self-preservation. Maybe he's a coward.

"I know the word for father," he ends up saying, which isn't technically a lie. He does know the word for father, and a few other words that he's picked up. Despite swearing to himself that he would learn Russian, Shane hasn't been able to do it. It feels wrong to do it for her.

Maybe there's someone else he'd do it for.

The thought comes out of nowhere, and Shane shoves it away. It's ridiculous. If he won't learn Russian for her, he won't learn it for anyone. She's his soulmate, for crying out loud.

Ilya pulls him into his side, and Shane relaxes into the calming rhythm of fingers in his hair. The edges of his vision go blurry. It's like with one simple move, Ilya has turned off the anxious part of his brain.

Why couldn't it be him?

Shane pulls himself out of Ilya's hold, scrambling backwards. Ilya looks confused.

"What is—"

"I have to—I can't—I have a soulmate," he stammers, a million thoughts racing through his mind.

"And I have one too, but I am sure she will understand, Shane," Ilya says calmly, like he's trying to steady a spooked horse.

Shane.

Ilya called him Shane. They don't do that. Ilya must see his reaction, because he immediately backtracks. "Hollander, come on. It is nothing, we both know there is someone else for us."

But it's not nothing, and that's the problem. It's not nothing at all, this thing with Ilya. And, fuck, since when had he become Ilya in his head? This was too much. They would meet their soulmates any day now, and it would all come crashing down.

“I can’t. I’m sorry, I—I have to go.” Shane shoves his feet into his shoes and goes, ignoring the hurt expression on Ilya’s face.

It isn’t until he’s halfway back to the hotel that he realizes he’s wearing Ilya’s shirt, and that his own shirt and jacket are still in Ilya’s bedroom. And, fuck, he isn’t wearing socks either.

Who cares? He’s a millionaire. He’ll buy more socks. He absolutely cannot go back there, not when his head and his heart are such a mess.

He can’t have Ilya. He has a soulmate, and she’s probably perfect and pretty and nice. Whatever he feels for Ilya, he’ll feel tenfold for her.

He resolves himself right then and there. He is going to find her. Whatever it takes.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, go easy on Shane. He's doing his best.

i'm on twitter, threads, bluesky, and tumblr.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ilya groans dramatically, but he also pushes himself off the mini fridge and joins Shane on the bed. Small victories.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Because I'm in love with you. Because I think you're my soulmate. Because I hope and pray that you feel the same. But he can't say any of that, so he says, "who else am I gonna tell?"

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry for upping the chapter count to three, but as I was writing this I realized that there wasn't an easy way to wrap this up in two chapters without cutting a ton of content, and I didn't want to do that.

I tried to make some of the iconic scenes a mix of book canon and show canon. I didn't want it to feel like you were just rereading the book, or reading a summary of the show. I also didn't want to accidentally plagiarize Rachel Reid. I hope I did a good job?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rose Landry is fantastic.

She's beautiful, charming, and witty in a way that immediately draws Shane in. He feels like he really clicks with her, in a way he doesn't with most people, and it makes him feel warm inside.

They exchange numbers, and when Shane goes home he immediately types into Google "Rose Landry Russian." A video comes up of the press tour for a movie she was in last year, where she played a Russian spy. In it, she's doing an interview. *In Russian.*

Holy shit. *Holy shit.* Could she be—it has to be her, right?

There's a rushing sound in his ears, almost like he can hear the blood in his veins. He found her. He found his soulmate. And she's pretty, and nice, and funny. *And a girl,* an unhelpful voice in his head points out. He ignores it.

(He also ignores that her Russian is slow and careful in the interview, and that she apologizes to the interviewer for her delayed response. *Sorry, I am still learning!)*

Ilya hasn't texted Shane in a month.

It's not uncommon for them to go long stretches without texting, and even when they did text it was usually to schedule a hookup, which is off the table now that he's with Rose. So he's not sure why it's bothering him so much.

But it is.

Rose is great, though. She texts him all the time, and he honestly loves it. He never considered himself much of a texter, but he really likes talking to her. *And you don't have to touch her over text,* that unhelpful voice says.

Sure, the sex stuff is…tough. But Shane chalks it up to being nervous. Rose is super famous, and has dated movie stars and famous musicians alike. He's just some boring hockey player. Plus, there's extra pressure, with her being his soulmate and all.

He hasn't brought up soulmates with her. He's thought about it, almost done it on several occasions. One night when they go out to dinner, he speaks to their waiter in French, just to see if she maybe understands. She doesn't give any indication either way.

Neither of their soulmarks have appeared either, but Shane isn't worried about that. These things can take time. Hayden and Jackie were together for a whole year before theirs showed up.

That voice in his head, mean and insistent, tries to tell him that there's a reason why he won't ask Rose about soulmates, but he refuses to acknowledge it. Instead, he tells himself he just doesn't want to rush things.

He's happy with Rose. He really is. So why can't he stop thinking of Ilya?

They're playing Boston soon, and Shane is nervous. What should he say? Will Ilya want to talk about what happened last time they saw each other? Will he ask about Shane's soulmate again?

It turns out Shane's worrying is for nothing, because Ilya won't even look at Shane during the game. After, when they go to shake hands, Ilya gives him the same emotionless "good game" that he gives to the rest of the team, not even making eye contact. Shane feels it like a punch to the gut.

He feels hollow all the way home, and the feeling doesn't go away. He showers, changes into something more club appropriate (a white tee is club clothes, right?), and calls an Uber, hoping the entire time that he'll start to feel more like himself.

But then the lights are too bright, and the music is too loud, and Rose is asking him to dance, and Shane is thoroughly out of his element. When Miles hands him a drink, he has to resist

the urge to down it in one gulp, just to give himself a boost of confidence.

He tries to focus on Rose, on her smiling face and the way she lifts his shirt to playfully touch his stomach. But the music is *really* loud, and the dance floor must be crowded, because Miles is *way* too close.

He looks around the club, trying to see why it suddenly got so full. He realizes it's actually not any more crowded than usual, but before he can question things further, he sees Cliff Marlow dancing across the room and cold dread settles in the pit of his stomach.

If Cliff is at the club, then Ilya is probably here, too.

His eyes scan the crowd, searching, and then his heart rate skyrockets. Because there is Ilya Rozanov, making out with a blonde woman. His eyes start to burn.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," he tells Rose, quickly extricating himself from her and Miles. He makes his way towards the hallway in the back where he knows the bathrooms are, and then stops dead in his tracks.

Now he can see them fully, see how they're kissing and dancing in a way Shane frankly thinks can barely be considered dancing. More upsetting than any of that, though, is that Ilya is looking right at him.

Ilya makes direct eye contact as he continues to dance with the blonde, staring Shane down as he kisses her ear. Her *right* ear. The ear where a soulmark would appear. It's sensual, bold, practically indecent.

Shane's limbs feel heavy. He wants to look away, disappear, poof out of existence, anything that will take him away from here, where he is rooted to the spot in a club that is too crowded and too loud, watching Ilya Rozanov touch someone else the way Shane used to wish he'd touch him.

With an icy shard of dread, he wonders if this woman is Ilya's soulmate, then banishes the thought when it makes his eyes burn even more. He can't cry, not right now. Not because of Ilya Rozanov.

Why should it matter? He's with Rose. Rose, who is kind, and smart, and funny, and pretty, and perfect. Who speaks Russian, and likes hockey. *And is a girl.*

That last thought is what finally breaks him free. His feet come unglued, and he rushes to the bathroom. He doesn't actually need to pee, so he looks at himself in the mirror. His face is red and blotchy. He looks miserable.

He splashes water on his face and pats it dry with a paper towel. The water is colder than he expected, and it shocks him back into the present. He adjusts his shirt, puts on a brave face, and heads back out into the fray.

He just hopes no one can tell he was crying.

Sex with Rose isn't getting any better. In fact, it might actually be getting worse.

He struggles through it every time, and only manages to finish when he pictures strong arms, dark blonde curls, heart-shaped lips. He doesn't let himself freak out about that, because at this point he's desperate for anything that can get him to stop embarrassing himself.

This is his soulmate, for crying out loud. Why is it so difficult?

He should bring up the soulmate thing. It's time. Maybe that's why they're not connecting, because he's so anxious about their potential that he can't face their present.

He meets Rose for dinner, and he immediately feels calmer as he sits at the table. Talking with Rose is easy, and he feels safe around her. She picked this restaurant for its low lighting, because she knows that Shane hates bright fluorescents.

The dinner goes great, and Shane tries to psych himself up to bring up soulmates. But Rose throws him off when she brings up Miles.

Sure, Shane was, like, vaguely aware that Miles could be gay. Looking at it now, yeah, he can see it. But he isn't sure why Rose is bringing it up.

"I really like you, Shane," she says, grabbing his hand, and Shane is confused about the direction this is going.

"I like you, too."

"But I have a feeling that maybe I'm not…doing it for you?"

Shane's denial is immediate. "Yes, you are."

"I know you like talking to me—"

"Yeah."

"Do you like kissing me?"

"Sure." Shane immediately knows he's said something wrong. He tries to backtrack. "No, no, of course I do, sorry."

"Hey, don't apologize. I just—I have a feeling, and maybe I'm completely off-base here, but, I don't know, I feel like you'd rather be kissing Miles?"

Shane suddenly can't look her in the eyes. She assures him that it's okay, but he knows that's not true. He has to fix this. He has to tell her.

"I do like you, I really do. I like talking with you, I like being with you, I like all of it. I know the—the sex stuff is a problem—"

"It's not a problem," she interrupts to assure him. She continues before he can finish his thought. "A problem is something you can fix. We're more like…a square peg and a round

hole." She covers her face with her hands. "Ew, no, I'm sorry. Forget I said that. We're just —"

"I'm pretty sure you're my soulmate," Shane blurts, his voice cracking embarrassingly on the last word. Rose looks at him then, and with a sinking feeling he recognizes the expression. Sadness, sympathy, pity.

"Oh, Shane," she sighs. "You're not my soulmate."

No, no. This isn't right. This isn't how this night was supposed to go.

"You don't know that," Shane insists, desperate.

"Shane," Rose steels herself, then continues. "This isn't public information, so please don't repeat it, but my soulmate speaks another language." Shane opens his mouth, and she beats him to the punch. "Not French."

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

"Can I ask if you've ever been with another guy?" Her voice is careful, compassionate.

There's a lump in Shane's throat, and he can't seem to get the words out. He thinks of Ilya, of all the times they've been together. There's no point in lying to her now. He nods.

"Was it different, with a guy?"

The first memory that comes to mind is from years ago, in the stairwell of his apartment, after the first time they fucked. Ilya kissed him so gently, so sweetly, and he felt like he was melting right there against the railing.

"Of course."

Rose doesn't miss a beat. "Was it better?"

He thinks of the All-Star game, when it felt like there was a gravitational force pulling him towards Ilya. Like he couldn't breathe until their lips were touching, until his hands were in Ilya's hair. It was never a struggle, not like it was with Rose.

His eyes burn, and he tries to casually wipe away a tear. "Yeah, it was, uh, it was better."

Rose nods, and her smile is so kind that he has to look back down. She pauses before continuing. "And have you ever considered if your soulmate was…a guy?"

And, embarrassingly, Shane hasn't. Ever since the first moment he found out about his soulmate, at a hockey camp in Vancouver, he pictured a girl. He remembers laying in bed, dreading the thought of her.

"Embarrassingly, no," Shane admits with a laugh. Rose laughs too, but it doesn't feel like she's laughing at him.

“Well maybe it’s time to consider it,” she says.

The thought of his soulmate being a man feels…right. It feels good. Maybe a little scary too, but in a good way. He hated talking about her—even thinking about her—before. But now that he considers being soulmates with a man, he wants to tell someone.

Rose smiles at him from across the table, nothing but acceptance and love on her face. With crystal clarity, he knows he can tell her.

“He, uh, he speaks Russian,” he shares, looking down at his hands. Rose gasps, and Shane’s head shoots up.

“No effing way, that is so funny,” she smiles excitedly. Shane is confused, but she quickly goes on. “My soulmate speaks Russian, too.”

“Oh, that explains some things.” When she looks at him with a cocked head, he explains. “I, uh, looked up whether you could speak Russian the first night we met. I found an interview you did in Russian.”

“Oh my god, Shane,” she laughs, reaching for his hand again. “My Russian was *terrible* in that interview. I am nowhere near fluent.”

Shane laughs too. “I think I knew that, deep down. But I wanted it to be you.”

Rose looks sad again. She rubs the back of his hand with her thumb. “And do you still want it to be me?”

His answer is immediate. “No, I don’t think so. I think what you said, uh, is true.” Rose smiles proudly, and Shane feels his eyes burn for a different reason. “The thing is I—I kind of prefer being the hole, rather than the peg.”

Rose laughs, and he laughs too. He feels at ease. They talk a bit more, about Rose’s previous gay boyfriends (Shane is apparently her eighth), about who knows Shane is gay (no one but Rose), and whether she knows who her soulmate is (she has no idea).

“So, do you know any men who speak Russian?” She asks, leaning forward like it’s hot gossip.

Realization barrels through Shane at lightning speed. Because yes, he does know a man who speaks Russian. A funny, annoying, secretly sweet man, whose soulmate speaks English and French. A man who Shane has been trying to convince himself he’s not in love with for God knows how long.

Shane brushes the question off, tells Rose that plenty of hockey players speak Russian. He has to wrap his mind around this more before he can tell her about it.

They leave soon after, agreeing to be best friends. Rose Landry is fantastic. He’s not sure he’s ever had a friend like her, but he can’t fully appreciate that when his mind is reeling with a tempting new possibility.

Ilya Rozanov could be his soulmate.

Shane walks into the hotel bar in Tampa feeling like a million bucks. He's wearing a new suit his stylist picked out for him (though he went with a plain black tee underneath instead of the button up she'd originally suggested), and he knows he looks good.

When he sees Ilya sitting at the bar, a little thrill goes through him. He's wearing a very tacky floral shirt, but he still looks amazing. He wishes he could kiss him.

He sits next to Ilya and orders a beer. Ilya is a bit standoffish at first, their conversation focusing on the upcoming game and who's who at the hotel. It feels like they're circling around something.

Eventually Ilya loosens up, and when Shane admits to having a personal stylist, he basks in the good-natured ribbing Ilya gives him.

The conversation eventually turns to Rose, and Ilya asks several questions. Shane's answers must not tell him what he wants, because eventually he's just blunt. "So Rose Landry is not with you?"

Is Ilya jealous? God, Shane kind of hopes he is. But he also doesn't want to leave Ilya hanging. He clears his throat. "No, she's not. Not in Tampa or in general. She and I—we weren't compatible."

The look Ilya gives him is hungry. If they weren't sitting at a bar full of people, Shane would climb into Ilya's lap. Or maybe he'd get down on his knees. Both are tempting.

He has to excuse himself before he gets hard. He's captain, after all, and he actually does need to circulate to talk to the other guys on their team. As he walks away, he turns back one last time to look at Ilya. He's covering his face with his hand, but Shane thinks he can see a smile underneath.

Playing on the same team as Ilya is electric.

It's surreal to finally have a teammate who can keep up with him, and it's practically telepathic the way they're so perfectly in sync. When Shane scores a goal, Ilya skates up and kisses him on the cheek.

It's bold, but everyone else probably just assumes it's Ilya being his typical asshole self.

You missed, Shane wants to say, but knows he can't.

Later, as he sits on the beach and watches the sunset, Shane feels that odd synchronization again when Ilya sits next to him. He has no way of knowing, but something tells him this was the first place Ilya thought to look.

It has to be you, he thinks. *I know it.*

“I looked up that word,” Ilya says, bronze and beautiful in the fading sun. “Compatible. I thought I knew what it meant, but I wanted to be sure.”

Shane isn’t sure what to say to that. “Oh.”

“So you and Rose Landry are not—”

“Yeah, not compatible,” Shane confirms. “Not in that way, at least.”

“So it was not her?”

Shane doesn’t have to ask Ilya to clarify. “No,” he answers, softly. “It wasn’t her.”

He has things he wants to say, *needs* to say, but he can’t do it here. He can hear other people further down the beach, and he wants privacy for this conversation.

Before he can get too anxious about how to phrase his next question, he feels Ilya’s thumb in the sand, stroking his own. It feels like every nerve ending in his body is centered on that point where their thumbs connect. It gives him the confidence to ask his next question.

“What room are you in?”

It’s a gamble, and he can’t breathe as he waits for Ilya’s response. They haven’t hooked up since before Rose, since Shane ran out and abandoned Ilya in his apartment. This is the moment where he finds out if they can repair things.

When Ilya tells him his room number, Shane doesn’t even bother trying to hide the fondness in his smile.

Shane thinks hard about what he wants to say before he goes to Ilya’s room. He’s decided he doesn’t want to tell Ilya right away about the soulmate thing. The two of them aren’t even together, and Shane figures he can start there. And if that answer is yes, maybe he can ease into the soulmate thing.

When Ilya lets him in, he immediately goes to sit on the bed. He tries to look casual with his thumbs in his pockets, but he clearly fails because the moment he sits down Ilya comments on it. “This looks serious.”

“It’s not,” he lies. It’s never been more serious, at least to him. But he can’t let Ilya know just how serious he is, or else he might scare him off. But he does want to come out to Ilya, and then again that is also serious.

He needs to stick to the plan. Ilya was sitting next to him when he imagined this moment. *Fuck.*

“I mean, yeah, I guess. Can you just sit down or something?”

And because Ilya can never be easy, he goes and leans against the mini fridge instead. It's okay, though. Shane can do this still.

"It's not just me, right?" He asks, nervous.

"Not just you what?"

"You feel it too? Don't you?" When he looks over, Ilya looks nonchalant, almost bored. But Shane knows him better than that. Ilya looks scared.

"Feel what?"

"The last time we were together, it was different."

"What was different, that you ran away?" And for the first time, Shane can see how much that really hurt Ilya. Behind the nonchalant exterior, Ilya is hiding something ugly. Fear, hurt, disappointment.

"Look, I—I'm sorry I freaked out, okay?"

"Freaked out over nothing."

"It wasn't nothing," Shane fires back, letting his frustration get the better of him. "Don't act like that, this is hard enough without you being an asshole."

"What do you want, Hollander?" Ilya asks, getting frustrated. Shane is getting frustrated, too. "We get together, we fuck, is simple."

"Simple?"

"Is simple for me." That's a lie if Shane's ever heard one.

"Bullshit." He pauses, then. He needs to get this back on track. He's here to tell Ilya the truth. Well, some of it. "I think…I think I'm gay."

Ilya laughs at that. He *laughs*. Shane isn't sure if he wants to punch him or kiss him. "Mm, oh yeah, what makes you think that?"

"Fuck you, you're not gay."

That shuts Ilya up for a second. "No, not completely."

"Yeah, well I think I am. Completely."

Ilya still looks annoyed, which only makes Shane feel more annoyed. "Okay, so you're gay, so what?"

"Well it's kind of a big deal. To me, at least. Sorry if I'm being boring again." He can't help but use that word, since its one Ilya seems so determined to tease him with. Or at least he thought it was teasing.

Ilya groans dramatically, but he also pushes himself off the mini fridge and joins Shane on the bed. Small victories.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Because I’m in love with you. Because I think you’re my soulmate. Because I hope and pray that you feel the same. But he can’t say any of that, so he says, “who else am I gonna tell?”

Ilya nods, staring straight ahead. Shane soldiers on.

“It’s not just being gay. It’s you. It’s this.” And he should really stop there, but something in him forces him to keep going. “Being gay is one thing, but this—this fucking your arch rival is another thing.”

“That’s why it is a secret.”

“I know that, but. Last time,” he pauses, realizing that Ilya is still hurt. “And for the record, I am sorry about last time. Okay? I’m sorry I freaked out.”

Ilya doesn’t respond to that, so Shane continues. “But before that, it was nice.”

“It was,” Ilya admits, and Shane finally feels like he’s getting somewhere. He’s too cautious to be relieved yet, but he can feel it waiting in the wings.

“And it felt like we were something.”

“We can’t be something, Hollander.” Ilya is shutting down again, but Shane won’t give up that easy.

“Would you want to be, if we could?”

“We can’t.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“What does it fucking matter?” Ilya asks, raising his voice. Shane prepared himself for the possibility that Ilya might be resistant, but he promised himself he’d try.

“I don’t think I can keep pretending I don’t like you anymore,” he admits softly.

“You don’t like me.”

You’re right, Shane thinks. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

“Yeah, I do. I think I like you maybe a little too much.”

“Don’t, don’t fucking do this, Hollander,” Ilya pushes back. At least he’s not trying to convince Shane he doesn’t like him. “I’m not…I wouldn’t be able to go home again. Ever. Do you get that?”

Shane thinks back to the phone call he overheard in Ilya's apartment, the tense way he'd spoken to his brother. And before that, the few times he'd seen Ilya with his father, always looking somehow smaller and younger.

"Because your family?"

"Because Russia! I would not be able to go back to Russia," Ilya yells, exasperated.

Right, Russia. He remembers back in Sochi, when Carter Vaughn mentioned that Russia was a bad place for gay people. He should've paid more attention, back then.

"What would happen to you?" he asks, a bit horrified at the thought.

"I don't want to find out," Ilya replies, sounding dejected.

"What would your parents…"

"My father is police. My brother is police." Ilya sounds resigned to sharing this information.

"And your mother?"

"Dead," Ilya replies without skipping a beat, voice monotone. He won't look at Shane. And, God, what is Shane supposed to say to that?

"I'm sorry," he tries.

"I was young," Ilya brushes him off. "My father is very old-fashioned. And sick."

Shane thinks back to that phone call. From Ilya's end of things, it sounded like his father was confused, unsure of reality. "Sick like, crazy?

"That too, a little. But no, sick more like—"

"Oh, like cancer?"

"Dementia."

"That's awful," Shane says, because he can't for the life of him think of anything else to say to make it better.

To his horror, Ilya starts crying. He turns his head away, like he's embarrassed for Shane to see him so vulnerable, and Shane acts without thinking.

"Hey," he says, and climbs into Ilya's lap. Even when he doesn't know what to say to Ilya, his body has always known how to do the talking.

Ilya apologizes, and Shane responds by kissing him. It's intimate and sweet, though in typical Rozanov fashion, Ilya slips in a little tongue.

Ilya holds him, rocks him. He's still crying, and Shane decides not to push anything further about their relationship tonight. He's told Ilya he's gay, he's admitted to having feelings for

him, and at this point that seems like all Ilya can take.

After a while, Ilya presses his face into Shane's neck, leaving small kisses against the skin there. At first Shane thinks it's harmless, but then Ilya's hands slide from his back to his ass, groping in a way that cannot be misunderstood.

"Ilya, we shouldn't…" Shane starts to say, unsure of how to finish the sentence. *You're feeling vulnerable. You're not in your right mind. I'm worried I'll tell you I love you.*

"Please," Ilya whispers against his neck, voice small. "I need this. I need to not think anymore."

Shane doesn't need much more convincing. He wants to help Ilya, and this is how he can do that. And maybe it's selfish, but he hasn't gotten to touch Ilya in months, and his hands itch with the desire to.

Ilya braces his arms behind Shane's back and moves them both further up the bed. It's a bit awkward, but eventually Ilya's back meets the headboard without ever dislodging Shane from his lap.

Ilya kisses him, rough and desperate. He grabs Shane's jaw with one hand, keeping him in place as he licks into his mouth. Shane takes the opportunity to start unbuttoning his shirt, throwing it to the side of the bed once he's done. For once, he doesn't care where his clothes go.

He's equally as cavalier about his shorts and his underwear, when the time comes. Ilya takes longer to kick his clothes off, unwilling to separate from Shane's mouth for long enough to do it smoothly.

When Ilya opens him up, he takes extra time with it. Neither of them say it, but they're both aware that it's been a long time since Shane's had this kind of sex, and so it takes longer to get him loose enough.

But then, finally, Ilya is slipping on a condom and sliding Shane back into his lap. Shane reaches behind him, taking Ilya in hand and lining him up with his entrance. He sinks down slowly, savoring the stretch. Even with how careful Ilya was, it still burns a little, but Shane doesn't care.

When he's finally fully seated, Shane takes a moment to adjust. The fullness is delicious, and he knows he won't last long. From the pained moan Ilya makes beneath him, it seems the same is true for him.

He goes slow, drinking in the exquisite drag of Ilya's cock inside him. Ilya kisses him again, and Shane moans into his mouth.

It feels different this time, sex with Ilya. They kiss like this thing between them is precious, like there is something fragile that they can't afford to break. Shane loves all of ways Ilya fucks him, but this slow, gentle sex is something special.

He leans forward so that they're chest to chest, and the drag of his cock against Ilya's stomach pushes him over the edge. He comes with a loud gasp, his hands pulling on Ilya's hair.

"Fuck, so good," Ilya says in Russian as he fucks him through it. *"I missed this."*

Ilya finishes soon after, head thrown back as he thrusts up into Shane one last time. Shane collapses on top of him, the only sound in the room their heavy breathing as they both come back down.

Later, after they've cleaned up, they cuddle in bed. Shane knows he can't stay the night, but he gives himself this brief moment of peace, Ilya curled around Shane, holding him to his chest with a hand against his heart.

It's yours, Shane thinks. *It's always been yours.*

They meet up again in Boston two weeks later, and Shane resolves that he needs to broach the subject of soulmates again.

He's distracted, of course, by the way Ilya pounces on him the moment he walks through his door, dragging him upstairs to the bedroom without so much as saying hello. They fuck quick and dirty, the complete opposite of the last time they were together. But that's okay. Shane likes it this way just as much.

They've never done this before a game, and Shane wonders whether something has gone wrong for Ilya, if this is another instance where he needs to lose himself in Shane's body.

After, he decides not to bring up soulmates. Instead, he focuses on trying to figure out what's wrong. "Hey, um. Are you okay?"

Ilya looks up at him then, worried. "What do you mean?"

"You just seem off, is all."

Ilya sighs, like it pains him to talk about this. Maybe Shane should just let it be. "My father is dying. My brother won't stop calling. I don't want to talk to either of them."

Shane has no experience with a dying parent, nor with awful siblings. But he knows Ilya, and if they really are soulmates, he'd probably be better at comforting him than anyone else. He just doesn't know how to go about doing that.

"Do you…want to talk about it?" He asks. That seems like a good place to start.

"No, not right now."

Or maybe not. But not right now doesn't mean never, and Shane can at least lay the groundwork. "Well, if you ever do want to talk about it, let me know. I'm here for you."

Ilya smiles at him, and Shane feels like he's staring directly into the sun.

They lose to Boston. The team has an early flight back to Montreal, so Shane doesn't have time to see Ilya again. He hopes he's okay.

The next day, JJ shares in the locker room that Ilya didn't go to Nashville with the rest of his team. Shane tries to play it cool, but he's worried. Ilya seemed fine yesterday, and he even gave Shane a cocky wink as they shook hands after the game.

He pulls out his phone and sends a text to "Lily." *Are you okay?*

No response. Later that night, he checks his phone again, and still gets no response. They've never called each other before, but he takes a chance. He needs to know if Ilya is okay.

The call goes straight to voicemail. He doesn't leave a message, because he doesn't know what to say. *Hi, I'm worried about you, and I think maybe you might not be okay?* That won't work. Ilya will see that he has a missed call, and maybe that's enough.

He tries to distract himself by reading his book again. It's a struggle, and he has to reread a few paragraphs multiple times when his mind keeps straying back to Ilya. Eventually, though, he's able to make some progress.

He's interrupted by the buzzing of his phone, and when he sees the FaceTime call from *Lily* on the screen, he readjusts his position and picks up.

Ilya looks tired. He's still handsome, he's always handsome, but Shane can tell that whatever has happened, it's taken its toll on him. He wishes he could do something to help.

Ilya tells him he's in Moscow. That can only mean one thing, and Ilya confirms it a moment later. His father is dead.

Shane tries to talk to him about it, but Ilya seems to be primarily focused on Shane's glasses. Which is crazy, because he's never really liked how he looks in them. And also because Ilya's father just died, too. It seems like there's more important things to focus on.

But Ilya can't be convinced otherwise, and soon enough Shane is naked, cock in hand, as he watches Ilya on the other side of the world doing the same. At first his camera is flipped around to show what he's doing, but eventually he realizes that's not what he wants.

"Hey, um, Ilya?" He asks, hesitant to break whatever spell they're both under. "I think I'd rather see your face." Ilya is silent for a moment, and Shane worries that he's said something wrong.

"Only if you do, too. I need to see your freckles," he finally says. Shane laughs at that, but he does as he's asked.

"Really? My freckles?" he asks, scrunching his nose. Ilya looks fond on the other end.

"Yes, I am nuts about them. They are stunning," he moans. Shane realizes Ilya must be touching himself again.

“I always hated them growing up,” he whispers breathlessly as he takes himself in hand.

“No, they are very beautiful. Um, take my breath?”

Shane feels his cheeks heat up, and is glad Ilya can’t see his cock, because he lets out a little spurt of precome at the words.

They continue stroking themselves, staring at each other through the screen. It’s intimate in a way Shane hadn’t expected, but he loves it. When he finishes, he does so looking into Ilya’s eyes, and for a moment it doesn’t feel like he’s so far away.

Ilya climaxes soon after with a rough groan. He puts his phone down to grab a tissue, and Shane can faintly hear him say something in Russian. It sounds like *I’m fucked,* but the rest of the words drift off as Ilya walks away from the phone.

Before they say goodbye, Shane reminds Ilya one last time that he can talk to him. “I want to help, if I can.”

Ilya is silent for a moment. “You did, thank you.”

The next day, Shane is in a hotel room with Hayden when Ilya texts to ask him if he can talk. He rushes out to the stairwell, making a half-baked excuse about where he’s going. Hayden doesn’t seem to care.

When Shane picks up the phone, Ilya sounds sad. Defeated. Whatever is happening in Russia, it is not good.

Ilya stumbles over what he wants to say, and Shane has trouble making sense of it.

“I don’t know,” Ilya eventually sighs. “English is too hard right now.”

You can say it in Russian, Shane wants to say. *I’ll understand it.*

But that’s not the kind of thing he can admit over the phone. Because alongside that confession is the confession that Shane’s soulmate speaks Russian, and Shane has understood all of the sweet things Ilya has secretly said to him all this time.

And that his soulmate might be Ilya.

Ilya has had enough stress and turmoil for one day. If he’s too overwhelmed to speak English, he’s definitely too overwhelmed for such major revelations.

“Maybe, uh, maybe we can sit here together. We don’t have to talk,” Shane suggests. His chest feels hollow, and of course it does. His heart is on another continent.

“That would be nice.” Ilya says, sounding stuffy in a way he only does when he cries.

“And maybe when you do have the words, you can tell me.” He doesn’t want Ilya to think he doesn’t care about what he has to say. He will always care about what Ilya has to say.

Ilya sniffles on the other end of the line. “Okay.”

“God, I wish I could hold you right now.”

“You know, for someone who said we don’t have to talk, you are talking a lot.”

“Shit, sorry,” Shane says, embarrassed. “I’ll stop now.”

“No, no, it was helping,” Ilya replies with a wet laugh. “How about you talk? Tell me about something boring. Tell me about your hockey book.”

Shane smiles, and suddenly he doesn’t feel so alone in the stairwell.

“It’s about the 1972 Canada/Russia series,” he shares.

He goes on to tell Ilya all about the Summit Series, and how the Cold War tensions bled through onto the ice. Ilya probably knows at least some of this, he thinks, but he doesn’t interrupt to say as such. He listens patiently as Shane tells him everything.

Shane isn’t sure anyone has ever let him gush about hockey for this long. It feels like a gift, and the fact that it’s somehow helping Ilya feel better is the icing on the cake.

He isn’t sure how long he talks, only that eventually, he’s telling Ilya the information he’d just been reading yesterday.

“Uh, and that’s as far as I’ve gotten in the book,” Shane says nervously. The other end of the phone is silent, but he can hear a slight breeze, so he knows the call didn’t drop. “Ilya?”

“Sorry, I think I fell asleep,” Ilya jokes, and Shane rolls his eyes. He can’t hide his laughter, though.

“You’re the one who asked me to tell you about it!”

“Yes,” Ilya says, soft and fond, “I did. And I did not really fall asleep.”

“Maybe you should,” Shane says softly. “Go to sleep, I mean.”

“Ah, you are trying to get rid of me,” Ilya says, “I see. I am on dark street in Moscow, but you want me to hang up.”

That worries Shane. Ilya is hurting, and while he doesn’t know much about Moscow, he doesn’t think walking around by yourself in any city late at night is a good idea.

“Should you be alone right now?” Shane asks.

“I’m not. You are here, yes?”

Shane’s chest feels light. He wishes more than anything that he could be with Ilya right now. He’d hold him, kiss him, and tell him that no matter what happens, neither of them will ever be alone. They have each other. They’re soulmates.

“Thank you, Shane,” Ilya says after a moment, sincere. “I will call you when I have the words.”

Montreal wins their game against Detroit, handily. Shane scored three goals and two assists, and when he enters the locker room, it’s to the smiles and cheers of his teammates.

He doesn’t even look at his phone until he gets back to the hotel, and when he does he startles at the notification. *Lily - 1 Voicemail. 7:24 PM.*

Ilya left him a voicemail during the game. If Shane knows his time zones, that has to have been the middle of the night in Moscow. He excuses himself once again to the stairwell, but Hayden is on the phone with Jackie and doesn’t even notice when he leaves.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and presses play.

“Shane,” the voicemail starts. “I think I have the words. But I am not yet ready to say them to you yet. So…please don’t translate this.”

No. No, no, no, no, no.

“I never want to come back here again.”

Ilya is speaking in Russian, because he thinks Shane doesn’t understand. This is a gross abuse of Ilya’s trust.

“I fucking hate it here.”

Shane needs to stop, but curiosity gets the better of him for one awful, selfish moment.

“And they all fucking hate me.”

Will Ilya feel betrayed? When he finds out Shane could understand Russian this whole time and never told him? When he learns that Shane might be his soulmate and never said anything, will he hate him?

“I pay for everything.”

He doesn’t know what to do, but every second he deliberates is another second Ilya is telling Shane things he shouldn’t be hearing. Things Ilya doesn’t realize he’s confessing.

“I make sure everyone has clothes they like. I—”

Shane shuts off the voicemail. He can’t betray Ilya like this, it’s wrong. He should have stopped listening the moment Ilya started speaking Russian, but, fuck, he was curious. He was curious and selfish and he feels awful about it.

He looks down at his phone. He only listened to twenty seconds of a three and a half minute voicemail. Whatever else Ilya confessed, he won’t know. He won’t listen to it. Not without telling Ilya the truth. Not without letting Ilya choose to tell him whatever it is he said.

He won’t listen. But he doesn’t delete the voicemail, either.

A week later, Montreal faces Boston for a spot in the playoffs.

Shane has been a mess all week. The voicemail has sat in his inbox, taunting him. He hasn’t played any more of it, and he won’t. Not until he tells Ilya.

They’re going to meet up after the game. Shane can’t wait. He’s going to invite him to his cottage. And at the cottage, relaxed and without the pressure of hockey and family and the rest of the world, he’ll tell Ilya everything.

The voicemail, Russian, soulmates. All of it.

But first, there’s a game to win, and he needs to do what he does best.

When the game starts, he and Ilya are at the top of their game, and Shane feels like he’s flying. He steals the puck, racing towards the net, and turns back once to look at Ilya. One cheeky look at the man he’s so in love with.

Ilya’s eyes are alight with a competitive playfulness, and he looks so beautiful that Shane can’t help but smile around his mouth guard. Even without the mark, he knows without a shadow of a doubt that he’s looking at his soulmate.

The look only takes a fraction of a second, but it’s enough time that he doesn’t see Cliff Marlow skating towards him. He doesn’t brace for impact. He goes against the boards hard. There’s pain, and a whooshing sound in his ears.

And then everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t hate me for making the Russia confession a voicemail. I gave it a lot of thought, and I think it would be wildly out of character for Shane to just sit there and let Ilya continue such a vulnerable speech without telling him that he can understand what he's saying. And that couldn’t happen without other potential revelations happening. I wanted Ilya’s monologue to still happen, but for there to be a way for it to be saved until Shane knew he could listen to it. But I promise, he *will* listen to it. I did not cut the monologue!!! Just postponed it.

Chapter 3 is already half written, so it should be out within the next week or so. Thank you to everyone who loved the first chapter, I’ve really loved writing this!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The doctors leave the room, and he's left alone for a bit. He tries to remember what happened, but it all blends together. There was something he wanted to tell Ilya, but he can't pinpoint what it was.

As if summoning him, Ilya shimmies through the door of the hospital room, closing it behind him like he's trying to be sneaky.

"Ilyaaaa," Shane sings. Ilya immediately starts shushing him, which is quite frankly rude, but Shane will forgive him because he loves him.

Wait, was that what he was supposed to tell him? No, that was later in the plan. It was something else.

Chapter Notes

Hiii! Thank you all so much for the love on the last chapter, I was really worried about the changes I made and I'm so glad to see everyone liked them.

I hope you all enjoy this final chapter!!!

Small note: this probably goes without saying, but since I'm paranoid, I want to be clear that absolutely no AI was used while writing this fic. I use a lot of Oxford commas and em dashes—AI can pry them from my cold, dead hands.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything is a blur between waking up on the ice and getting to the hospital. He thinks he can hear Ilya somewhere asking if he is okay, but no one answers him.

He vaguely remembers asking the medics to tell Ilya that he's okay, but he can't recall any sort of response to that. He keeps going in and out of consciousness, and every time he reawakens the paramedics seem more and more distressed.

When he wakes up in a hospital room, the bright lights immediately hurt his eyes. He tries to hold up his hand to block them, but he can't for some reason. He looks down and sees that his arm is in a sling. Huh.

“Oops, sorry. I’ll dim those for you,” a voice from the other side of the room says. When he looks over, squinting to avoid as much light as possible, he sees a nurse coming in through the door. She lowers a slider on the wall, and the lights go down to a much more manageable level.

“What happened?” He asks, his voice cracking. He laughs at that, though he’s not sure why. His head feels funny.

“The doctor can fill you in soon. She’s on her way up,” the nurse smiles. He tries to read her nametag, but the letters are indecipherable.

“Aren’t nurses practically doctors? I’m sure you can tell me,” he insists, then switches to a whisper. He cups his good hand around his mouth. “It’ll be our little secret.”

She laughs, but she doesn’t budge. “Nurses and doctors are not the same, but I promise you won’t have to wait long, Mr. Hollander.”

“Please, Mr. Hollander is my father. Call me Mr. Shane.” He pauses, tries to think for a second. “No, wait. That’s not right either.”

The nurse seems to think he’s funny, at least. He tries to read the name on her badge again, but he can’t make sense of it. She must notice, because she tells him that her name is Ana.

The doctor comes quickly, introducing herself as Dr. Campbell. She tells him he has a fractured collarbone and a pretty serious concussion. He’s also apparently on painkillers, which is why he feels so loopy.

He learns that his parents are here, though they’re not in the room. His mom is on the phone rescheduling a few commercial shoots, and his dad left to get them coffee from a nearby cafe.

Once his parents are back, the doctor will have them sign the release papers, and he’ll be allowed to leave with them tomorrow morning. He apparently isn’t allowed to fall asleep again yet, which is very mean, because he’s really tired.

Dr. Campbell and Ana leave the room, and he’s left alone for a bit. He tries to remember what happened, but it all blends together. There was something he wanted to tell Ilya, but he can’t pinpoint what it was.

As if summoning him, Ilya shimmies through the door of the hospital room, closing it behind him like he’s trying to be sneaky.

“Ilyaaaa,” Shane sings. Ilya immediately starts shushing him, which is quite frankly rude, but Shane will forgive him because he loves him.

Wait, was that what he was supposed to tell him? No, that was later in the plan. It was something else.

“I, um, I just wanted to…” Ilya takes a deep breath, then restarts. “Are you okay?”

“Concussion and a fractured collarbone. Out for the playoffs. But—”

“Could have been worse,” Ilya finishes for him.

“Could have been worse,” he confirms.

“Marlow feels terrible, he did not mean to hurt you.”

“I know. Part of the game. We all get our bell rung eventually, right?”

“Right.” Ilya looks sad, though, and Shane doesn’t like that.

“Hey,” he calls. Ilya doesn’t come any closer. Rude. Maybe he didn’t hear him. He repeats himself. “Heeeey.”

Ilya rushes over, still shushing. Seriously, what’s with all the shushing? Shane forgives him again though, because Ilya takes his hand and that’s much better.

“Yes, better,” he smiles, closing his eyes. Nothing can be that bad when Ilya is holding his hand.

“You scared me,” Ilya confesses, and Shane feels like he could melt into a pile of goo. Ilya was scared, which means Ilya cares. Which means Ilya might say yes about the cottage.

The cottage. Yes! That’s what Shane was supposed to tell Ilya. He was going to invite him to the cottage last night. Oh god, last night. He stood Ilya up, didn’t he?

“I’m sorry I didn’t text you last night,” Shane apologizes, closing his eyes against the light. He feels calmer now that Ilya is here. Ilya will take care of him. That’s what soulmates do.

“No, it’s okay,” Ilya breathes, and Shane feels gentle fingers caress his cheeks. At least Ilya isn’t mad about it, then. But still, Shane didn’t get the chance to invite him last night, so he needs to do it now.

“I was excited about last night. I’m mostly mad at Marlow for fucking that up,” he smiles, and when he looks up at Ilya, his face is drawn tight with concern.

“He feels really bad.”

“You know, I had a whole plan to ask you something,” Shane continues, but when he looks up Ilya doesn’t look curious at all.

“Maybe it’s better if you just rest now,” he says, but that’s not better at all. Shane’s brain may be all over the place, but he’s not letting Ilya leave this room without an invitation to the cottage.

“I was gonna ask you—”

“Hollander.”

“—will you come to my cottage this summer?” When Shane looks up, Ilya doesn’t look convinced. Maybe he needs to be clearer. “Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house. We’ll have

so much fun, it's so private, no one will know."

"Hollander, you know I can't do that." Ilya is being stubborn then. Shane continues without missing a beat.

"We can have a week, or even two. We'd be completely alone. *Together,"* he whispers the last word, then remembers a line from the little speech he'd prepared last night. "Haven't you ever wanted more time?"

Ilya pauses, then after a moment grimaces. "Maybe. Maybe."

Shane nods at that, excited. Maybe isn't no. Maybe could be yes! He can work with maybe.

Ilya looks pained as he gazes down at Shane, and Shane wishes he could do more than just hold his hand. Ilya sighs. *"I missed you. Please never scare me like that again."*

"I won't, I promise," Shane smiles. He feels like he's floating, he's so happy. "I missed you, too."

Ilya goes rigid, turning towards Shane slowly with a tense look. His eyes are a mixture of confusion, hurt, and fear. Shane is confused. What's going on?

"Did you understand me?" he asks, voice grave. Shane giggles at that. So that's what's going on. Ilya is being silly.

"Of course I did, the drugs aren't *that* strong, Ilya," he teases. Ilya's jaw tightens, his face losing its color. He drops Shane's hand. It takes Shane another second to figure out why he's so suddenly closed off, but then it hits him.

Ilya was speaking Russian.

He looks betrayed, and Shane thinks he can see tears in his eyes before Ilya turns his face away. Oh no, oh no, no, no. *Fuck.* He's nowhere near present enough to know how to fix this, but he has to try.

"I was gonna tell you," he swears, but Ilya doesn't look convinced.

"Tell me what? That you understand Russian? That you've been laughing at me all these years while I told you my secrets?" Ilya's voice is rough, betrayed.

"I would never laugh at you," Shane argues. "You have to know that."

Ilya shakes his head, looking towards the door. He won't look at Shane, hiding his face. Shane thinks he can see a tear escape. "Yes, well I thought I knew a lot of things. Seems I was wrong."

"Ilya, please, I can explain," Shane tries, but Ilya is already backing up. Shane feels panic creep in through the haze of the painkillers. The monitor beside him starts beeping as his heart rate skyrockets. "Please, Ilya, don't go."

Ilya pauses at the door, his back to Shane. “I can’t talk right now. I need to think.”

Shane feels tears burn the edges of his vision. He wants to get up, pull Ilya into his arms, but he’s not even sure he can walk right now. There must be something he can say, some words that can fix this whole thing. But his concussed, drug-addled brain won’t cooperate.

“Please,” he begs. “I’m sorry. Please don’t shut me out.”

“Get well soon,” Ilya says in Russian, and then he’s out the door.

Fuck. Shane is full-on crying now, and the machine next to him is beeping even louder. Stupid, stupid, he’s so fucking stupid. He had his soulmate all along, and it took him nine years to realize it, and now he’s lost him because of it.

No, it’s even worse than that. Because even at the beginning, he could’ve told Ilya about the Russian. But he’d been scared. So fucking scared. He thinks that even at seventeen, he must’ve subconsciously known that sharing that fact would mean something.

But he’d waited too long, and now he’s lost him. Shane’s lost his one chance at happiness with the man he *knows* is his soulmate.

Ana rushes in, along with several other medical staff. They frantically check his pulse, his temperature, trying to figure out what’s got his heart rate going so fast.

He can’t tell them, the words trapped inside with whatever’s left of his heart. Another nurse races in with his mother in tow, and soon he’s being hugged and comforted. She probably thinks he’s just overcome with emotion about the season-ending injury.

He doesn’t tell her otherwise. He just cries in his mother’s arms, feeling lost.

Shane’s parents bring him to their house in Ottawa.

He’s silent for the whole drive, a little angry that his mom won’t give him his phone. Yes, technically the doctors said he needs to limit screen time, but he’s also twenty-seven years old. He doesn’t need his mom to babysit him like that.

Or maybe he does, because he knows the first thing he’ll do is call Ilya, text Illya, order a fucking carrier pidgeon if that’s what it takes.

She doesn’t give him his phone back until she gets him settled on the couch, his body exhausted from the physical and emotional whirlwind of the last twenty-four hours.

“Twenty minutes,” she warns him, then leaves the room to get his old bedroom set up. His dad is in the kitchen making lunch, listening softly to something on the radio. It’s too faint for Shane to make out, probably by design.

He unlocks his phone. There’s some texts from his teammates asking how he’s feeling, a text from Rose, another from his dad wishing him good luck on the game. Nothing from Ilya.

Shane looks around to make sure no one is within listening distance, then presses Ilya's contact on his phone. *Dialing - Lily.*

It goes straight to voicemail. He hangs up, tries again. Voicemail. He keeps going like that for a while, in a ceaseless cycle.

Dial, voicemail, end call. Dial, voicemail, end call. Dial, voicemail, end call.

After the eighth time, he tries leaving a message. He listens as Ilya's prerecorded voice warns that he won't listen to any voicemails, sounding bored. He has to try, though.

The tone beeps. "Ilya, it's Shane. But you knew that," Shane stumbles a bit. Maybe he should've prepared what he was going to say. "I know you're mad, and hurt, and that's all so valid. I, well, I can't explain exactly why I didn't tell you. I was scared, I guess.

"But now I'm scared I'm going to lose you. I am so sorry, Ilya. Please just—please call me back," he begs, getting choked up towards the end.

He hangs up, switching over to their text chain. He sees the last string of texts they sent each other, and he wants to throw up.

Lily [5:38 PM]
I feel bad for you.

Jane [5:39 PM]
What? Why?

Lily [5:41 PM]
Because we will make you cry. And then tonight I will make you cry again.

Jane [5:45 PM]
Well one of those doesn't sound too bad.

Lily [5:48 PM]
You say that now. 😈

Jane [5:49 PM]
Is that a threat?

Lily [5:50 PM]
It's a promise.

Lily [5:51 PM]
Warmups are starting. See you soon. 😘

Such a flirty, fun exchange. For a moment, he lets himself imagine how the night would've gone had he not been injured. Montreal would have won the game, and then when they got back to his apartment, Ilya would have edged him for hours in retaliation, until he was sobbing for him to just fuck him already.

After, they would lay in bed and cuddle, and Shane would ask Ilya to stay the night. He'd mention his cottage, talk about how relaxing it is, then invite Ilya along. He had a plan.

He had cried last night, but not in the way he'd hoped. Shane cried in the hospital for so long that he felt like he couldn't possibly have any tears left. But even now, laying on his parents' couch, his eyes start to burn again.

He drafts a new message to Ilya.

Jane [11:46 AM]
Ilya, I am so sorry I didn't tell you. I was scared. I was a coward. You deserve better than that. I never wanted to hurt you, but then I did anyway. I want you to know that I didn't listen to your voicemail. I couldn't. You said all that stuff thinking that I wouldn't understand it, and I'd never betray your trust like that. I know that's hard to believe after everything, but it's true. I know you may need time. That's okay. Call me any time. The invitation to the cottage still stands. My feelings for you haven't changed. Good luck at the playoffs.

He reads it over several times, rewrites some sentences again and again.

"Alright, Shane, screen time is over," his mom calls, walking down the stairs. Has it been twenty minutes already?

Frantic, he hits send. He watches as the text goes through, hoping that the final version was good enough. Once it sends, the bubble is green, not blue. Which means either Ilya's phone is off or…he doesn't want to think about the other option.

His mom takes his phone away. He doesn't even fight it. All he'd do is stare at their text chain, rereading over and over again. The final kiss emoji from Ilya feels like a slap to the face now.

A week goes by with no word from Ilya.

Shane gets his phone back, and just as he suspected he would, he scrolls back through their old messages. Eventually he goes so far back that he reaches the first message from when he first got this phone. It's from Ilya, trying to convince Shane to come over after a game to hook up.

Lily [11:03 PM]
Come on, Hollander. I know you miss me.

God, Shane really does. Not just the sex, either. He misses talking to Ilya, laughing with Ilya, all of it.

He tries to distract himself, doing puzzles with his dad, taking walks with his mom. They watch hockey together once he's cleared for longer screen time, and his mom tries to cheer him up by criticizing different plays the teams are doing.

Usually Shane would be all about it, but right now his heart isn't in it.

When Boston has their playoff game against New York, he tries his best to act uninterested. But the truth is that every time Ilya is on screen, it feels like a sip of cold, clear water in a desert.

“He’s playing with bruised ribs,” his mom comments, and Shane looks over at her.

“What?”

“Rozanov, he’s playing with bruised ribs,” she repeats, pointing at the screen, where Ilya is skating away from a check looking worse for wear. Shane is angry, suddenly. Ilya is putting himself in danger of a worse injury, all for what? Pride?

He doesn’t give himself time to think. He pulls out his phone and sends another text message.

Jane [8:56 PM]
You shouldn’t be playing with bruised ribs, asshole.

He sends it, then immediately regrets it. The message before was his heartfelt apology, ending with an offer to give Ilya space. The follow-up to which is a text that calls him an asshole and bosses him around. Jesus.

The sent bubble turns blue, though, so at least there’s that. He knows he isn’t blocked.

Later that night, Shane struggles to fall asleep. He has a light headache from watching the game, but he hasn’t told his mom out of fear that she’d turn it off. He could probably get up to grab a couple painkillers—over the counter now—but he’s too tired.

His phone buzzes on the nightstand next to him, and he grabs it expecting another call from Hayden about how terribly the team misses him.

Incoming Call - Lily

He scrambles to sit up in bed, picking up immediately. “Hello?”

“How did you know I bruised my ribs?” Ilya asks in a deep timbre, and Shane wants to cry at how good it feels to hear his voice again.

“My mom noticed. We were, uh, watching your game,” Shane answered. After a moment, he adds, “sorry about the loss, by the way.”

“Is okay,” Ilya responds. “Scott Hunter needs a Cup before they force him to retire for being too old.”

Shane laughs, smiling like an idiot into his dark bedroom. He wants to ask Ilya about so many things, but he forces himself to go at Ilya’s pace.

Ilya wastes no time. *“So you understand Russian, then?”* He asks in Russian.

“I do, yeah,” he confirms in English, nervous.

"Your soulmate speaks it, I assume?"

"Yeah, uh," he resists the urge to say *you do.* "He does."

"Ah," Ilya responds, switching to English. "And you did not listen to my voicemail?" Ilya sounds nervous, and Shane is glad more now than ever that he stopped himself from listening further.

"Correct," he answers, then stumbles a bit. "I mean, technically, uh, technically I listened to the first twenty seconds, but once you started speaking Russian I turned it off."

"That is good," Ilya says, but he doesn't elaborate. They sit on the phone together in a tentative peace, quiet other than the sounds of their breathing. Shane is afraid to say anything more.

Eventually, Ilya speaks. "What does your mom think about New York?"

He's changing the subject, but that's okay. Shane is happy to talk to Ilya about any subject, and hockey just so happens to be one his favorites. "She thinks they're gonna win the Cup."

Ilya groans on the other end, and Shane laughs. "Weren't you just the one saying Scott Hunter deserves a Cup before retirement?"

"Ah, ah, ah," Ilya corrects. "I said he *needs* a cup. I said nothing about deserving it."

"Oh, I see. So you were just trying to make yourself feel better about losing the playoffs," Shane teases, and he can hear Ilya laugh on the other end.

"You are asshole, Shane Hollander," he accuses playfully. "The whole world must know this." Ilya's voice gets louder, though Shane can tell he's pulled away from the speaker to not overwhelm his ears. "Attention everyone, Shane Hollander is asshole!"

Shane feels giddy, like a high school boy talking on the phone to his crush. He missed Ilya so much, but he doesn't say so. He's still afraid of scaring him off.

"How do you feel?" Ilya asks softly.

Like I miss you. Like I love you. Like I need you. But of course he's asking about Shane's injury, not about his feelings for Ilya.

"Better. Still can't look at a screen for too long, and I've been getting headaches, but I should be out of the sling by the end of next week, so that's something." And he knows he shouldn't, he really shouldn't, but he can't help it. "It'll be nice to not be in a sling while I'm at the cottage."

"Mm," Ilya hums, but he doesn't add anything more.

"Do you…" Shane steels himself for rejection, then forces himself to be brave. "Do you think —would you still want to come?"

Ilya is silent on the other end, and Shane feels like he's going to throw up. This is the moment, he thinks, where he'll finally find out if he's really forgiven.

"I don't know if that is a good idea, Hollander," Ilya eventually sighs. Shane's heart sinks, but he doesn't give up.

"What was it you said to me once? Everything we do is a bad idea," Shane challenges, and Ilya laughs sadly on the other end of the line.

"I'm not saying no, Shane," Ilya says. *Shane.* He called him Shane again. Shane feels hope spring to life in his chest for the first time in a week.

"But you're not saying yes either?" Shane guesses.

"I will think about it," Ilya promises, and for now that has to be enough. For now, Ilya is talking to him again, and even though he hasn't said Shane is forgiven, they're clearly moving towards that direction.

"Okay. Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight, Shane."

Two weeks later, Shane is watching the Cup finals with his parents while texting Ilya. His parents are rooting for New York, while Ilya is mostly making jokes about Scott Hunter being old. It's the best night he's had in a long time.

Jane [9:45 PM]
I can't believe New York is about to win the Cup.

Lily [9:46 PM]
They had to take pity on Scott Hunter eventually.

Jane [9:47 PM]
Come on, even you have to admit that he played great this season.

Lily [9:48 PM]
Yes, he played good.

Lily [9:48 PM]
For dinosaur.

Shane laughs at his phone, and when his parents give him a questioning look, he tells them that Rose sent him a funny text about the game. It's not entirely a lie. Rose did text him to tell him that she's watching the game. An hour ago.

The timer hits zero, and the rest of the New York players explode out onto the ice. New York really did it. They won the Cup.

Shane watches as Scott Hunter shakes the commissioner's hand, then takes the cup and raises it over his head. He skates around the rink with it, and the announcers on TV start talking about just how historic this win is.

Eventually, Hunter hands the Cup to Carter Vaughn, and turns to scan the crowd. Some of the players' families are taking to the ice, but Shane knows from attending a few charity events that Scott Hunter doesn't have any living family.

Scott looks nervous, though, and while Shane's parents chat about the game, he leans forward and watches as Scott gestures to a man in the crowd. The guy is young and attractive, though not necessarily Shane's type. Is he a friend?

He texts Ilya.

Jane [9:52 PM]
What is he doing?

Ilya texts back immediately, which means he's probably watching and wondering the same thing. Shane wonders if he's alone or with people.

Lily [9:52 PM]
I don't know.

His parents look back to the TV as the guy from the crowd hops the boards, joining Scott Hunter out on the ice. Scott guides him by the hand back to the center of the ice, and Shane zeroes in on that contact. Is Scott Hunter…?

Before he can process anything else, Scott Hunter is grabbing the face of who Shane can only assume is his boyfriend and kissing him. Holy shit.

Scott Hunter is kissing a man. On live television.

It's not an innocent kiss either. They kiss like two people who have kissed many times before, and eventually Scott pulls back and engulfs the man in a hug. Shane's mouth is wide open, and he can see that his mother's expression of shock is similar.

Shane's phone starts to ring. *Incoming Call - Lily.*

He excuses himself to the hallway, picking up as he turns the corner.

"What is—"

"Listen to the voicemail," Ilya commands, sounding resolved. "Then let me know if I am still invited."

"And if you are?" Shane asks. He's pretty sure there's nothing that could be in that voicemail that would make him rescind his invitation. Ilya could admit to murder and Shane would probably still invite him.

"Then I will come to the cottage."

Shane waits until he's in the privacy of his bedroom to listen to the voicemail. He pulls out headphones, connecting them to his phone and pulling up his Phone app.

Lily - 1 Voicemail. 7:24 PM. 3/28/17.

Well, it's now or never. Shane presses play.

"Shane," Ilya's voice says through the headphones. This part is familiar. "I think I have the words. But I am not yet ready to say them to you yet. So…please don't translate this."

Ilya goes on to talk about how much he hates being in Russia, how awful his family treats him, and his regrets about the end of his father's life. Shane's heart breaks for him.

"I have no one now," Ilya says, sounding miserable. *"Well, not no one. I have Svetlana. She loves me. And I love her."*

Svetlana again. Shane knows that she and Ilya are old friends, but he can't help the spark of jealousy that ignites in him. Before he can get too upset about it, though, Ilya continues.

"But not like…fuck…But not like I love you."

Shane's heart fucking stops. Or at least it feels like it does.

"That's the worst fucking part of all this is that all I want is you. It's always you. I'm so in love with you and…" Ilya trails off, and Shane is desperate to hear his next words. It sounds like Ilya is crying.

"And I know I have a soulmate. And I know it probably isn't you. But, God, I know I will never love anyone the way I love you. And it scares me that God or the universe or biology has decided that there is a person out there who is my perfect match, and it might not be you. I need it to be you. Because if it isn't you…I don't know what I will do. And if it is you…I don't know what to do. I don't know which scares me more."

The message ends there. Shane sits for a moment in shock, staring at his phone screen and trying to process what he just heard. He wipes a tear from his eye and—fuck—since when was he crying?

He plays the voicemail again, then again a third time. There's so much to process. Ilya loves him. He *loves* him. And then that last part. *I don't know which scares me more.*

Shane understands that feeling. It's what kept him from telling Ilya he understood Russian for all those years, it's what made him so desperate for Rose to be his soulmate. It used to be true for him, too.

But not anymore. Because Shane knows which scares him more now. The thought of Ilya not being his soulmate—he can't even fathom it.

It's rare for soulmates to reject each other. It happens, of course. Couples who have been married for decades, only for one of them to find their soulmate. Exes who can't get past the

things that tore them apart. Having a soulmate doesn't mean your soulmate will be a good partner, or even a good person.

But it's still rare to reject them. In some cultures, people who reject their soulmates are made into pariahs for going against destiny. Russia is like that. He knows because he looked up *Russian soulmate customs* when he was twelve, back when he thought his soulmate was a girl and was probably secretly hoping for a way out of it.

Ilya was probably raised with the expectation that he would spend the rest of his life with his soulmate, whether he wanted to or not. And yet here he is, promising that even if Shane is not his soulmate, he will choose him.

Would Shane do the same?

He immediately knows his answer. If Ilya isn't his soulmate, he will look God or destiny or whatever force it is that decides that two souls are inextricably linked right in the eye and defy them. He will tell them that they are *wrong.*

Because he loves Ilya Rozanov, soulmate or not. He loves him, he loves him, he loves him. He loves him so much that it feels like it can't fit in his body, like all this love has to erupt out of him or else he'll explode.

He pulls out his phone.

Jane [11:23 PM]
You're still invited.

Ilya doesn't respond at first, and Shane wonders if he's gone to sleep already. But ten minutes later he gets a text back from Ilya. It's a screenshot of a flight confirmation from Boston to Ottawa, two weeks away.

Lily [11:34 PM]
See you soon.

Shane refreshes the page on the airline's website, squinting at his phone screen and wishing he'd brought his glasses. His stomach jolts as the *In Flight* changes to *Landed.* Ilya is here.

He looks out his window at the terminal exit, as if Ilya will walk out at any second. Which is stupid, they just landed. What, does he think Ilya is going to teleport to him? They're probably not even done taxiing.

He drums his fingers against the steering wheel. He definitely got here too early. He's circled the terminal at least three times, stopping at the curb long enough each time that airport security yells at him to move along. He can see them in his rearview mirror now, watching him. They probably wrote down his license plate number.

Whatever. Ilya's plane landed, so Shane's not going anywhere. He'll pay whatever damn fine they want to send his way.

He's nervous to see Ilya. They haven't talked much since the night of the Cup finals, just an occasional text here and there, small logistics things to plan for these next two weeks.

They're both sort of in a holding pattern, really. It's like they know they have some very important things to talk about, but neither wants to have that conversation over the phone. So instead, they've been dancing around it while they wait.

Shane has a plan. Well, he's changed the plan six times in the last twelve hours, but he feels confident with the current plan. He's going to drive them to the cottage, show Ilya around, and then once they're settled in, they'll sit down and have an honest, open conversation about how to move forward.

Lily [1:25 PM]
Just got off the plane. Heading to exit.

Shane takes a deep breath. It's go time.

When he sees Ilya finally exit the sliding exit doors, his heart rate kicks into high gear. Ilya is wearing sweats, sunglasses, and a hat, probably trying to conceal his identity as best as he can.

He looks good. *Really* good. Shane suspects that he's extremely biased, because usually no one looks good after spending hours on an airplane.

Ilya puts his suitcase in the back, then climbs in the passenger seat. Before Shane can say anything, Ilya looks around and asks, "is this a Jeep?"

"Yeah, so what?" Shane responds, looking around his Jeep Cherokee like he can find whatever is making Ilya react so distastefully.

Ilya snorts.

"What? It's good in the snow. Practical," he defends. This was not how he planned on greeting Ilya, but it feels on brand for them.

"You're a millionaire," Ilya replies, like that explains anything. It really doesn't.

"It holds a lot of stuff," he adds, but he already knows that whatever Ilya's issue with his car is, that won't help.

"Okay." Ilya says it like he agrees, but Shane knows better. He's just dropping the conversation.

Shane maneuvers them out of the airport lot and gets onto the main road. They're silent for a while, and Shane panics a little. What is he supposed to say? None of his plans accounted for the two hour drive to the cottage. He's kicking himself for that now.

"Are you hungry?" He eventually asks. "It's about a two hour drive, but we can stop for something if you want."

“No, I’m okay,” Ilya responds immediately, and Shane can’t take his eyes off the road long enough to analyze his facial expression.

Shane starts to say more, telling Ilya about the cottage, about groceries, about the weather for the next two weeks. He knows he’s just filling empty space, but he can’t stop himself. He’s so anxious he feels like he might die.

“Thank you for still inviting me,” Ilya eventually interrupts. That shuts Shane up.

Because what is he supposed to say to that? *Yeah, sure, I listened to your voicemail and I feel the same way, I love you so much that it hurts sometimes, of course I was going to still invite you.*

No, he can’t say any of that. He has to stick to the plan.

“Thank you for still coming,” he replies softly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Yes, me too,” Ilya smiles at him. “But also terrified, yes?”

Shane immediately feels better now that one of them said it. “Yeah, same,” he agrees. He takes his eyes off the road for a moment, and Ilya is looking at him so fondly that he briefly considers pulling over to the side of the road so he can kiss him.

Not yet.

Ilya reaches over to where Shane’s right hand is tapping nervously against his thigh and pulls it over to his lap, linking their fingers together. It’s the first time they’ve touched in months, and Shane feels prickles of excitement race up his arm.

I love you, he wants to say. He bites it back.

When they arrive at the cottage, Shane’s skin buzzes with apprehension and excitement. He takes Ilya’s suitcase, moving towards the door without looking back.

“I can carry my own suitcase,” Ilya argues, and Shane huffs.

“Are your ribs still bruised?”

He can almost hear Ilya’s eye roll behind him. “My ribs are fine. Healed.”

“Well, I’m still gonna carry your bag,” Shane insists. He gets to the door, fumbling with the key for a second before he manages to get it in the lock. He turns the knob.

And then he fucks up, because he turns around, and Ilya is smiling at him soft and shy, and his clothes are rumpled from travel, and he looks so, so good.

Fuck the plan. Fuck everything, honestly. The second they both get through the door, Shane is pushing it closed behind them, dropping the suitcase and turning around to pull Ilya’s face to his own.

Ilya gasps into the kiss, clearly shocked by this development. Shane doesn't care. He doesn't care because he's here in his favorite place with his favorite person, who loves him. Ilya *loves* him.

He tangles his fingers in Ilya's hair, pulling in a way that makes the other man groan. Ilya gets over his shock quickly, and soon Shane is being moved around, his back pushed against the door, Ilya's body pressing against him. Every point of contact sends a little trail of fire directly to Shane's cock.

He slips his tongue into Ilya's mouth, moaning at the faint taste of spearmint gum and something inherently Ilya underneath.

He can feel Ilya's cock against his hip, achingly hard. He wants it in his mouth, needs to taste the heady musk of his skin. Shane drops to his knees, grabbing at the band of Ilya's sweatpants and pulling them down alongside his briefs.

He wastes no time, pressing his tongue into the slit before opening his mouth wide and taking Ilya down to the root. He fights against his gag reflex, his body unused to such an intrusion after months without it.

This is repentance, this is devotion, this is Shane on his knees giving worship the best way he knows how. Ilya grunts like he's been punched, bracing one hand against the wall and grabbing a fistful of Shane's hair with the other.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya groans.

Shane presses his tongue against Ilya's cock and sucks, bobbing his head frantically. He needs this, he's never needed anything more than he's needed this.

He brings one hand to Ilya's balls, fondling them in a way that has Ilya panting above him. He can feel how close Ilya is, and Shane doesn't let up. He wants Ilya to come down his throat, taste his spend on his tongue.

"Wait, wait, wait," Ilya commands, sounding breathless. Shane keeps going, lost to the sensation of Ilya's thick cock in his mouth, and doesn't stop until Ilya uses the hand tangled in his hair to physically pull him back.

Shane looks up at Ilya, feeling dazed, drool running down his chin.

"Where is your bedroom?" Ilya asks, and it takes Shane a moment to remember how to speak.

"Down the hall, first door on the left," he pants. Ilya pulls him up off his knees, pressing a dirty kiss to Shane's wet mouth before pulling back.

"I need to fuck you," he breathes. And yes. Yes, Shane wants that.

Ilya pushes Shane backwards, kissing him again as he guides them towards the bedroom. Shane feels free, handing all the power to Ilya. He doesn't want to think right now.

When they get into the bedroom, Ilya pushes him down on the bed before crawling on top of him, straddling his hips. He captures Shane's lips again, licking into his mouth as he presses his wrists to the bed, lightly restraining him.

Shane bucks his hips up, desperate for any sort of friction against his aching cock. Ilya presses his hips down, brushing their clothed erections against each other. Shane moans, throwing his head back at the relief.

Ilya moves to Shane's neck, pressing messy kisses to the skin and moving lower. He releases Shane's wrists to work at the buttons of his shirt, and Shane in turn grabs the hem of Ilya's tank and pulls it over his head.

Once their shirts are off, Ilya leans down and takes Shane's nipple into his mouth, biting just on the side of too hard in a way that has Shane arching his back. When Ilya moves to his other nipple, Shane fumbles at his bottoms, pushing his shorts and underwear off together.

Ilya lifts off of Shane's chest to do the same, and then they're fully naked, skin to skin.

"Where is your lube?" Ilya asks, lowering a hand to palm at Shane's erection.

"In the—the nightstand," Shane answers, jerking his head towards his right to indicate which one. Ilya reaches over, pulling out the lube and condoms Shane keeps there.

He maneuvers off of Shane's lap, settling between his legs and pushing Shane's thighs up to his chest. He can feel how exposed this makes him, but he can't care about that when Ilya is popping the cap off the lube and slicking up his fingers.

He presses the pad of his index finger to Shane's hole, leaning forward to press a kiss to the back of his thigh.

"Please," Shane begs, wiggling his hips as if it'll somehow get Ilya's fingers in him faster. "I need it. Ilya, I need it."

At the sound of his name, Ilya presses a finger in, and Shane groans at the stretch. With his fucked up collarbone, he hasn't been able to finger himself for a while.

"Fuck, Hollander, so tight," Ilya teases, leaning forward to kiss Shane's ankle.

"Haven't—" he hisses as Ilya adds a second finger. "It's—it's been a while." He can feel the curve of Ilya's smile against his abdomen.

Ilya scissors his fingers, working them in and out of Shane's hole. After a minute, he adds a third finger, and Shane whines. He doesn't want fingers.

"Please, fuck me, Ilya, I can take it," he babbles, but Ilya continues to finger him. He'll probably be grateful for the careful prep later, but right now it feels like torture.

After what feels like hours, but is probably a matter of minutes, Ilya pulls his fingers out and tears a condom out of its wrapper. Shane watches as he slides it down his length, a primal part of himself wishing that Ilya could spill inside him. Maybe someday.

Ilya slicks up his cock, then leans over Shane, pressing the head to his hole. When he presses in, Shane throws his head back, overwhelmed by the slight burn and all-encompassing pleasure.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya grunts as he bottoms out. *“Feels so fucking good,”* he adds in Russian.

It’s the first time Ilya has spoken Russian around him since finding out Shane can understand the language. Shane would probably have a bigger reaction to that if he wasn’t impaled on Ilya’s long, thick cock. He could practically feel him in his throat.

Ilya pulls back slowly before snapping his hips forward, and Shane feels stars dance across his eyelids. The pleasure is so acute, so intense, that there’s no possible way he’s going to last.

He reaches up, pulling Ilya into a messy kiss. Ilya continues pounding into him, the rough slapping of their bodies colliding filling the room. He hits Shane’s prostate with brutal precision, and Shane feels heat lick down his spine, fire racing through his blood at each perfectly aimed thrust.

“Gonna come, gonna come,” Shane pants against Ilya’s mouth. They’re less kissing now than breathing against each other.

“Fuck, please,” Ilya groans, sounding close himself. “I need it, I need you to.”

Shane reaches down and takes himself in hand, and it only takes a couple strokes for him to hurdle over the edge, vision going black on the edges from the intensity of his climax.

Ilya curses again, picking up speed and pressing Shane’s legs even higher. He finishes with a pained shout, hips thrusting erratically as he spills into the condom.

He presses his forehead to Shane’s, both breathing heavily as they come down from the high. Ilya eventually rolls to the side to avoid crushing him, and Shane sort of wishes he hadn’t.

After his lungs start to feel normal, Shane gets up, walking into the ensuite bathroom to clean himself up. When he passes the mirror, he sees that he looks absolutely wrecked. Lips kiss bitten, eyes glazed, hair sticking up in all directions. Ilya must look about the same.

When he exits the bathroom with a damp washcloth, Ilya is laying on the bed with an arm over his eyes. The condom is gone, likely disposed of in the trashcan Shane keeps by the bed.

Shane climbs onto the bed, using the cloth to carefully clean Ilya’s softening dick. He presses a kiss to his pelvis as he finishes, throwing the cloth into the hamper across the room. He doesn’t even check to see if he missed.

He lays down next to Ilya, and when he goes to put his head on his chest, he realizes it’s shaking, quiet sobs wracking through him.

“Hey,” Shane says, soft, “hey, hey. What’s going on?” He tries to pull Ilya’s arm from his face, but Ilya resists.

Shane kisses his shoulder, his neck, his chest, trying to press all the love he feels into his skin. “Ilya, I need you to look at me. I have something to tell you.”

This is not how he had planned to do any of this, but he can’t be bothered. If he goes another minute without telling Ilya how he feels, he might die.

Ilya takes in a shaky breath and removes his arm, looking over at Shane with wet, sad eyes.

Shane props himself up on an elbow so that he’s hovering above Ilya, looking down at that handsome, beloved face.

“I love you,” he whispers, and Ilya’s eyes fill with tears again. Shane panics, worried that he’s somehow misread the situation. “I’m sorry if it’s too late, or if you don’t feel the same way anymore. But I love you, I love you so much, and I don’t think I’ll ever stop.”

Ilya reaches a hand up then, cupping Shane’s cheek and running his thumb over his freckles. *“My love,”* he says in Russian. *“I have never stopped loving you. I never will.”*

Now it’s Shane’s turn to cry, the tears spilling over and running down his cheeks. Ilya tuts, making soothing noises as he brushes them away.

“I love you so much,” Shane says, voice shaky. “So, so much, Ilya.”

Ilya smiles at him then, pulling Shane onto his lap. Shane rests his head against Ilya’s chest, letting the comforting repetition of Ilya’s hand in his hair calm him down.

“Does it feel like agony for you, too?” he asks.

“Not anymore.”

Shane wakes up warm and comfortable, cradled against Ilya’s chest. He didn’t realize he fell asleep, but between the tears and the way Ilya was petting his hair, he guesses he never really stood a chance.

He looks up at Ilya, only to see the other man looking down at him with a besotted smile.

“You’re awake.”

“I’m awake,” Shane repeats.

They spend a few moments just looking at each other before Ilya sighs, still smiling as he asks, “so you listened to my voicemail?”

Shane swallows. “I did, yeah.”

“And what did you think?”

“I think that some part of me has always known you were my soulmate,” Shane answers honestly. Ilya’s eyebrows raise, a pleased smile belaying the nerves he can still see behind his

eyes.

“And if I’m not…” Ilya asks, sounding small.

“If you’re not, then I don’t care. I choose you, Ilya. I will never love anyone like I love you.” Shane’s voice is confident, unwavering. He doesn’t want to leave any room for doubt in Ilya’s mind. “But I know that you are.”

“Our marks haven’t appeared,” Ilya points out, and Shane can’t resist rolling his eyes.

“They will. I know they will.”

Ilya doesn’t look convinced, but he leans down and kisses him. Fine, he doesn’t have to be sure. Shane can be sure enough for both of them. They are soulmates. He’s never known anything more than he knows this.

The rest of the day is spent enjoying the cottage, sharing lazy kisses as they swim in the lake, kicking around a soccer ball and giggling as Ilya tackles Shane to the ground to get it back.

Shane grills burgers for dinner, and Ilya makes fun of him for not cutting the recipe in half. Shane grumbles about it, but the kiss Ilya places behind his right ear, where a soulmark should be, makes up for it.

By the time night rolls around, Shane is exhausted. They exchange lazy handjobs in the shower before brushing their teeth and climbing into bed.

Shane wakes to a sharp pain behind his right ear, bolting upright and raising a hand to the aching flesh.

He hears Ilya gasp beside him, startling awake with a hiss of pain. Shane reaches for the nightstand, switching on the light. When he looks over at Ilya, his hand is behind his own right ear.

They look at each other for a second, stunned, before Shane scrambles on top of him, pushing his head to the side so he can look at his ear. Ilya doesn’t fight him, lifting his head to give Shane a better view.

And there it is.

A swirling, complex pattern on the patch of skin behind Ilya’s ear, unique as a fingerprint. Or not, technically, because he suspects there’s a matching mark behind his own ear.

He has Ilya check anyway, and once they confirm that their marks match, Shane bursts into tears. Ilya kisses him everywhere, on his nose, his freckles, his cheeks, his chin. When he reaches his lips, Shane can taste the salt of his tears.

“It’s you,” Ilya says, over and over again. “It’s you, it’s you, it’s you.”

Shane kisses him hard, happiness and relief coursing through him. He wishes he could press closer, so that their very molecules were intertwined.

He knew, he always knew, but it's still such a relief to be sure. Ilya Rozanov is his soulmate.

"My soulmate," Ilya says in Russian. Shane strains to hear, focusing on the words.

"Say it again," he commands.

Ilya repeats it, and Shane concentrates on exactly what he said. "Моя родственная душа."

"Moya rodstvennaya dusha," Shane tries, and he's sure he butchers it, but Ilya's eyes fill with tears anyway. It's Shane's turn to kiss them away, and then he gently grabs Ilya's jaw and turns his head to the side, pressing a soft kiss against the new mark behind his ear.

"I love you," Shane whispers. He pulls back to look into Ilya's eyes again.

"What are we going to do?" Ilya asks, looking a little scared.

Shane has some ideas, actually. Quite a few. They're all a part of the plan he'd so carefully prepared, the one he so quickly threw out the window the second they were alone together. He's known for weeks that he wants this between them, not just for now but forever, and he has plans for the long game.

"I have some ideas," he shares, punctuating it with a kiss. "We can discuss them tomorrow morning. We have two weeks to get our story straight. But right now," he kisses Ilya again, "we don't have to worry about that."

Ilya cups his cheek, smiling up at him like he's the center of the universe. "Okay," he says, sounding more confident now. "But after morning sex, okay?"

Shane laughs, happier than he's maybe ever felt. "After morning sex," he agrees.

He goes to climb off Ilya's lap, but he's stopped by a pair of strong hands on his hips. "No," Ilya demands. "Sleep here. On me. Like blanket."

Shane rolls his eyes, but he doesn't complain. He settles himself against Ilya's chest, listening to the sound of his steady breathing.

They have a lot to discuss tomorrow. There's so much more they need to figure out, skeletons still in closets. If it's okay with Ilya, he'd like to tell his parents, maybe Hayden and Rose, too. Maybe Ilya can tell Svetlana.

But that's tomorrow's problem. For now, he lets himself drift off in the arms of his soulmate, feeling safe and loved.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for reading! This really was such a joy to write, and I hope you loved reading it as much as I loved writing it!

I got the Russian phrase for soulmate after doing some research and going into a few forums with native Russian speakers, so hopefully if anyone here speaks Russian, I used it right. It's not a direct translation (technically it means "kin soul"), but the forum users indicated this was the term that would be used.

Kudos and comments are always appreciated! Come scream about Heated Rivalry with me on Twitter, I have a few more fics planned that I hope you'll be interested in, too!

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by Prongs_Antlerz

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