the cadence of a secret

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by marigoldens

Summary

> *Did you figure anything out?* Shane writes, and flips the page around for Ilya to read it.
>
> *Wont like the answer,* Ilya's written, in his quick hand.
>
> So he doesn't have to take the pen back, Shane just shrugs. *What?*
>
> Ilya sits down at the desk for a steady surface to explain.
>
> *3 things*
> *1 its curse. if true we can break it*
> *2 its spell. if true we can break it*
> *3 we are soulmates. if true we are fucked*
>
> "No," Shane mutters, before he can stop himself. Immediately, he slams a hand over his mouth.

or: Ilya and Shane are soulmates, and their bond prevents them from both talking and being apart. Unfortunately, the only thing that'll make the pain stop is confessing the one thing they *can* say: that they're in love.

Notes

this is the angstiest thing ive written ..This is loosely inspired by books i love, 1 called 'sorcery and small magics' (that everyone should read), another series called 'the tarot sequence' by kd edwards, and my love of the soulmate trope/urban fantasy. i wrote one for buddie a couple months ago and it was rlly fun so here is my return with hollanov😋

i did try to keep Some idea of where i was in the story as i was going on and do a little research on hockey buttttt what i was most focused on was what would work as the angstiest to do plot wise and i dont like rewriting scenes that have already happened soo basically what im saying is lets all just ignore if the timeline is questionable :)

one more thing is im seeing sm abt ppl using ai in fic and just wanna let yall know I Will Never Use AI and i will do something to get me on the news if im ever accused of it like omg this has become my number 1 fear lately. writing is like the one escape i have from reality and ive loved doing it since i was 12 ok this yaoi is provided to u homemade like😭😭 NEVER DOUBT ME Im up till 5 am writing this is srs for me

and on that note this fic took me a week to finish and its 34k words and im very proud of it and i hope yall like it cause it consumed me while i was writing it And i absolutely love a lot of scenes im excited to upload most likely every night☺ ☺🫶

Chapter 1

part I.

2010

Shane waits for Ilya in the dark, cramped hotel room, with the curtains closed and the bed made neatly. It calms Shane down to mess up the comforters, disarrange the pillows, and then put it all in order again. So far, he's done it four times in the past hour.

To distract himself from the pain in his chest, he stands to do it again, grabbing at the corner of the white blanket. Just as he goes to lift it from the bed, he hears a quiet knock.

Finally. Ilya barely has the door shut completely before Shane is embracing him and tightening his arms around his waist. It slows his breath, eases the ache in his bones that has been present for two years, and only lessened at their game today, and now, here, in Shane's hotel room.

Ilya's shaking hands draw up and down, from Shane's shoulder blades to the bottom of his spine, touching gently and then pressing, feeling, warming Shane's skin when he slips them underneath his thin shirt.

He only pulls away once Ilya does, taking a final squeeze of his waist, near desperate to pull him in again, to settle his nervous system. But the touching, the scent of him, the sound of his breath, it's only a necessity. Not a want. A need.

Shane goes for the small notepad on the desk that's sitting on top of his phone. He clicks the pen. He should've had something prepared, but he was too anxious.

Did you figure anything out?? Shane writes, and flips the page around with urgency for Ilya to read it.

His eyes track the words slowly, narrowing. Then, he makes a *give it* motion with his right hand, taking both the notepad and Shane's pen.

Wont like the answer, Ilya's written, in his quick hand, the letters all jumbled together and misaligned. Shane takes care to read them over, though, so Ilya doesn't have to rewrite it slowly, getting annoyed that Shane can't read Russian for the hundredth time.

So he doesn't have to take the pen back, Shane just shrugs. *What?*

Ilya raises his eyebrows at him, and then sits down at the desk for a steady surface to explain. Shane reads over his shoulder as he notes it all down.

3 things

1 its curse. if true we can break it

2 its spell. if true we can break it

3 we are soulmates. if true we are fucked

"No," Shane mutters, before he can stop himself. Immediately, he slams a hand over his mouth.

Ilya's hands go up in anger, and then he quickly pens down, *SHUT UP.*

Shane points at him. *You shut up.*

Ilya points at himself. *Me?*

Shane nods.

Ilya rolls his eyes. *Say something else see how it works out 4 us when u in montreal and i in florida. We will collapse and die*

Shane, and there's no other way to explain it, *snatches* the notepad from Ilya. *Sorry for being in shock.*

Ilya flips him off.

I can cross out one of those options. Shane shows him the page, and Ilya's eyebrows furrow as Shane sighs, and goes to point at the word *soulmates.*

How do we track down someone who cursed us in ~~Suskat~~ ~~Saskatcha~~ REGINA

Ilya smirks at the misspellings, and Shane turns around so he doesn't have to see it. Even when they can't directly talk to each other, he somehow manages to still be an asshole.

You are in canada i am in boston you deal with that.

Shane shakes his head. *You're there all the time.*

I went to talk to crazy witch then you can do this.

To show how annoyed he is, Shane rips the page out. *I hope there's pictures of you talking to her everywhere tomorrow.*

Ilya considers putting down his own reply for a moment, the pen hovering over a blank page. Then, he sets it down on the desk. Part of why they've been dealing with this for over two years now *is* because Ilya finds it better to just *not* talk then try to end the overwhelming pain that they feel when they're separated. Because, *you don't need to talk to fuck.*

Not exactly a lie, but they still let words slip through occasionally, and pay the price of it. Every new word spoken to each other, *or* about each other, adds to the pain of being without the other. Their proximity to ease the ache gets shorter and shorter with every journalists' questions for them about their rivalry, with every accidental *fuck* or gasp of the other's name.

The simple solution is to stop meeting up. They say they'll do it, and then . . . well, it doesn't end up happening. And then they add to their problem. Shane's trying to finally move forward, stop sitting in the denial that it doesn't hurt, and all Ilya wants to do is say, *It's simple.* That's what he wrote when Shane was freaking out the last time, when all the tension of his headache went away with a simple brush of Ilya's fingers at the back of his neck. *It's simple. No talking. That is all.*

That is, most definitely, *not all.*

But Ilya reaches a limit on how long he'll deal with Shane's theories or ideas before he gives up. And Shane, always so quick to say yes to him, at least in a quiet hotel room, gives up, too. The witch here in Boston was a long shot, and Shane made the promise of shower sex for Ilya to go see her. Not any trouble for Shane, but he made it seem like it was *so* annoying, just so Ilya would finally listen to *his* plans for once.

But, touching Ilya doesn't sound so bad right now. So Shane goes with his plan for the rest of the night, his mouth covered by Ilya's large hand, his eyes looking into his to communicate *yes, yes, more,* and they are really fucking good by now at talking without their voices.

Ilya doesn't wake him up before he leaves, but Shane hears the door click, feels the wetness on his cheek from where Ilya had kissed it just seconds before. His hand hits a piece of paper as he stretches, and he holds it out in front of bleary eyes.

try not to talk about me. i know it is hard.

—lily

There are pictures of Ilya all over the magazines getting his tarot cards read. Shane almost wants to frame one and send it to him. He just looks *so* out of place, and uncomfortable, standing in the middle of the street in front of the witch's table, his arms crossed as she talks to him.

He has shades and his hoodie on, but it's very obviously him. Because he was wearing a Boston Bears fucking hoodie.

So much for being *down-low,* the way he said he'd be when texting with Shane before they played against each other.

Shane:

You think the witch will do an interview?

Ilya responds back to Shane's text as he is walking the steps to his apartment, getting an extra workout in whenever possible.

Lily:

Shut up.

And all for useless info. Go to Regina

Shane:

So you're giving up? You want to solve this?

Lily:

Yes. I want to hear you beg for me

Shane deletes the message as soon as he reads it, his face heating.

Shane:

I wouldn't.

Lily:

I think you would.

You would do it now

Right now

He's in his bedroom for no reason at all, keeping the lights off, biting his lip, unzipping his jacket, all for *no reason at all.*

Shane:

Gonna have to try harder than that.

Lily:

Because you would like me to make you beg?

Shane needs him here. To take the cramps from his ribs, to kiss him, to be able to say all of this in his lovely accent, in spoken words. There is nothing, no one else that can help him other than the one person on Earth he should be hating. It's horrible, it's addictive, and Shane can't get enough of it.

Shane:

Yes.

Please.

Lily:

Fuck.

Imagine that out loud

Would be worth the pain.

Shane:

Maybe to you

Lily:

No, to you too.

Listen

Wouldn’t you like to hear me say how good you are?

He would. It’d be everything in the moment, and then hurt him when Ilya was gone.

Shane:

I’d like to break this curse.

Not because of that!

Lily:

Yes, okay.

Shane:

Fuck you

Lily:

Yes, okay.

There are covens in most larger cities of the world, and to the best of Shane's knowledge, they can't pull off *actual* world-ending spells, or life-altering curses, or jinxes strong enough to injure. They are just powerful enough, though, to cast annoying as shit curses such as, *two people feel more pain the farther away they are from each other and the more they talk to each other.*

It was a mouthful. And for the life of him, Shane couldn't imagine why someone would have done this to him and Ilya before they'd even been drafted into the NHL. This was their burden from the first time Shane had introduced himself to Ilya.

If anyone was going to know something, it was Pearl Langston. Shane didn't know where else to go with this if she didn't have answers, being a part of the closest coven to Regina and fairly popular around the area for her ability to heal small illnesses and light pains, as well as having a wealth of knowledge after thirty years studying and practicing magic.

Shane orders himself a ginger tea and Pearl a black coffee while he waits for her to meet him. He's in a booth closest to the wall, furthest from the wide windows of the diner. This place was out of the way of the city, a roadside stop only people on long trips stopped at for a quick bite before they resumed their drives.

Shane hoped no one would notice him because of this, everyone here being in some kind of rush, from the truckers with drop-off dates to the waitresses who had full tables.

Before Pearl gets there, he sends Ilya an update.

Shane:

> Waiting on someone from a coven close to Regina. We have a game against each other in two months. Probably we could break whatever curse/spell this is then.

Shane takes a sip of his tea, waiting for him to respond. He could be at practice, or with someone else, or sleeping, or he doesn't care, or—

Lily:

> Ok. Look forward to see all about it in the magazines

Shane:

She’s nice. She won’t tell anyone.

Lily:

Right.

And with that, Shane puts his phone away.

She arrives twenty minutes late. Shane wanted to be at the gym by twelve, but the tingling in his hands kept him waiting. He wants this to end. Not only was it a nuisance when he was trying to play or do any of his other day-to-day activities, but if either of them let another couple words out for the other, they were going to be in unbearable pain, to the point where they couldn’t even *play* if they weren’t in the same arena.

Pearl, true to her name, has shiny, white hair that goes down to her waist. Ten or twelve necklaces swing as she goes to sit, and tangle with her crocheted shirt. Her eyes crinkle as she smiles politely. “Hello, Shane. It’s great to meet you. You’re very anxious.”

“I . . .” Shane draws out the word, surprised at her bluntness. Then, “I mean, sort of. I just have a lot of questions.”

“And hopefully I have the answers. Before, though, can I ask if you really want them?”

Her nails tap a ringing song on her mug, and Shane tries to not let it get to him, the incessant repetition. “I do. Course I do.”

“If you say so. What’s your first question?”

Shane takes his mini notebook out where he has everything written down, notes on the side as follow-ups to keep himself on track. He trails his finger over the first, having put them in order of importance.

“Well, I wanted to ask you about curses? I read about this one, put on this guy from Arkansas? Every time he’d step outside, it’d start to rain. He stayed in for the majority of, like, two years I think. It only broke when he went to find his ex-wife and she was ordered by her new coven to undo it.”

She nods slowly. “Yes. That’s all true. What’s the question in there, Shane?”

“Oh,” he mutters, going back to his notes. “Okay. So. I mean, after that, I read some more. And all these curses—the powerful ones at least—were cast by people who were wronged by the other. They’re all personal. So can a curse that affects you long-term be put on you by someone you don’t know? And if it can, then can it be put on two people?”

Pearl worries her lip, *tapping* again, looking down at Shane’s list. “These questions are not just for you, then?”

“They’re . . . they *are* for me. Mostly me.”

“Okay,” Pearl softly says. She glances at Shane, into his eyes, looking for something more. “To answer: any curse that lasts longer than six months has to have emotion behind it. And you can’t get *real, true* anger and passion in your curse without personalization.”

Shane’s stomach drops. *Another dead end.* But there has to be more. They’re not out of ways to go with this.

“Okay, so—what about a spell?”

“No, a spell cannot be evil, Shane. Not in its intention. A spell can have negative consequences later, but in its formation, when it’s cast, it has to be from purity. Is your curse, or spell, something harmful? Something bad?”

Shane shrugs, to not show her just how deep the ache is at his sternum right now without Ilya.

“Oh,” Pearl gasps.

Shane’s eyes fly to hers. “What? What is it?”

“Shane,” she whispers, and drags his hands into hers, her long fingers reaching almost to his wrists. “There *is* someone else at stake here. That explains why the pain is so intense. Still, I need you to try and tell me about it.”

Witches scare Shane. Honestly. In their power, in their mystery, but for the most part, in how easily they can read a person. Shane feels like Pearl is staring into his soul, seeing the transparency of his true identity, waiting for Shane to say it aloud so she can fully pick it apart, what it means to him to hide it and what it’d mean if he didn’t.

“It’s . . . I don’t know how it is. For the other person. But to me, it’s this *low,* thrumming ache. Not always in the same place, not always so sharp, but it is always there. Unless I’m with them. And if I talk to them, or-or talk *about* them, then it gets worse. I have to be closer to them, or I think my bones are gonna break apart.”

“You said it fades with them. And when you don’t see them for a long time?”

“Yeah. W-well.” Shane sighs. “I can’t. It’ll hurt them.”

“Not if I don’t know who they are. And not if you don’t say their name. I promise.”

He’s never had to explain this before. But it *excites* him, he thinks, to finally be able to, to get closer to an answer, and to fix things. “If we’re apart, but I’m thinking of them, and nothing else, the pain will mostly settle. But the more I try to take my mind off it—off of *them* . . .”

“The more it hurts,” Pearl says.

Shane nods. “And it *has* to be a curse. I mean, right? There’s no upside to it. We can’t even speak to each other. We probably wouldn’t have even *known* each other without this thing.”

It took Shane six and a half months to contend with the fact that he was tied to Ilya by this curse. For Ilya, Shane is pretty sure he’s still in the acceptance stage.

“Maybe there’s something there with that, then. Curses, spells, jinxes, *magic*—you know where it comes from, right? There’s two sides at work. There’s the human one, the emotional drive behind the force of how powerful any of the magic is, and then you have the other side.”

“Comes from the Earth, right?” Shane had done his reading. (A lot of reading.)

“Exactly.” Pearl smiles. “That’s how your magic is going to stay grounded. Controlled. The Earth knows how much strength it can handle from the human side, because the Earth is connected to every one of us. But, sometimes, both of these sides go haywire, and it’s with the same kind of emotion that they do.”

She pauses, and Shane nods, following, forgetting his tea. His hands are still in hers, and, miraculously, they ease Shane’s hurt. “It’s . . .?”

“Love,” Pearl says. “Not exactly the final answer of *love,* but all those paths to it. Infatuation, admiration, desire. All of that, if it’s strong enough, and if two can’t communicate to the Earth what all of it is to them*,* then wires are crossed, and a bond is formed.”

Shane thinks back. Before, before he’d even met Ilya, he wanted to play him on the ice, to pick his brain about hockey. Here was a boy who loved the sport as much as Shane did. Who could keep up with him, and was his age, all at the same time. Shane was so excited to go out and talk to him, to finally, *hopefully*, know him.

It had come at the same moment Shane realized how beautiful Ilya was, with his shocking blue eyes. At the same time as his irritation with Ilya smoking in a no-smoking area and the way he’d brushed Shane off. At the same time disappointment had flooded in that Shane had fucked up another chance at friendship.

All of it. All of it at once, in the span of a minute, had hit Shane in the face.

“Are you saying . . .”

“I think so,” Pearl finishes his thought for him once again, continuing, “I think you and this person are soulmates, Shane. I’m sorry that’s not what you wanted to hear. It’s such a rare and beautiful thing to have.”

Someone else can have it, Shane thinks. *Please.* And if Shane has to wait until retirement to take it back, that’s *better,* because he *wants* a soulmate, but it can’t be—it has to be *anyone* other than Ilya Rozanov. *Anyone.*

“No,” Shane says. “You don’t understand, we—me and them, we couldn’t be together. It’d be a disaster.”

“Would it?” Pearl leans in. “Shane. There are forces out there, in the atmosphere that we can’t even see. And they are *drawn* to you. You *and* your soulmate. This is something you want to get rid of, I know—but there is almost nothing that—“

“So there *is* something?” Shane asks desperately. “There’s something that we can do to get rid of it?”

Sadly, Pearl frowns, her eyes teary. “If I even told you, it would break your heart, Shane.”

Shane can take it. What he can’t take is the inevitable death he’s going to have all because of being separate from one person. He has a career to build, a reputation to uphold, people he’s made promises to. It can’t all be ruined by him following Ilya around like a puppy. He won’t let that happen. Shane *needs* his life to be *his* life.

He’s been working for this since he can remember. It won’t be taken away.

“Just tell me. Please.”

Pearl hesitates, and Shane holds her hand stronger. “Okay,” she whispers. “There’s only one thing you *can* do. And if you did, the effects of the power would fade, but your conscience, Shane, your *heart—“*

“*Pearl.*” He shakes his head. *This is a mistake, this is how it has to be.* “C’mon. Please.”

“Your soulmate—they would have to die, Shane. You would have to kill them.”

It happens in a second. Shane is thinking of-of holding something, a knife, a gun, a weapon, or—and then he’s crying out, clutching his chest, an agony radiating from the center of his sternum and up his throat.

“I’m *sorry*. Take your mind off it—“

“How?” Shane grits out, tearing at the back of his scalp.

“Think of them. Them smiling, them laughing, how it feels to hold their hand, to reconnect.”

He groans. *Ilya, Ilya, Ilya,* looming over him in bed, a smirk on his face as he leans in to give him a kiss, as he trails them from Shane’s neck to his stomach, as he reminds Shane with a squeeze of his hand to tap him if he needs to stop.

The one who knows him so well, and hasn't spoken to him at all. The one Shane was lit up by in the freezing cold, the one, the one the universe had chosen for him.

"I shouldn't have—" Shane breathes deeply, catching the air back into his lungs. "Please don't ever—don't let me ask about that again. I can't, I-I won't, I promise, I won't—"

"Okay. Okay. I won't. I promise, Shane." She helps ease away the rest of the burning at Shane's lower back, transferring her ability to subtly heal from her hands into Shane's skin. "You are going to have to love them," Pearl tells him. "Maybe you don't now. But you will. You will feel it, and the second you do, you confess it. And all the pain will go away. The same goes for your soulmate. That's the only way to settle with this."

All of Shane's *can't*s and *won't*s go out the window. It is the worst, most terrorizing pain to even *imagine* physically hurting him. Shane doesn't want to think of how it would be if he actually did it.

But the only answer continues with a harder question—*How the hell is he going to make Ilya love him back?*

Two months, and Shane can't wait until they're on the ice warming up to be close to Ilya. It stings, the yearning in his heart, sharper now that he knows he's within walking distance of Ilya. His pulse rings quickly, anxiety buzzing light at his skin as he clenches his hands around the porcelain of the hotel sink.

Just one hour. One hour until he can get to the arena, escape to an empty room or bathroom, and hold Ilya until the hurt wanes.

Pearl's words about *soulmates* circle around Shane's mind. And then Ilya's words. If they're soulmates, *they're fucked.*

Ilya doesn't want it, either. Ilya barely entertains the fact that magic *exists.* When Shane tried to explain how it injured him to drive and fly far away from him, Ilya hadn't taken it seriously. And then the discovery that speaking made the time away worse came, and with that, at least, had Ilya given in to Shane's '*crazy theories.'*

Shane wondered how he was feeling now. If it healed him, too, to let him consume his thoughts, if it finally let him sleep to imagine Shane in bed with him. He wondered if Ilya was tempted to run to him right now the same way Shane was.

Fifty-five minutes.

Shane:

There's an empty office upstairs to the left of the elevator.

He's locked the door of the room, rolled up his sleeves with how the desperation is heating his temperature up. It always gets like this the seconds before they're near each other, that blinding anticipation that distracted Shane from every responsibility he was meant to be following through on. All his inhibitions lowered and the only thing that mattered was being with Ilya once more.

Lily:

2 minutes.

That's it. Just two. Shane sinks down to a crouch, holding the table he almost kneels in front of, his legs shaking. Any more than Ilya's promised *two* and Shane was going buckle and fall.

Shane:

Please.

Lily:

I know.

With a rapid knock on the door, Shane curses himself for locking it. But if someone had walked in on him close to tears, losing his breath, they would've started questioning if Shane

needed to sit out the game tonight. That is the *last* thing he needs to do. He needs to be as close to Ilya for as long as possible.

He crawls at first to the door, getting his footing with support on the wall, and then yanks Ilya inside fast.

It's so quick to draw him in that Shane doesn't even see Ilya's eyes first, he doesn't even slap his shoulder for his mouth opening, on the precarious fringe of saying *hello,* or *thank God,* or *finally.*

Shane breathes him in. That woody, naturalistic smell of after-rain on his skin, at his neck, whispering against Shane's skin from his soft hair. Suddenly, Shane is in his arms, his legs lifted up and secured at Ilya's waist, and Ilya's mouth is on his before he can gasp.

A surprising moan is drawn from Ilya's throat, against Shane's fingertips, the rumble of it vibrating through Shane's blood, making him want more but knowing better than to ask. Instead, he kisses down Ilya's neck with fervor, groaning at the relief of it being *real* and not in his dreams.

His soulmate. This is real, palpable, Shane can feel how his body becomes lighter against Ilya's, how his fears turn their volume down and his two months of uneasiness settles into pleasure.

Shane tries to back away, just a little to take the notepad from his back pocket, but Ilya grabs the hand he had reached for it with and kisses at his palm, looking into Shane's eyes. Then, he trails down his arm with his lips, closing in on more sensitive areas the closer he gets to Shane's throat. *It's never enough,* Shane thinks.

The initial fire is stoked into a slow burn with a long-lasting hug, hands under shirts and Ilya's cross necklace making an indent at Shane's chest. Finally, Ilya lets him pull the notepad out and a pen.

Worse this time, Shane timidly writes, hoping and dreading at the same time that Ilya agrees.

Yes. But only two months apart. Did you have to talk about me?

Shane shakes his head. Any insults towards Ilya from his teammates given on the flight, Shane ignored. He's getting better at it, shrugging, nodding, anything to not have to speak on it to save himself the pain. His team just thinks at this point that Ilya has gotten under his skin so much that he gets annoyed solely at his name. It's something like that, anyway.

No. Did you?

Ilya shakes his head *no.*

Shane has to tell him the truth. He realizes, as he thinks back to their six months apart, that not even that was as bad as this. The only real difference here is that Pearl had helped Shane to learn what the connection between him and Ilya *really* is.

There was really bad day, Ilya jots down, and Shane looks over his shoulder to read. *When u met with witch. Had to leave practice. Did she try to break curse/whatever the fuck for us?*

He deserves to know. But as soon as he does, Shane isn't sure how he'll react. Will he call bullshit and storm off? Laugh in Shane's face? Look for other solutions that will only waste more of their time? Surely he won't smile and kiss Shane and miraculously be bursting with affection for him and heal their bond.

Any path they go down, this is a complicated mess that is, most likely, going to reach debilitating levels before they can fix it.

It's not a curse. Or a spell. And there it is, marked down for Ilya to take in. His expression dances from confusion, to denial, to a despair that curls his lips down. Shane's heart is jumping, asking for release, and with a shaky hand, he goes to give Ilya the pen.

But he shoves it back against Shane's chest. And, slowly, he shakes his head, looking at Shane with what can only be described as a consuming pain and disgust.

Shane's lips part, choking back an apology before he fully says it. His eyes burn, but no emotion comes out, not before a game, not at *this,* not at a rejection from someone he should never have wanted in the first place.

I'm sorry, Shane thinks, trying to communicate it, shrugging miserably because he has no other answer. This is where they are.

And Ilya isn't meeting his eyes. The only way Shane can talk to him without a pen and paper, without his phone, and Ilya's blocking him out. Shane slaps his chest, cups his face with both hands, begging for him to look at him, just one more time. Shane's vision darts all over his withdrawn expression, lost amongst Ilya's raging sea that Shane can usually navigate with enough patience.

He knows it's a mistake. He knows it's stupid, the worst thing he can do, but after he kisses him, open-mouthed and begging, Shane whispers, "*Please.*"

Ilya shoves him back. He breathes heavily onto Shane's face, his lip trembling with every fast and harsh emotion, the betrayal of Shane's voice directed at him, the truth of being Shane's soulmate. And worse, worst of all, is that it *makes sense.*

He's on the cusp of saying something back. Shane almost wants him to. If all he feels for the rest of time because of Ilya is *pain,* then maybe it's right, at least it's something from him.

Before Shane can say it again, before he can ask and plead and fall at Ilya's mercy for something neither of them can control, Ilya pulls him into a kiss.

His teeth are rough at Shane's bottom lip, nipping until it's numb and close to releasing blood. Shane falters for a second, just to ask himself if this is okay, if this is the best way to live with this, ignoring it for the sake of keeping their connection brutal and electric instead of easy and calm.

But if he loses Ilya all together, if what breaks them is that they are more than hook-ups and secret passion, Shane will never forgive himself for being the one to end it, even if it is wrong and leaves him aching to reach for more.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part II.

2012

Months pass, and they are more of the same. Reunions make Shane hopelessly anguished, yet dizzyingly happy, crying and muffling his longing against Ilya's hand, both silencing and helping him so it doesn't pain him more to part.

Afterwards, when Ilya is more relaxed, when Shane has caught his breath, he shows Ilya the same sentence he's been writing to him weekly.

You need to meet with a witch again.

Ilya scoffs. Shane just underlines it.

When you're back home. Arrange it. Go somewhere private.

Still, Ilya doesn't take the pen. His only move is to drag Shane into his lap, tracing his fingers scar to scar, new and old ones.

They know what they're talking about. Stop being stubborn.

With a kiss at the scar lined on Shane's shoulder, he finally begins to answer.

What will one tell me that you have not?

Flipping to a new page, Shane's hand jerks. He can't put this down. He can't even think of *it.*

Something I can't say. Write. Both. The only way out is through, Rozanov.

Beside Shane's words, he puts a big question mark.

It means there's no ignoring it. You have to face it.

You really trust a witch who is from whatever, canada?

Yes. And she's from ~~Susc~~ Regina. Asshole. You made me do that on purpose.

Ilya laughs, loud and heady. Shane savors the gasps of it, the genuity. At least *this,* this joyous noise from him, does not hurt.

He puts the notebook on the side table, and kisses Ilya around his happiness.

There's a celebration of the end of the season at Hayden's house, and Shane's already migrated to the backyard, away from the music and the majority of his team.

He sits on the porch swing, the painted white chipping at the arms. The woods span until all that Shane can see is a black abyss, until the color fades and the lights in the yard are accidentally knocked out by a rogue soccer ball.

Hayden would be more strict about it if Jackie was out here, but now, with a beer in his hand and a ginger ale for Shane, he just says, "*Hey,*" loudly, and the guys give noncommittal *sorry*'s and continue to kick the ball, the light of the moon and the faint glow from the porch their only guides.

"You should have one, man," Hayden says, tipping his beer towards Shane. "You deserve it."

"Already did. I gotta drive home, though."

The beer was more of an experiment to see if it would enact some kind of numbing on the heaviness in Shane's chest. It failed, and worse, because of being distracted by his idea, he'd said, *oh, definitely,* when a teammate asked him something. And then, *wait, what?* And he repeated, *We're beating Rozanov next year.*

Ilya's gonna be pissed when Shane confesses to it later by text, but he deserves to know. Keeping track of when they fuck up, telling each other has gotten better, but the annoyance that comes with those mistakes has *not* gone away.

"Why don't you come inside?"

Shane runs his finger over the metal at the top of his can. “Kinda loud.”

“Tell me about it. I always get noise complaints with these parties. But, what can you do?”

Not have them? God, how Hayden would look at him if he said that.

“What is it?” Hayden asks. He puts an arm behind Shane’s shoulders. “If you’re beating yourself up for that last game—“

“I-I’m not. I’m just. Thinking.”

“Oh, I can tell.” He chuckles, shoving Shane. “C’mon. Get it off your chest so we can go in and you can chill out.”

Shane smiles weakly. *I have a soulmate,* he thinks. *I have a soulmate, and I can’t talk about him.*

“Do you, uhm—you know the whole soulmate thing?”

Patiently, Hayden nods. Shane’s never heard him talk about it, but when he’s with Jackie, he’s quieter. Not in a bad way, but it comes from a calmness, that he doesn’t have to explain himself when he’s with her, he doesn’t have to be energetic and yelling. Jackie is sort of like his quiet place in all the chaos.

With soulmates being real, Shane could believe that Hayden and Jackie are one pair. And his parents would be another.

“Do you believe in all that?”

“That’s what this is about?” Shane’s not fast enough to catch up before Hayden says, “Dude. If you’re, uh, a little lonely, I can definitely set you up.”

Shane blanches. “I’m not—“

“No, it’s okay. This is great! Let me go ask Jackie if she knows someone.”

Fuck. Now Shane’s going to have to come up with excuses. And explain those excuses. And lie. And lie, and lie, and fucking lie.

It’s his first night back in Boston after staying in Russia for the summer, and the first thing he has to do is see about a witch.

Shane and his stubborn insistence that Ilya *had* to, that ignoring this was foolish for months had finally made him agree. He didn't see why they had to complicate this. Ilya's never heard of such a powerful curse put between soulmates like the one he and Shane have to deal with, and so in his opinion, this wasn't a soulmate thing. Maybe it wasn't a curse thing, either, or a spell, but it wasn't fucking *soulmates.* Shane had just heard the worst and gone with that, because he was curious about an answer after two years of just letting it be, and following its shitty guidelines.

It's interesting how fast Shane spirals about this ridiculous curse. Ilya's better not bringing it up, but Shane is worried about it *all the time,* texting Ilya check-ins at the end of the night, making sure he didn't talk about him that day.

The worst thing to Ilya is the pain. Not the sharpness of it, or that it drags him down, but that it is so fucking annoying, and never goes away. He's trying to focus at practice, in a game, in an interview, trying to be happy and high off a win downing shots, and there it is, like a stubborn flu that's grown an infection in his chest.

If there's a way to stop that, other than burying his hands in Shane's hair and breathing him in, he'd love to find the solution.

But *soulmates?*

They were rare. Too rare. Only so many have Ilya heard about, and all of the couples are treated differently, like freaks of nature, like they had chosen to be stuck together. It is no surprise so few are recorded—they probably don't want all of the scientists, all of the God fearing people calling them up and pressing them with inappropriate questions, like they deserved any answers from them.

Ilya's meeting the woman at no choice of his own. So, he agrees to walk with her from his regularly visited gym to his favorite place for coffee, which is fifteen minutes at the most.

Ilya's less caring towards his *public image,* yet knows exactly how he's going to be perceived. Articles will say they're dating, as he leaves the gym to see her looking through her purse and clears his throat.

"Hello," he awkwardly says.

She spooks, her hand coming out of her purse with a pair of sunglasses. "Oh! Hello. How do you know Pearl again?"

"I don't," Ilya answers, and signals for her to follow him down the busy street. They're cramped close on the skinny sidewalk, the heat made worse by Ilya's recent workout. He'd showered, but it isn't helping. "What is your name?"

"Maya? You *are* Ilya, right?"

"Yes. Sorry." Half-distracted, Ilya'd forgotten about an introduction. Talking to witches makes him . . . not nervous, definitely not nervous, just on edge. Maya is younger, though,

her voice soft. So maybe she isn't as annoyingly good at looking into Ilya's psyche as that other witch was.

"Oh, uh, no worries. S-so—*woops,* sorry!" She calls to a guy, who had shoved her and not apologized. "You wanted to know about soulmates?"

Not really. "Yes. You believe in them?"

Ilya slows his stride to match Maya's steps. Where she takes four, he takes two.

She smiles brightly, lifting her glasses up her nose. "I do! Doesn't everyone, though? I don't think it's really just a witch thing. Can't you feel that energy? You *do* have a soulmate yourself."

Ilya shakes his head, fidgeting with his house keys in his pocket. "Mm. Can't energy die down?"

As they cross a street, Ilya holds onto the strap of Maya's purse to keep her going fast on the crosswalk. It's nine in the morning, people are in a rush, not paying attention. It's what Ilya dislikes about his walks, and now that he has to look out for someone else, it makes it all the more chaotic. But he spends too much time on planes, and likes to drive more for the pleasure of an open road.

When they're safely back on the sidewalk, dodging holes in the pavement, Maya answers. "Of course. But that's not how it works with soulmates. That's what makes the bond so interesting, so *intense.* Curses, spells—those can weaken. But soulmate attachments are formed out of a million different emotions, and untangling all that would take centuries."

"*Centuries?*" Ilya repeats. The word confuses him for a moment, looking for the definition in his head amongst Maya's explanation.

"Oh, yes. Like, hundreds of years? Obviously that could be an exaggeration as no soulmates have actually *lived* for centuries—at least, not human ones."

What? Ilya wishes that he hadn't dismissed her knowledge so early and agreed to meet her somewhere private, where he could actually absorb some of what she's telling him.

"I thought just humans could . . ." He puts his hands together. It's too much for him to try and explain himself. Better to leave it to her.

"No, no. I mean, that's what the Internet will say, but really, that's just the easiest, surface level way to look at things. But we're all connected to the Earth, right? In a way, that's a bond of its own. The strongest we all have. And the moon and the ocean communicate, too. The wind and the grass? Trees and soil?"

"Dirt and plants are soulmates?" It all sounds like a stretch to Ilya, but no less interesting. What frustrates him is he can't grasp everything Maya is saying, only catching onto the easiest things.

“Dirt, water, roots. Yes, there’s the science, and that’s an important part. But we know that magic is real, too, and has been here long before us. It can work within the universe without a human’s energy. It’s stronger with a human, fine, and there’s interference from our mistakes with taking care of the planet that have gotten in the middle of the bond from the Earth to us, but it can never *fully* step in front of what’s been there for billions of years—“

“Okay, okay,” Ilya says, signaling with his hand. “Slow down, please. So—if I am just talking about this . . . *bond* between two humans, then? It cannot be broken? Or yes?”

Ilya looks over to her, but can’t read what she’s thinking with her sunglasses on, her arms crossed. “Well, do you really *want* to do that? Most soulmates like the connection. Some have even reported that it’s helped with their grief, their insecurities.”

“No, this is different.” They reach Ilya’s coffee shop, but he opts to bring Maya over to the seats outside in front of it, choosing a table farthest from the door. When she sits down, Ilya leans forward, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. “This bond. If it is . . .”

“Soulmates,” Maya finishes.

“Yes. That. Why does it hurt, then?”

She frowns, sliding her sunglasses off. “What do you mean, it hurts? Like mentally?”

“No, like . . .” Ilya wishes she spoke Russian. “Inside. My bones, my—heart. It’s physical.”

Ilya can feel it now, buzzing and loud, calling for Shane. But he’s hundreds of miles away right now, in Montreal, probably running over New Jersey’s stats, as his first game will be against them. Obsessing over that, obsessing over him and Ilya’s bond.

“That must be horrible,” Maya says, slowing down finally, after her quick ranted words on the walk here. “Are you and your soulmate together?”

“Obviously not.”

“No, like-like a couple.”

“*Oh.*” Ilya blurts out, in surprise. It’s not such a crazy assumption, but Shane and him . . . Ilya doesn’t think it needs labels. “No, we cannot even talk. We are not together.”

“You can’t *talk*?”

“No. That is why we need to get rid of it. We talk, it makes pain worse.”

“*Wow.* Pearl told me your situation was different, but she didn’t tell me that. But, Ilya—trying to get rid of your bond will—and sorry for being so blunt—kill you. You can’t.”

Kill him?

The only way out is through, Rozanov. And now Ilya understands why Shane had said that. But Ilya’s not going to take that for an answer. Witches worship a soulmate bond, that much

is obvious. So it makes sense they would hide the solution to end one, especially seeing as soulmates are so rare.

“I think I can,” Ilya says, not unkindly, Maya seems nice, but—she can’t keep the answer away forever. Some things just aren’t meant to be, and a soulmate connection between him and Shane is obviously one of them. The power behind it is even saying so, giving them chest pains.

“Millions of studies say otherwise, Ilya. The only way *to* break it has never been done, and it never *will* be done. I’m sorry, but this is one force not even witches can manipulate.”

“I will do it, whatever it is. I can.”

Maya rolls her eyes, a first show of impatience. She whispers, “So you’d kill your soulmate with your own hands?”

The idea of it nearly makes Ilya fall out of his chair. He’s pretty sure his heart stops for a few seconds, that bones break and then realign, that his heart shocks him just for *thinking* of hurting Shane.

He doesn’t give Maya an answer. She doesn’t ask for one.

“What’s so bad about them that you want the connection to break? The universe brought you together. And the universe doesn’t make mistakes—“

“*Yes,* it does.” Ilya’s about to yell, but—he can’t. He wouldn’t. This isn’t on Maya. She’s just passing down the truth. Even if it’s a horrible set of facts. “Do you think someone deserves to be stuck with me? I do not. No. This is a punishment.”

“For your soulmate?” Maya tries to grab Ilya’s hands, but he pulls away. “Do you really think you’re so bad? What have you really done, Ilya? What have you done that makes you think you don’t deserve a miracle or two?”

The word *deserve* in a positive light has never set right with him. No one *deserved,* because no one really *owned* anything. *Deserve* leaves a subtext that anyone should be paid back for doing something kind, which was selfish. Ilya did not *deserve,* because he hasn’t done anything all that special.

Him and Shane—he gives, but not enough to make it hopeful. His dad, he takes care of him, but with reluctance. Hockey, he puts his whole being into, but he’s always loved the teamwork of it, to *win,* more than he actually loves the game.

There’s nothing he’s fiercely dedicated to. Maybe to a certain grief for his mother, but. What can she give him now?

What does Ilya *deserve?* He’s not inherently good. Not like Shane is, and Shane *deserves* someone who is as good as him, who has such a set of strong values.

“There is another way to fix it,” Ilya says. “There must be. Me and them, it cannot go anywhere.”

“Ilya—“

“*What?*”

“There isn’t,” Maya repeats. “If you want to end the pain, then accept what the world’s given you. Love them the way the world wants you to. Tell them. That’s all you *can* do.”

Except, the world *doesn’t* want Ilya with Shane. There would be arguing, drama, they could be thrown out of the league—or worse, made to sit on the bench for the rest of their careers, and turn into ghosts.

He doesn’t want that to happen to him. He doesn’t want that to happen to Shane.

“And if I don’t?”

“Don’t *tell them*?”

“Yes. What if?”

Maya seems half-sick of him, rubbing her head like it’s aching. “What do you think? The pain won’t stop. It’ll get stronger, Ilya. It’ll consume you.”

“And them?”

“The same thing. You’re punishing the both of you.”

“*No.* There has to be something that will stop their pain. I can’t take it all myself?”

She flinches. Ilya’s hope flares.

“You don’t wanna do that. You would be—I don’t even know. It’s never been done. It would have to be similar to the other solution, though. *Always* there, always—“

“Let us try,” Ilya says.

“*No.*” Maya’s soft voice slips into anger. “All I can give you are *guesses* to how this would be, Ilya. And my guesses are that it will turn you into a *zombie.* You will be in *so* much pain, that your body won’t be able to handle it. So what it’s going to do, to account for all the extra from your soulmate, is turn it mental. So not only will you have to be on every pain medication in the book, you’ll also be fighting intrusive thoughts, telling you to make the pain stop.

“And-and you’ll *resent* yourself. And there would be no way to undo it, other than letting yourself love your soulmate. So you’ll reach that point, anyway. Do you *really* want to make yourself suffer, all for no reason? All because you think they’re too good for you?”

Ilya’s empty, now. Overwhelmed. Seeing his future, his—*painful* future, the end of a short-lived career, the end of him and Shane. It’s lonely, quiet, it’s what he’s always thought he’d have, anyway. But Shane is thriving, winning Cups, skating over to his partner who is good to him, hugging them, kissing, smiling, glowing.

He doesn’t really know Shane. But what he did for Ilya was make him excited, happy, he eased a pain that wasn’t just because of the Earth’s powers. He’d let Ilya come here, even though he had to know Ilya would want them to stay away from each other—because there is no way he wasn’t thinking the same thing.

To fall in love, what would it be like? To fall in love with Shane, that—that would be something so risky, but something so *fun.* No one would get it. No one would let them, not really. They’d always have to watch their backs, take caution, Shane would never be able to rest.

Ilya could be selfish, as he’s always been. Get caught up in a mix of emotions and let this bond bring him down and turn him into good.

But is he made for that? Or will his mind trick him, the way it always seems to, and tell him devastation is coming, that happiness is *temporary* and it isn’t his to fully hold?

The universe believes in him, but Ilya isn’t so sure he believes in himself.

Ilya couldn’t make it to see Shane before their game, so Shane decides to check him into the boards as often as possible instead to be close.

Over *eight months,* barely talking, Ilya avoiding all things *soulmates,* and Shane looking over his schedule to determine gaps where he could go see Ilya and getting denied each time, and Ilya is acting like he hasn’t been in agonizing, distracting pain every second.

So Shane is pissed, and luckily, he gets to take it out on him. Not shoving so hard to cause him a bad injury, but just enough to lightly bruise, to wake him up and force him to think about how much of an asshole move it is to leave Shane lying in wait, to stop communicating with him at all unless it’s to proposition him over text.

Stupidly, Shane had pushed him to see that witch so he could know the truth. His guilt won him over, not wanting for Ilya to be in the dark about this. There was the other thing he couldn’t even imagine, no less *write* to him, and even though Ilya acts calm about this, he isn't. Maybe he just hates that Shane knows it.

After an exhausting game, Shane partially distracted, the Voyageurs won by one point. Could’ve—*would’ve* been more, if it wasn’t for Ilya, aggravating him without even speaking, without looking at him.

The journalists notice Shane being off his game, playing more aggressive than usual. When he’s in the locker room, surrounded by mics, he tries to pay attention, but he doesn’t like this

part. Having to answer questions when he's just finished a game and has no time to process it, and no time to *shower,* either, and get his disgusting clothes off that feel like they're stuck to his skin.

Shane gives his practiced answers, and dodges Ilya-specific questions by saying *the Boston Bears* instead, a loophole he's ashamed to say took him a while to understand was an option.

By the time he's in fresh clothes and the bond-related pain is merely a buzzing underneath his skin with Ilya close, he's feeling wiped out. His anger dissipates, and he realizes this is the reality of things. Ilya and him are nothing. *Soulmates, love, forever,* all an investment that Shane didn't want, either.

But he *did* want to at least talk about it. Instead, he feels like they're making things worse. He isn't doing it right. He isn't handling it correctly.

Both of the failures weigh heavy. He's exhausted, overcome with disappointment. He plans to go home and immediately go to sleep. For now, he sits in the relief of having his pain run low. He'll leave when he knows Ilya has.

Lily:

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Shane:

Seriously?

Lily:

Yes. Will make it worth your time

Shane:

We'll talk?

Lily:

Maybe.

Ilya closes the door, and Shane slides to his knees, kissing down his midline until he's to the belt looped through his slacks. His hand pushes firm fingers through Shane's damp hair, then to the nape of his neck, pulling him closer.

Shane takes him in, and doesn't think. For once tonight, he is away from his head, away from his stress, burning hot and pleased with Ilya's guide, with his silent demand.

He's catching relief from Ilya's leg between his thighs, from the press of him at the back of his throat that is almost euphoric, close to choking but not quite, perfect in how consuming it is, in how much effort it takes Shane yet feels like no chore at all.

Ilya tries to pull him away, but he doesn't want to. He wants to stay here, on his knees below him, gone and happier for it. Shane moans, and at least he can do this, and at least his mouth full keeps his words in his head. But sometimes, Ilya will replace the nothingness, the emptiness with his fingers, and it can be just as good as this if he closes his eyes.

So he listens, follows Ilya's hand pulling his hair to tilt his head up, to keep his lips parted for two of Ilya's fingers, pressing to his tongue and then sliding clean as Shane adjusts. Shane isn't doing anything for him, not a hand on him, but he sees with Ilya's hooded eyes that it's exactly the opposite.

Shane shuffles forward on his knees, closer to where Ilya has taken over Shane's effort to make him come. He's grunting, breathing heavy, close and frantic for it, pushing a third finger past Shane's wet lips. He hooks at his mouth, claims him in a way he wouldn't given a second thought.

Because they don't do this. Ilya isn't meant to pull Shane closer, let his cheek rest on his stomach for comfort while he holds himself together with his hand almost fully in Shane's mouth, his palm at Shane's chin. Shane groans, whines like he never has, so loud it tears out of him and leaves a burn at his waterlines.

Shane is focused onto him, and thinks he's never wanted anything more than to see how he's satisfied Ilya here, now, when he's mad at him and when Shane's just bruised him all over and beaten him in their game, when Shane's just hid something huge from him for months,

when Ilya's ignored his attempts to be close and has instead told Shane about all his fantasies.

But it's proof, proof that Ilya will take even Shane's most violent days, his most aggressive, horrible actions, and show him that he still wants him, maybe more so. *Show me,* Shane thinks. *Show me I'm good.* And he isn't, is the thing, he's acted shamefully, but he wants to see he's good to *Ilya*, that the bad parts of Shane make him better.

Ilya keeps his eyes on him through it, through moans and his legs shaking, unsteady. He keeps his hand attached to Shane's jaw, uses it to get Shane off his knees. He replaces fingers with his tongue, replaces his leg from between Shane's thighs with those same saliva covered fingers and brings him close fast, as if Shane wouldn't have come untouched without the pressure.

But it's good, so fucking good he's whining, sweating, his heart out of pace, and it pushes him further, the fact they can't talk and Ilya still knows what he needs, that there's this danger of hurting each other if he speaks and Shane is putting *all* his fucking trust in him, tears falling from his eyes. Ilya knows, he knows what he needs, he knows how to touch him, it's so intense Shane is biting into Ilya's buttoned shirt, supporting himself with a leg on Ilya's waist.

He claws into his hair, rides through it thrusting his hips against Ilya's hand, and it is everything, drowning out the noise, uncomfortable in how demanding it is to overtake him. Shane wants to run from how he can work him up, but he wants to stay so much.

He breathes heavy, hot exhales onto Ilya's neck when the adrenaline slows, his mouth dry from biting at Ilya's shirt. When he detaches his mouth, he sees he's ripped through it.

He pushes one finger through the hole his teeth had made. Then, kisses the skin that's revealed from it. Once, twice. Pecks. Then up his neck, to his lips. And finally, he takes the fucking hug he's wanted all summer.

Shane sleeps, snores so quietly that Ilya stops breathing himself for a moment, just to hear it. *I can take your pain,* he thinks. How beautiful is that?

By the time Shane wakes up from his short nap, (ten minutes, tops) Ilya has written and filled up two pages. He shoves the notepad in Shane's face, tossing the pen on the hotel bed.

Shane blinks, widens his eyes. Begins to read.

There is a solution. I know you were told there is not. But there is. It will not remove the bond. We will still not be allowed to talk. But your pain will stop when I am gone. And then we do not have to listen to stupid rules forced on us by 'the world.'

Maya the witch I talked to gave me the steps. Just need you to say yes. It is easy spell. You can go out and get what we need and it will be done in a couple minutes. Will not hurt. I already asked. Don't be stubborn. This is the last we will see each other for a while. We should do it now.

Just the 'don't be stubborn' is a red flag for Shane. Like it's the wrong thing to do, actually? He reads it over five times, ten. Pearl told him completely different from this. She said only one solution. She told Shane that soulmate bonds can't be messed with.

This sounds dangerous, Shane writes. When Ilya tries to take the notepad, he continues. *No spell can break it. Even if it does, it wouldn't work long term. Spells and curses are ~~temporary~~ not long lasting. And since there's no attachment with us, it will last an even shorter time.*

Shane hands it over, crossing his arms. Yeah, he's being stubborn about it. But this isn't sitting right with him. He'd love to be rid of it, but if a powerful witch from a powerful coven says *no,* then it's a no.

I know what temporary means, Ilya's put down. *And if it only lasts a week, then that is good, no? Week you can focus and get better with your backhand. You need it.*

Shane flips him off. Puts quickly, *YOU need it.* Then, *Sorry. Temporary. I don't trust this idea. Maybe the world will get mad at us for trying it.*

I don't care, Ilya answers. *If it will stop your pain, why say no? I would not agree if it was so stupid. Have some faith, Hollander.*

Shane carefully takes in the information, flipping back pages. It's too vague. Too . . . *easy.* His hopes are trying to get ahead of him, a promise within them that maybe his game will improve if he isn't hurting all the time. But Shane is cautious, and Ilya should be, too. Neither of them have experience fucking with magic. Let alone trying to end it.

He reads over Ilya's initial pitch. He'd taken time to put this all down, patient while Shane dozed off. *Your* pain will stop. Just need *you* to say yes.

Shane doesn't much want to entertain the thought, but—*will the spell help you?*

The first sign of hesitation comes from Ilya, as he bites his lip, darting his eyes from the page to Shane. *Why does it matter?*

Shane gives him a deadpan look. *It fucking matters.*

I can handle it. You have a career to get to. Will be hard if you have to go on pain medication or if it affects you forever. Just say yes.

Handle it? What does that mean? No. Shane doesn't like it. He doesn't want it, not when Ilya is barely revealing anything, when he's not giving him a straight answer.

I'm saying no. Unless you tell me the spell will help you, too, we're not doing it. I'll know if you're lying.

Ilya groans, and stands up from where he was sat at the desk. He paces in front of the bed, tapping his hands at his hips.

He's nervous. Not looking at Shane directly. *Guilty.*

The spell would fuck him over.

Shane doesn't need him to write that down. He can read it fine from Ilya's body language.

Furious, Shane stands up and quickly gets dressed. He can't believe Ilya was going to—*fuck* him. Fuck him for trying to trick Shane into it and hurt himself in the process. And fuck him for thinking Shane would ever even consider letting it happen.

You're going? Ilya holds the paper up in front of Shane, his focused gaze watching as he buttons his shirt.

Shane doesn't go for the pen at first. He gets to the bathroom, checks his hair, washes his mouth out. Gets his shoes on, his jacket. Shakes his head, but the anger won't calm.

Don't you ever try to pull this shit again, Shane says on the paper, the ink heavy with his tight grip on the pen. *You're not going to end your life in the process of saving mine.*

He doesn't give Ilya the time to say anything back. He heads home, and feels the pain persist as he does.

Chapter End Notes

and once again i will mention how i like shedding light on ilya's depression during the hr timeline

this has gotten me thinking about the inherent loss of agency when it comes to having a soulmate, and like choosing the person to love and trust forever should not be left up to the world you know so i thought about this a little too much and thats why making the point of how shane and ilya couldve stopped talking was important bc it left them a choice once they found out. but then again, it shouldnt have been either stop talking or fall in love quickly ! but i then became too interested by the layers and overall (fantasical) philosophy of soulmates and decided to leave all the morally grey what is supposed to be romantic stuff in.

honestly i think it makes it more romantic bc theres a resentment to this bond but also helps them look deeper into their interactions and begins this dynamic of working together aka building trust when they're meant to be against each other and while loving each other feels crazy now theyre at least acknowledging they dont wanna kill each other aww<3

i'll stop now lollll i am So Sorry

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part III.

2013

January

Ilya:

Still mad?

Shane:

No.

Ilya:

No?

February

Ilya:

Have you seen this article?

Shane:

?

Ilya:

Soulmates in Ireland. They could hear each other's thoughts after a date. They did not know what was happening and went to the hospital. Now they are being tested, shoved in front of cameras.

If we did the spell, we can avoid this.

Shane:

I told you not to ask again.

Ilya:

No, you didn't.

I would do it for you.

Shane:

You're doing it for me?

Are you sure?

March

Shane:

That wasn’t fair.

April

Shane:

Sorry.

May

Shane:

Come on.

I’m sorry. But it would ruin your life.

I'm not letting you do that.

June

Shane:

Have a good summer.

July

Ilya:

Are you busy?

Shane:

Hey

No. How have you been?

Ilya:

Bored.

Shane:

You’re not serious

Ilya:

Whatever. I’m over it.

Shane:

Fine

I’m bored, too.

August

Shane:

Another case came out.

Ilya:

Soulmates, yes?

Shane:

Yeah. They said it was like the world sent them on a mission. They could feel each other, but were across the country from each other. Once they met, all their anxiety went away. They wouldn't even describe it because it was too 'spiritual' and 'otherworldly' to share publicly.

Crazy, right?

Ilya:

Very crazy, Hollander.

Very.

Shane:

I guess so.

September

Shane:

See you in Boston October 29

Ilya:

Will be a waste of trip for you.

Shane:

We'll see.

Ilya:

Need to see you before.

Okay?

Shane:

Yes.

October

Ilya:

Painful, yes?

Shane:

Fuck you

Ilya:

Is not MY fault!

Shane:

Oh it isn't?

Why does it always get worse right before we see each other?

Ilya:

Maybe because you want it so much.

Excited to see me?

Shane:

Fuck you again.

November

Shane:

I'm sorry. I just had to answer two questions about you. My coach is getting onto me because I always avoid them. I couldn't help it.

I'm sorry. Really, I am.

Ilya:

Relax.

Didn't even feel it. Was in a game.

Shane:

You’re going to. And then you’ll be pissed.

Ilya:

Okay. Then I’ll talk about you.

Shane:

Please don’t. I tried.

I really did. And have.

Ilya:

Hollander, it was joke.

Calm down.

We both know about the clock on this.

Shane:

Well we’ve done sort of good so far. And now I’m the one fucking it up.

Ilya:

Yes, and I will probably fuck it up next month.

December

Ilya:

Did not fuck it up.

Do I get a reward?

Shane:

Your reward is saving us from collapsing on the ice.

Ilya:

Boringgggg

We should fuck it up in more useful ways. Don't you think?

Shane:

I don't think.

Also, it's eight in the morning. Bit of an early start.

Ilya:

Not to me.

Shane:

Of course not.

Have a good day.

Ilya:

I will try without my reward ☹

Have good day, Hollander.

2014

Shane's days are spent ignoring his body and its needs. *Mind over matter, mind over matter,* he tells himself before each game. But it's getting harder and harder to push himself, to stay standing after he's checked into the boards.

He can't talk about it with his team's doctor, because he can't explain why he's hurting. But if he could, if Shane could just say *anything,* he would say—he would say, *I have a soulmate, and I don't love him, and it hurts. But, you know, I think I could. Love him. If he would let me. And people would hate it, but, God, I'd feel so much fucking better.*

There's magic coursing through Shane's blood, and all it feels like is poison. It's worse after games, leaving Shane to sit in it, plus the aches from exhausting himself on the ice, no distraction other than thinking of Ilya, who's in Boston tonight, playing a home-game.

Shane's watching, as the score remains the same as it has for the past ten minutes, 3-1. Ilya's winning. *Boston* is. It's almost over. Shane can't comprehend how he keeps his energy up, all throughout the game when he knows *exactly* what he's feeling right now. A raging headache, a weakness in his knees, and always, *always* that burning in his chest.

Maybe Ilya has a stronger pain tolerance? Maybe he's better at repressing this shit than Shane is? Whatever it is, he's been meaning to ask him. But that would mean saying it's affecting Shane more than it's affecting Ilya. And Shane is never one to admit defeat, not until he's done everything possible to fix the situation.

Boston predictably wins, and cameras follow them closely. After a commercial break, there's Ilya on the screen, breathing heavy, his chest red from exertion. He looks good, perfect like this in front of a camera, confidence shining on him brightly.

Shane turns his volume up. He gets to hear his voice so rarely. They ask him how he's feeling about the win tonight, and he smirks.

"Never been better, Rachel." And of course, he knows the journalist's name. "We are on a bit of a winning streak, I don't know if you know." The words dance together pleasingly in his thick accent, pulled from an ineffable, open exuberance.

There's so much about him Shane doesn't know, and so much he wants to. Ilya told him, more than once, (albeit in a joking manner) that he hated pronouncing certain words, and Shane was lucky he got to deal with his handwriting instead (which wasn't as nearly bad as Shane's was).

And yet, he speaks loudly. Like he knows the English language inside and out. It's false confidence, maybe, fine. But Shane thinks, as Ilya is basically backed into giving a long answer from the journalists' thorough questions, that it's all bravery.

Maybe it's Ilya's secret to playing through the pain, and maybe Shane was too quick to call him out when he wanted to do that spell. Really, it was just Ilya showing who he truly was.

Selfless, and barely knowing Shane, he was ready to take on his pain, to ruin his chance at a future.

But is that how Ilya saw it? Or did he only see the chance of one of them being able to break free from this, and was brave enough to accept the consequences if it meant Shane could be released?

Shane still wasn't doing the spell, but. He was less pissed now.

*Shane**:***

Good game.

He texts Ilya when he knows he'll finally be able to see it, after the cameras leave him alone and finally let him go back into the locker room.

Lily:

You were watching?

Shane:

Nope.

I have an idea.

Lily:

You think you will break my streak? Funny.

Shane:

I will, but not that.

Something else.

I don't have practice tomorrow. Or a game.

And you'll be in Boston for the next day.

Lily:

You want to come see me, Hollander?

Shane's fingers hover over the keyboard, almost shaking. Is it too much? Surely, Shane isn't the only one who thinks of this every day, who needs it like a lifeline. Ilya has to feel it, too. And since the Olympics, they haven't seen each other. Ilya's been focused, driven, pushing himself to the limits through every game.

Shane thinks he knows what's happening—what he's going to accomplish by the end of the season. But he won't inflate his ego about it. But, also, he's been recording all his games, and more than once has he leaned forward in his seat, captivated by Ilya's strength.

He wants more than one thing, going to see Ilya.

Shane:

It would help.

Lily:

Yes.

Shane:

So yes?

Lily:

Is what I said.

Shane stands up, getting ahead of himself, already doing a mental checklist of what he needs.

Shane:

I could come tonight.

Lily:

You will get here at like three am.

Shane:

Worried?

Lily:

🙄

Be careful.

Shane:

I will.

See you soon then.

Lily:

See you soon, Hollander.

The same sensation Shane gets every time he's close to Ilya washes itself over him. It grows, becomes more apparent as the hours draw to minutes. Shane's hands are trembling with it.

At the end of agony that Ilya gave him came the intoxication of dopamine. It's all that remains as he pulls into his driveway, the headlights off to not draw attention from Ilya's neighbors. He stops the car, gets his bag, and heads up to the door, texting Ilya a *here.*

The distance Ilya's been putting between them makes Shane hesitant, nervous to be with him tonight. Their time will be limited, but worth it, and Shane's been planning it for a week, now. With their bond, he's always looking for openings, but Ilya rarely says yes, and Shane rarely is confident enough to ask.

But he's here, waiting at Ilya's front door, and they'll have close to a full day together. The more time, the bigger the risk, but Shane's willing to take it to be with him.

Ilya takes Shane to bed right away. No tour, no talking, he's not interested in that right now. Right now, he wants Shane underneath him, his moans in his ear. It's a great way to end an eventful fucking week of won games, celebrations, and a counted sixth win on the Bears' streak.

Shane's telling him, with a hand on his hip, for faster, for more, for enough for his brain to fog. Ilya is more than glad to be that for him, as Shane gives over the control and has Ilya doing as he pleases.

To add on top of everything, all the pain is gone with Shane so close; so close his back is to Ilya's chest, as Ilya brings him to his knees and holds him up by the waist, taking a hand to his jaw and tilting Shane's head back on his shoulder.

He loves to bring Shane to this point of no control, of relaxing. He is good this way, perfect, taking Ilya like he *needs* it, like he never wants it to stop. And Ilya doesn't, either, he could be this for Shane as long as he'd like, as long as they're together, because Shane makes him stronger.

He feeds off him. It's like he can touch it, the energy he brings. Elevated, a burning pyre in Ilya's heart. He wants to praise Shane for this, for centering him and returning power that is lost without him. He is so good, so good for Ilya always, pure and beautiful, Ilya craves to hear his voice if Ilya would tell him, *Good boy, Shane,* especially if he is breathless and moaning and getting out a choked, *Thank you,* or better, *Fuck you.*

Ilya is so stricken by it, just the imagination of it, that he comes without registering it's going to happen first, and he lays Shane to his stomach with a push of his hand between his shoulder blades.

Shane follows him quickly, curling his hands into Ilya's pillow, his mouth wide open. Ilya always wants to give him more, light him up with so much it crushes all his worries and leaves him happy for hours.

Because it's what he does for Ilya, every time. He wishes this for Shane, but knows that he is high-strung, constantly thinking five things at once.

Not now, though. Not with Ilya.

He cleans him when he catches his breath, and grabs his phone in case Shane wants to talk. Then, he brings him onto his chest, petting at Shane's sweaty hair. He'll want a shower, but for now he allows himself to close his eyes.

They spend their day together watching movies, playing video games, and falling in and out of sleep. They write on Ilya's Notes app when they have something to tell each other, and when Ilya smiles at something Shane writes, Shane wants to put down, *beautiful.* So beautiful.

His cocky smirk is the most likely thing for Shane to see when he's in an interview. Not many, Shane assumes, get to be with him when he isn't putting on his well-practiced act.

He shows Shane *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift,* looking at Shane shocked when he tells him he hasn't seen it. And then, it's the other movies in the series, throwing pop-corn at each other. Shane keeps score in his head of how many he catches, and it's more than Ilya.

You are just bad at throwing, Ilya types.

Excuses, excuses, Shane types back.

They are slow about their private day. Shane had wanted to do more, everything, fill every second, but Ilya didn't allow it, barely letting Shane leave the couch, even to help with lunch.

When they're both tired of movies, but not laying together, Ilya trails his lips down Shane's chest and makes him come with a slow, drawn out effort, kissing his thighs afterwards and not stopping until Shane's tremors do that were racking through his body.

It's concentrated, attentive in the way they usually don't have the time for. Shane brings Ilya up and kisses his cheek, his nose, his forehead for such passion and care, for bringing Shane to a state of bliss over and over, never letting his stress get to him the whole day.

Shane only gets up after dinner to grab his book while Ilya watches a Chicago/Buffalo game, his eyes sluggish to open once it's off commercials.

Shane's back-and-forth between the game and his book until Ilya puts it on mute, when the game is 4-1. He turns in Shane's lap, and nuzzles his face into his stomach.

Shane watches him for a moment. He carefully pushes his curls from his face, and swipes an eyelash from his cheek. Then, he pulls the blanket up Ilya's shoulder.

Can I try something? He types for Ilya to see, turning the phone's brightness down so it doesn't startle Ilya as he's nearly asleep.

What? Ilya writes, slow.

If I read out loud, do you think it'll hurt you?

Ilya doesn't respond for a moment, running a finger over his lips. *If you are not saying it to me, then it should be ok.*

Definitely. Definitely not doing it for Ilya, universe. He's just reading out loud because he wants to. Not at all because he wants Ilya to finally be able to fall asleep to his voice, because he's been up for most of the past twenty-four hours.

Shane tries to communicate this to whatever powers control their bond, that it's just him reading *for himself.* And then, he starts on his new chapter.

Shane's voice is like silk. Dark, rough silk, or like chopping a tree. Something of nature, of the calmness of it, but also the quiet power it wields without effort.

He's slow over sentences, never messing up, never stuttering. Ilya is close to sleeping, drowsy, but it's *Shane's voice.* His sturdy voice, and one of his hands playing with Ilya's hair, and his body's warmth to Ilya's own hand on his hip, the other squished close to his thigh.

Ilya doesn't know what the book is about. But he listens. There's a long monologue, the English complex, words Ilya doesn't catch, but Shane keeps slow so Ilya can grasp the most of it.

Ilya hasn't stopped going since the Olympics. It's been running, fighting, *pushing* for over a month now, showing his team that he is capable of being their Captain. Showing his dad, too. Even though he'll forget it eventually. Even though nothing is ever good enough, anyway.

It's to his mom, too. The farther he gets, the more hopeful he stands to be. He still wants to make her proud.

When it's time for Shane to leave, it's ten o'clock. That leaves him four hours of sleep. He pushed it. He just wanted to be with Ilya as long as possible.

Ilya's asleep in his lap, his lips parted. Shane gently shakes him awake, and tells him he has to go.

Ilya holds him tighter at his hips, and Shane quietly laughs. He wants to stay the night badly, cuddle up in bed with Ilya and fall asleep together. But he can't miss practice.

By the time he's kissing Ilya goodbye in the hall, and Ilya is writing, *Drive safe. Blast music or something. Or do you just listen to white noise?* Shane is wanting so much that it's making his mind race.

For Ilya to pick him up. Kiss him deeply, push him up against the wall. To say *stay,* with his own voice. *Stay all night. God,* Shane would do anything for Ilya's voice. He hasn't heard him speak to him in years, other than the mistaked *fuck,* or *Hollander.*

Ilya hugs him tight, sleepy and clinging to Shane. He'd take care of Ilya like this, in another life. He'd hold his hand and take him into the bathroom to shower and brush their teeth together, and then he'd have Ilya in his lap again. He'd do so much with him if he was allowed to.

It's horrible. Shane thinks, as he leaves, as he walks to his car, that there's something now he could say to Ilya that wouldn't do them any physical harm at all. But it would break them. It would stop Ilya from talking to him. *Too dangerous. Too foolish.*

Shane knows all that. He's fucked up over it, too. But who says Shane isn't capable of loving Ilya in private? For years he'd do it. For *years.* Would Ilya let him? Could they fall into it? How would it even feel?

It probably feels the way Shane gets every time they reunite. Consuming and demanding, but love all the same.

He didn't know love could be so loud. He understands why the world has been in grief for years, now, wanting Shane to commit to his soulmate. It's fucking everything.

It just can't be. Not yet, at least.

When Shane is gone, Ilya calls Maya. He's been talking with her sparingly, when he has questions, but she always answers.

On the fourth ring, she picks up.

"Hello?"

"What if they love me?" Ilya blurts out, his breath shaking. He leans against the wall of his living room. "What if they—what do I do?"

"Your soulmate?"

"Yes—*yes,* who else, Maya?" He winces. "Sorry. I am . . . freaking out, I think."

"Yeah, I can tell," she says back, fighting Ilya the same as he had. He likes that about her, that she doesn't accept Ilya's jokes and sarcasm. It's annoying sometimes, but he's glad for it. "That's a good thing. A *great* thing. Why panic?"

"This . . ." Ilya's legs shake with fear. He slides down the wall. "It isn't good. It is disaster."

"Why?"

"*Because.* Because!"

"Because?"

"Because, I—" his voice breaks. "What will we do, huh? Be a couple? It isn't possible. Not for us, not when—not when they are so . . . and I am so—"

"Not good?" Maya sighs. "We've been over this, right? You're a good person too, Ilya. And your soulmate would probably be saying the same thing right now."

"Eh, no, they would not. Does pushing them away whenever they try to talk to me sound *good*, Maya? For years, we fight, and they keep pushing, and—Christ—" *I think I finally let him in. "*What do I do?"

Shane and his fucking . . *way* about him. And his reading, and his smile, and his stupid freckles that Ilya wanted to kiss across. He's pissed at him. No, *furious* at him for being so easy to fall for.

"Probably what you said. Be a couple? Be in love? End your pain? I can practically feel it over the phone, Ilya, coming back to you. Did they just leave?"

"Yes," Ilya croaks. He can feel Shane's distance, creeping in. "He did not want to. He wanted to be here, but—so many *we can't*s. So many. I wish he had just let me do the spell. He would

be okay, now. I wouldn't, but—he would. Now we are permanent. Forever, right?"

Maya hums softly. "Yes. Sorry, Ilya. No more running." She whispers it sympathetically, and because she has more patience for Ilya's bullshit than most of the population does, she's let him make excuses so far. And now it's confronted, and—not even *she* can feed Ilya's suppression. It's here. The love has breached through.

She doesn't mention it when Ilya sniffles, when he chokes back a sob.

"He?" She asks, though. Which stops Ilya right away.

"What?"

"Your soulmate. It's a he?"

Fear throws him into shock. "Yes," he mumbles, about to hang up, block her number.

But. "That's great, Ilya. That's—"

"It's fine," he cuts her off. "He is . . . yes. He's great. It is all so great."

"Sounds like," she quips.

It manages a laugh out of Ilya, even in the throws of a breakdown. Shane's distance hurts him more and more, putting pressure on his heart. His face contorts in pain, reminding him what *keeping it in* has done for him.

At least he could prolong it. At least they were able to manage a few good years in the NHL, doing what they loved while battling against the world.

"We're fucked," he whispers. He hates himself for noticing. Hates that he *wanted* Shane to say it, when he saw it dancing in his eyes. Such affection. Such love. Shane thought he was stone-faced, that it worked, hiding himself, practicing it for as long as he has.

But it doesn't work on Ilya.

And it never has. Even when Shane thought it had, Ilya could still read the heartbreak painted across his anguished expression. But he didn't mention it. He didn't want it to lead to a conversation. He let himself ignore Shane's feelings, and his, for enough time to where he could convince himself they were safe to be emotionless once more. And then he'd see Shane, hold him tight. And he'd think all over again about what a fool he is.

He's always known that Shane was dangerous for him. That what he did to Ilya wasn't anything Ilya could control. They were thrown into this, but they could've never talked to each other again. It could've remained nothing.

How could he have let this happen?

Chapter End Notes

(a tuna melt scene of my own design one might say…)

Basically everything about how soulmates work here is a cover for something else in canon. Soulmates are treated like outcasts, people don't know how to process it (how they would be treated if they came out) they're not allowed to talk about each other without it hurting (cover for the same thing in canon where it could hurt them career wise early on) cant talk to each other without it hurting physically (cant talk in canon without their feelings developing, without it becoming realer) being with each other both eases the pain and is a risk bc they could speak to each other (liking being together but always a chance they could get caught or slip up and admit feelings)

Im just going to be overexplaining my thoughts behind this fic the whole time apologies …..

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

tw for: panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

part IV.

2015

If Shane doesn't know where he is, then his mom does.

She can name all of the sponsorships he's doing off the top of her head, plus his schedule for the next month. She knows his pre-game routine, food he avoids and food he deems okay to eat.

She knows everything about him. Everything.

Shane doesn't like to hide things from her, but he's become good at it. The pain is one thing. Ilya is another. Or maybe he isn't. He is one half of the bond that's actively harming Shane. He's causing it, but he doesn't want to. Doesn't mean to.

He shouldn't be thinking of him right now. He's supposed to be listening to his mom, talking about the busy week Shane's going to have.

There's gifts from brands, requests for interviews, journalists who want to be the one to release some heart-felt story from Shane's childhood the minute the Voyageurs win the Cup.

And they *will* be winning this season. Shane can feel it. He's been working towards this all his life, and nothing is going to stop it. Not now.

"And you have the commercial shoot on Thursday at nine, and then—Shane. Shane?"

He looks up from the red placemat on the table. "Sorry, Mom. The, uh—the commercial."

“Yes. They’ll want you there early, but—“

Shane’s a fool to distractions anymore. He used to be able to turn his brain off when it came to hockey. Hockey washed it all away. It made things better. And for a couple hours, it made Shane free.

But hockey is connected to Ilya. And Ilya . . . well, Shane is always thinking of him, whether he’s trying to or not.

He shouldn’t be. But the bright lights of the restaurant, his fully booked week, and the sounds of laughter, chatting, the feeling of the rip in Shane’s jacket—he just needs something to power all of it over.

When their food comes, the smell makes Shane’s head hurt more than it already is. The steam from the plate carries up, turning the private booth they’re in humid.

The rip widens at Shane’s pocket. String unties, and he twirls it between his fingers.

“Honey?” His mom calls. And maybe she has been, for however long Shane’s been lost in his head.

“What?”

“We were just saying, we’re looking forward to coming to your game tomorrow.”

“Oh.” They were visiting Montreal, staying with Shane. It’s been nice having them around. He doesn’t see them as often as he used to, as he’d like to. But they worry over him when they’re here, taking on Shane’s chores at home when he doesn’t ask, talking about his diet, that he doesn’t have to be so strict with himself all the time. “Yeah, uh—me too. Toronto’s been-been great this season.”

It’s practiced answers, media training. Having a script can be helpful. Thinking of conversations before they happen so Shane is prepared with the best answer to continue a conversation other than end one.

People like him social. And smiling. And present. And kind. Shane does, too. And so he is. It’s not a problem to entertain all of it, he knows this is how things are, but sometimes, he gets really tired, and he doesn’t know why. And that exhaustion turns into a panic. And once he’s panicking, it’s hard to be what people expect.

“Not as good as you, of course.”

Shane smiles a little too late, forces it wide. “Thanks, Mom. It’ll be fun.”

It isn’t a lie. Eventually, he’ll stop feeling like this. Tomorrow morning. He puts a time limit on it. *Tomorrow morning,* he will be back to normal. He’ll force it in.

“Oh! By the way. We saw the Pierce’s yesterday, and they said their daughter is a big fan of yours. She’ll be coming tomorrow, too.”

Pierce? Old neighbors? Could be. “Great.”

“Well—“ She pauses with her wine in her hands. “It’s just, if you’d like to meet her, then—“

“Mom—“ Shane interrupts. Of course that’s where this is going.

“*No* pressure, I’m just saying, she loves hockey, Shane! You could talk to her, and—“

“I—“ *Can’t?*

“You don’t have to answer right now. But, you know, if you’re interested.”

He isn’t. He’s pretty damn sure he’s already in love with someone else. Someone they couldn’t be talking so casually about at lunch in the middle of a fine-dining restaurant.

It’s a lot of reasons why. The first is that it’s *Ilya.* Ilya, who he’s supposed to have been hating all this time. Ilya, who he avoids questions about, and so his parents *fully* believe he *does,* in fact, have a problem with him.

Ilya, who he couldn’t hate less.

“What if—“ Shane messes with the hole in his jacket more, making the rip harder to sew. “What if I have a soulmate out there?”

His dad finishes chewing, then says, “Do you think you do?”

“No,” Shane immediately answers. But. Why would he have brought it up if not? They’re going to catch on. To all of Shane’s lies. “Maybe. I could. There’s more cases now than there ever were. Only about ten thousand, but still—“

“Not nothing,” his dad says.

He’s always been willing to listen to Shane. Doesn’t jump to conclusions, or call Shane’s worries insignificant.

“Right. So. They’re *real,* you know. And the world is meant to bring them to you. I’d rather focus on my career than trying to, like, get in the middle of that.”

It’s a weak excuse. Shane looks down at his food while he eats, hoping all things *dating* are over with. He’d rather talk about *anything* else, actually. Other than his life. That can be ignored, too.

His mom puts down her fork. “Shane. That doesn’t happen for everyone.”

“I know.”

“So it’s okay to search it out. If I didn’t, I never would’ve met your dad. You make time for it. I don’t want you to be—“ She sighs, stopping herself.

“What?” Shane croaks. “Lonely? ‘Cause—“

“Oh, *no,* honey.” She reaches her hand out, placing it over Shane’s. “I don’t want you to miss out, Shane. That’s all.”

Guilt gets through, and tangles around Shane’s ribs. “I’m not, Mom. I’m good. Really, I-I’m good.”

She nods, the tears in her eyes disappearing. “So you . . . you *do*? Have someone?”

Shane glances up, caught.

His dad leans forward. “Shane?”

The panic persists against his heart, taking control of even his hands, his wobbling jaw. “I—“ His mouth goes dry. *I’m not ready.* “I gotta go to the restroom. ‘Scuse me.”

The room widens, as Shane walks towards the hall. He dodges waitresses, tables, breathing heavier. When he reaches the bathroom, he locks the door behind him, almost slamming it closed.

He checks to make sure no one else is there. The stall doors echo as he looks, hitting against the walls. The sound bounces, making Shane flinch.

It’s too loud. He stops. Freezes, so he doesn’t make another noise, standing in front of the sinks.

He takes large, heavy gulps of breath, fanning his shirt. If he were braver, if he was kinder, if he was better, then he’d—but he isn’t. Years, and he’s not ready. Careful, so careful, and it was the perfect moment to say something, but he choked up.

He grabs his phone. He goes to call someone before he knows what he’s doing, and listens as it rings.

He looks down at the name. *This is a bad idea,* he thinks. Horrible. Worthless.

But he doesn’t hang up. He just waits. Waits, and waits, and waits, until the call connects and all he’s met with is silence.

He brings his head down to sit in his hands, the phone close to his mouth. It’s hard to make himself breathe, he sobs with the effort, the sting of it. But he pays attention to the quietness over the line, how it compares to the clashing of the world outside.

He turns the volume up, like it will quiet his own thoughts down. He listens to what Ilya brings him. Still, peaceful calm. It remains that way through Shane’s tears, through heavy insults of himself, through his parents’ faces when they realized Shane *has* someone. A soulmate? They probably know. How could they not?

Something breaks through the staticed hush. Shane thinks it’s from himself, at first. But then he gives it closer attention, pausing all his frenzied thinking.

Ilya *sighs.* Audibly, close to his phone, and *long,* long enough for Shane to catch it amongst his panic.

Shane inhales sharp. *Fuck.*

As soon as he begins to exhale, choppy from his sobs, Ilya does, too. Slow, so slow, and *close,* keeping it a guide for Shane to follow him along. But his worry persists, and sheds tears from his eyes. He's sobbing through barely-gathered air, keeping Ilya his anchor.

His ears ring, and he's scared, terrified that he's going to pass out, and Ilya pulls him right back. "*Shh, shh, shh,*" he soothes over the line. Technically not words, but Shane just—Shane just *sobs* with the noise, that reminder from Ilya that he *is* fucking losing it, that he *is* crying.

Ilya stays in the same pattern. "*Shh*," quietly, then takes a deep breath. As Ilya begins to take in another pass of air, Shane repeats the action. He holds it in his chest, feels his heart slow, and then lets it out when Ilya shows him. Their bond glows with the synchronicity, lacing around's Shane's panic as it moves according to Ilya's direction.

They breathe together, and Ilya is patient with Shane's unsteadiness. It becomes easier as they continue. He puts the phone against his ear, hearing Ilya better, clearer. Shane can almost feel his lips at the shell of his ear, the huff of his exhale on his neck, the kiss before a kiss—Ilya's oxygen, his life, then his lips.

He eases Shane's hurt. Turns everything down. Keeps him grounded with a few simple breaths, until Shane finds it isn't such a task to keep himself standing anymore. He opens his eyes and is partially shocked Ilya is not there next to him, rubbing his back.

When he's present again, focused, the world starts to become less surreal. His reflection doesn't look so fake. There are tear stains on his cheeks, and his lips have reddened from biting them, holding back sobs, but he's no longer shaking.

When he looks back at his phone, the call's ended.

Shane:

Thank you.

Lily:

You are okay?

Shane:

I'm okay.

Lily:

Good.

That helped you, yes?

Shane:

Yes.

So much.

Lily:

Me too.

Shane locks his phone, and goes back out to his parents.

They meet for a game towards the end of the season. Shane slips away from his team when they're talking back and forth in the locker room, only having to give an excuse to Hayden.

"Just need to clear my head," he says.

He's gathered in Ilya's arms three minutes later in a cramped closet in the basement.

Ilya loves to have Shane any way he can get him. Hugging him with his nose pressed to his neck, above him in bed, looming over his shoulder as he takes the time to write out insults to Ilya and even drawing an angry face when he laughs.

Ilya misses him all the time. The way in which he gets rid of all of Ilya's pain so easily, without any effort is like nothing else. Ilya pulls him closer against his chest, running his hands underneath Shane's tight compression shirt, trapped, circling his waist so securely the tips of his fingers almost touch at the curves of Shane's stomach.

Shane begins with light pecks on Ilya's neck, below the sharpness of his jaw, next to his ear, on it where a beauty mark hides. Then, closer, with his eyelashes fanning at Ilya's temple as he kisses his cheek.

He treats him with such gentleness after a harsh and breathtaking hug, one that left Ilya's shoulders red with the imprints of his fingers. In apology, Shane kisses where Ilya's tanktop reveals as much skin as possible (purposefully, he knew Shane would want this, to do this).

It's a slow worship, lips down Ilya's arm until he's pressing Ilya's fingers to his mouth, nodding at him to go further, until two are placed at the back of his tongue like he can't go a second longer without them.

Shane *breathes*. Heavy, slow, concentrated with his eyes fluttering closed and he's groaning in relief. Ilya wishes he could tell him how perfect he looks like this, that he could ask him if he likes it and listen to Shane's wined response.

Eventually, he stops taking them back, and lets Ilya's fingers rest in his mouth while he lies his head on Ilya's chest, over his heart. When their connection thrums happily, it's right after Shane rests, after he moans softly.

Ilya lets him be quiet, safe. He wants it, too. He's begun to be grateful in their silence for what it gives him. Moments to learn Shane in a way he wouldn't have to put as much effort into if they could talk.

Softly, Shane starts to trace shapes, patterns on Ilya's back noncommittally. Ilya can tell how much he's missed this. It gets worse with every time they have to part. His muscles have slowly started to relax underneath Ilya's hold.

The shapes transform from squares, to triangles. Shane removes Ilya's fingers from his lips and instead presses them to Ilya's throat, breathing hot against his pulse. It's a weird, conquering thing, for Ilya to feel his liveliness underneath Shane's reddened lips, to be at Shane's mercy with his pulse at his teeth.

Triangles turn to a form Ilya has to focus to catch. Upside down U's, two in a row. Curving, a half triangle. Connecting.

A heart.

Ilya sighs, and kisses Shane's hair. He doesn't know how much more he can take of this. Shane isn't holding back at all. Ilya hadn't even known he *was.* But this is never something

he's done. Like he is lying claim on Ilya's soul, like he is feeding their bond and it lights him up to do it.

Hearts create, across Ilya's back, connecting in parts with his beauty marks that Shane has somehow memorized the spotted placements of. *The night sky is painted across you and I want to bless every star*, Ilya remembers reading a note that said that, crumpled in the trash. Shane hadn't shown Ilya, but Ilya's thought of it. Too much, maybe.

He changes his attempt after a minute, and draws a large line. Then, a smaller one that cascades down Ilya's spine. Two sideways ones after, like he's writing out some equation. It confuses Ilya until he makes a circle, and a straight line afterwards.

I-l-y-a, Shane's spelled. He begins again. The vulnerability has Ilya jerking away, but he reminds himself they're *alone,* and Shane's touches are too close to prayers to walk away from, and for the first time, Shane's just called him by his name, pressed hearts all over his bare skin. All over the sky.

Shane grabs for his waist, and turns Ilya around. He goes where he wants him, pliant, placing his hands on the wall close to him. He'd do, go, *be* anywhere, *anything* Shane wants right now.

He shivers when Shane lifts his shirt up, gasps. And when he kisses over Ilya's name he'd just written with loving hands, Ilya suppresses a sob. His breath stills. It overwhelmes him, builds in the back of his throat, behind his eyes.

Shane's lips are gentle and quick on Ilya's spine, and then to his waist, and back up between his shoulder blades. Blessing him a thousand times over, whimpering because it's too much for him, too, but now that he's started, he can't stop.

He lets Ilya's shirt fall, and goes over the back of his neck frantically with wet lips, pulling Ilya against him before he pauses, groans into the curve of his shoulder and throat, and turns Ilya around.

Shane kisses him deep and desperate, saying everything with a kiss he can't with words. It's never enough with him, his passion towards Ilya seeps into his skin, it is impossible for it not to with how many times he has pressed his love against him.

He deserves. He is so, so perfect. A miracle, or maybe two. Ilya's soulmate, who he can feel, even now that they're together. Because it isn't just pain. If it was, then both of them would have died from it long ago. But they keep each other alive with this hopefulness, this jumping around each other but never quite able to fully stay away.

It's a bone-deep devotion. One that still scares Ilya so much he's hesitating just to think of what he wants to tell Shane. It's there, it's always there on the tip of his tongue, waiting to be spoken, waiting to whisk them away and rid them of this burden they've felt now for seven years.

And God, Ilya has been his since he was born. Fated. The second they met—*meant to be.* He was always going to fall for him, and it was always going to destroy his life as much as it has

now.

There's no escaping it. Ilya had tried so hard. Shane had. At the mercy of fear, judgement, of not knowing what the hell they were going to do if they accepted it.

The terror is still there, for Ilya. His dad. His brother. His home, to never be his again.

But is it worth the pain anymore?

The least Ilya can do is *try.* Try to show the world, and Shane, that despite what scares him, this risk is worth it all.

Ilya exhales smoothly, and pulls Shane up from where he looks to be half-asleep, his head pressed to Ilya's neck. He caresses his cheek until Shane opens his eyes, his pupils blown wide.

Admiringly, Ilya runs his pointer finger over Shane's freckles. Then, he whispers to him, "I love you." Once, in Russian. And again, in English. "I love you. I do. Shane." His name, just to try it out. It's all he thinks, and now, it's all he wants to say.

Like he has already come to the same conclusion he was going to break their silence, Shane smiles. It's lazy, and then crooked, and it isn't at all his practiced one for the press. It is happiness, unmasked, the kind he doesn't get to show often.

"Love you," Shane mutters, low. Then, stronger, "I love you, Ilya."

"*Fuck.* Again. Please." Ilya cups his jaw, placing his forehead to Shane's. "Over and over."

"I love you," he repeats. "I love you, I love you, I've always fucking loved you."

"You have?" Ilya's voice breaks. "Since—"

"*Yes.*" Shane nods his head. "Since. Before, and—now. All the time, always, probably forever, and after that, too."

His steady cadence he'd had while reading to Ilya wavers. It's vulnerable, and tugs at Ilya's heart.

"Oh," Ilya whispers, "sweetheart."

They don't have long, now. Shane's phone buzzes in his pocket, Ilya's rings.

But they have tonight, and hours after that before Ilya continues on his roadtrip. He tries not to think too hard about that, and stay in the moment with Shane, but it's going to go by so fast. It always does.

Shane kisses his cheek. "Good luck. And . . I'll see you after. We'll, uh—talk."

He says *talk* in a lighter voice, the idea foreign to them. But Ilya smiles. "Yes. Here is the deal. When I win, you will talk so much to me you lose your beautiful voice. Okay?"

Another time, Shane would make fun of him. He's gotten better with that, fighting against Ilya's sarcasm, texting back quicker. But with their confession, he just says, "Okay, Ilya."

He hugs him once, a long while until Shane starts to pull away. He leaves first with a quick goodbye.

Ilya takes a little while more to leave. He moves his hands backwards, and follows in the drags of how Shane's fingers had carried on his skin.

Shane is so quick on the ice that Ilya just wants to pause and watch him work. Surely, people would understand. It's *Shane.* But what's better, he finds, is being in Shane's world, for just a moment. Where Ilya can see in his movements, in his eyes how much he knows hockey, through-and-through. As if he can see the future, where everyone is going to be on the ice before it plays out in front of him, like he is in control of this.

And no one can take it away from him. Ilya plays his hardest, giving Shane the competition he craves, but his team only manages to score two points against him. He is fucking unstoppable, no matter how many fights break out or how many penalties are given, Shane *drives.*

5–2. Three of those goals were Shane, scored in the speed of light, almost, hitting the puck without hesitation, with an easy technique, his blades gliding on the ice. He is *everywhere,* a powerhouse of a fucking player.

And now, he will get to play like this all the time. With the admittance of love came the absence of pain. Nothing could hold either of them back anymore. And Shane was aiming straight for the Cup.

Ilya's getting dressed when he feels it.

A familiar tug. Subtle at first, barely anything. Growing slow, then festering underneath his skin. It grabs and grabs at Ilya's tendons, begging him to go to Shane.

He closes his eyes, and slams his hand against the wall of the locker room.

It didn't work.

Ilya doesn't love him.

It's all that plays through Shane's mind on the way to the hotel. He's really, actually an asshole, he doesn't care, he was just fucking with Shane to throw him off his game.

It hurts to think of him that way. It isn't right. Why, *why* would he do that? Not even Ilya is that cruel. And definitely not enough all for a fucking win.

Maybe he only *thought* he loved Shane. He got his feelings mixed up. He ended up saying what made sense. Or maybe he wanted to see if not feeling the love but saying it would work, and their bond would settle.

Whatever it is, whatever forced those words out of Ilya's mouth, Shane has to deal with the fact that he, embarrassingly, *stupidly,* wholeheartedly, *meant them.*

He just . . . loves him. He loves how he challenges him. That he's brave where Shane isn't, leaps where Shane can't, that he's funny and has horrible handwriting and a wonderful smile and that when he calls Shane *boring* it isn't an insult, but a compliment.

Pearl said that at least the pain would be less now. It was a step forward, but it didn't seal the deal. One of them had '*hang-ups.'*

Ilya's been messaging him. Repeatedly. Shane thinks of kisses on his back and traced hearts and indents where he'd dug his nails in with the relief of having him again and feels like a fucking idiot.

Lily:

What room are you in?

Shane?

Please.

I do not know why it didn't help.

You promised you would talk.

Right?

I still want it.

Shane shakes his head.

Shane:

I don't think you know what you want.

Lily:

I do.

Because I always want you.

Trust me, please.

Shane:

If you don't feel it, then you don't feel it, Ilya.

But you didn't have to jerk me around.

Lily:

I feel everything for you

Fuck.

Shane.

I can't believe I am telling you this on fucking text messages.

Just meet me, please. It's the last time for weeks.

He *shouldn't.* It's just going to hurt him more. Getting answers will give Shane a firm reason why, and he doesn't know which of all the ones he's come up with are the worst.

But if it's the last time, the very last, then Shane wants him to at least know how fucked up it was, how everything had gone down. He's not getting off scot-free.

Shane:

1004.

Lily:

Thank you.

We will fix this, okay?

Shane doesn't respond. They have never been able to fix it before. What's changed? Nothing. Nothing in over seven years. Shane was still prone to say yes to him, even after he'd treated him unfairly. He was stuck to him. And Shane has never stopped giving in. Not even now.

Ilya is where Shane's weak spot is. Everyone wonders what in his game needs the most improvement, what startles him, what rattles his thoughts—well, there it is. It's Ilya. It's always been Ilya.

Ilya knocks and waits, his hands in his pockets. He hadn't even changed from his suit first before coming to see Shane. Distantly, he thinks he could've just followed the chemtrails of healing Shane left to get to him, and that he didn't need a room number at all.

Shane pulls him inside, but doesn't hug him, or touch him further. He goes for the mini bar of his hotel room, and takes a sip from his drink. It's unusual seeing it. When he drinks with Ilya, it's two, maybe three tastes before he sets his glass aside and forgets about it.

He's never seen him like this. Coping the way Ilya does, one hand surrounding a glass of vodka while the other is scratching at the back of his neck, unchecked nerves on display.

"Shane," Ilya says. *You shouldn't drink.* Like he's in charge of him, or in any position to piss him off. But Ilya can't help it. He *shouldn't* be drinking, because doing that when he's stressed is *not him.*

“No, just—we shouldn’t talk.”

“Why? The pain?” Ilya steps forward. “I don’t give a fuck about that, Shane. It will go away. Because I *do* love you.”

“No, you don’t.” The vodka sloshes in his glass as he throws his arms out. “Obviously, you fucking don’t.”

“Maybe if you were not trying to numb yourself, you could feel it, huh?” Ilya reaches out, lightly grasping at Shane’s forearm, and he pulls away.

“Don’t judge me,” he says, low. “You have no right. Do you know—everything I’ve done, everything I’ve worked for, there’s been *you* in the corner. And it was good, it-it pushed me, but—*you.* You are . . you make it matter less. The pressure, and—the rumors.”

Rumors? Ilya doesn’t ask, though. Shane’s rant tumbles away as he takes the last of the vodka down.

“And this is a bad thing?”

“Yes!” Shane yells. Hopefully, the room contains it. “I’m not focused, Ilya. I’m so fucking set on you that I’m not thinking straight. I’m-I’m fucking ruined, and this-this—“

“Shane.” Slowly, Ilya takes the glass from his hand, and puts it on the desk against the wall. “You’re panicking. It’s time to calm down, okay?”

“No. *No.* I do whatever anyone asks me to. Even you. I’m so fucking afraid of doing what I want, that I have *no* control over it anymore.”

“What? What is *it*?” Ilya’s eyes dart over Shane’s face, frantic, trying to look beyond his far-away gaze into the answers.

“Myself,” he whispers. “*Myself.* I’m not me anymore.” He pushes himself away from Ilya, and starts to pace in front of the large bed, clasping his hands on his shoulders. “I don’t feel right, Ilya. I don’t feel—I think something’s wrong with me, okay? I think I’m probably being punished, and you—you got caught up in it, and I should’ve just tried harder, I should’ve—“ his voice crumbles apart, and he falls to sit against the bed, burying his palms in his eyes. “I fell in love with you. I fucking fell in love with you. It was the easiest thing not to, we just had to stay away from each other, but I couldn’t. And now, there’s all these things inside of me, and everyone’s gonna hate it. They’re gonna hate me, and I can’t stop it. I have no fucking control.”

He fills the silence afterwards with small cries, and Ilya realizes this isn’t an outbreak for him. He’s been holding it in, thinking about it for a long time. He’s repeated to himself, over and over, *I’m wrong. I’m being punished.* This isn’t a revelation, this is just a statement he believes the full truth of, and he’s letting Ilya in on the facts of it.

Ilya sits beside him on the uncomfortable carpet, harsh on his knees. Shane becomes withdrawn, his panic disappearing into the numbness he was trying to reach.

“You really think this?” Ilya asks, even though he knows the answer. “That anyone could ever truly hate you? For something you can’t change?”

“Yes,” he says bitterly. “No one is gonna care that I ruined my body playing through pain. Or that I put my own needs on pause for seven years. All they’re gonna hear is that I love you, that I love—a man. Because that’s all it takes, you know? That’s all it takes to undo my career, my work, *years* of sacrifices, is to say I love you. And none of that will fucking matter anymore.”

“It matters to me,” Ilya strongly responds. He cups Shane’s face with his right hand. “And it matters to you.”

“It doesn’t.” He sighs, putting his head down. “*Ilya*. You said—and I said—but one of us isn’t telling the truth, right? And it isn’t me. So that leaves you. And I’ve let you—I’ve let *myself* give you a lot of me. To love you. And accept it. Now-now I know you don’t feel that. The same. And I’ve ruined it all. There’s no coming back.”

He turns away from Ilya, clenching fingers in his hair. *Fuck,* he really believes this. That Ilya doesn’t love him. And it’s undone years of work to mold himself into the perfect, pure hockey player without any weakness.

His world is falling apart around him. And Ilya is the cause.

He doesn’t know how to fix this. He *does* love Shane, he loves him with all his heart, he’s had years to understand it. He wouldn’t have told him if he wasn’t sure. He wouldn’t have wanted Shane to end up this way, not all because of love.

“Please, just listen, okay?” Ilya whispers it, turning Shane’s face back to see him. “You are strong, Shane. And brave. And good. You have done something, built something that no one else would have had the mind to. I know what you feel. I know how fucking hard it is. But do you really think I could not fall in love with you? In *any* time? It is impossible. I fucking tried, forever I tried, but it is here. I am here. And I am not lying to you. I swear on everything I have cared for, that this is not what you think.

“I don’t know why it still hurts. I don’t. But I do know what love for you feels like by now, and that is not the issue here. It is something else, and we will figure it out, but you have to trust me, okay?” Shane’s closed his eyes, clenched his jaw. “Shane? Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.” He nods. “I do, I just—I don’t understand. What is it supposed to be, then?” As he lets himself look at Ilya, Ilya sees in real time as his face contorts into pain, into guilt. “Is it me? I swear it’s not, but what if it is, what if—what if Pearl’s right, *fuck,* what if I’m so fucking insecure that I can’t—“

Ilya won’t hear anymore. He shakes his head, and has Shane stop talking. “No,” he says. Shane is not the issue. Ilya isn’t, either, but it’s not possible for Shane to be.

“But—I . . . *Ilya.*” He’s the one trying to get through now, caressing his thumb down Ilya’s temple. “Are you ready to—do you *want* to come out?”

Ilya's fingers jerk around Shane's waist. The answer shames him to think. "Do you?"

Hesitantly, and with grief, Shane shakes his head. "I could've. To my parents. It was right there, and—"

Ilya's body has turned numb. He can only anchor himself to Shane to stay afloat. "I would be . . . my country. I could not go back."

Shane shakes his head, and releases a heavy exhale. "Jesus. We—" He doesn't finish the sentence, but Ilya says, *I know,* anyway.

"We are not ready," he voices after. He tries to remain steady for Shane, keeping his mouth a thin line. "Maybe some day, but. Not today."

The words seem to terrify Shane. He grasps onto Ilya's arm, getting into his lap. "Fuck," he blurts out in frustration. "Fuck. No. I-I love you *now.*"

"Shane," Ilya weakly says. He can't hear it anymore.

"*What?* I do. How is that not enough?"

"I don't know. But it isn't. We are too fucked up, we are too—we are too *everything,* too much."

"But—" Shane's eyes close again. His brain is working to fix this, but they aren't in control here.

"But nothing. We cannot come out. Not yet. There is no getting rid of the pain." *The pain of loving you.*

"So-so what are we meant to do? Just *wait?* For how long?"

"I don't know, Shane. I don't have the fucking answers." Ilya has to get up. He wants to run miles, suddenly, scream up to the sky, release the anger that's coming after the numbness.

This is neverending, the torture they live in. They try to stop it, and still, they are holding themselves back. Ilya should care less about what his father will think, about Russia, and he wishes now that he did, but he can't suddenly quit, and Shane can't snap himself out of falling to the pressure of hockey to put up a front.

"There's gotta be something. Pearl said—"

"There isn't!" The desperation, the fear joins with Ilya's frustrated words. "We have nearly killed ourselves, all this talking, Shane. It will get worse. You know it. I do."

"But it isn't the same," Shane fights, getting up. "We're admitting our feelings, the pain will be less now—"

"But not gone," Ilya says low. He can see the hope disappearing from Shane's eyes as he continues. "I can't keep torturing you. It is selfish. I—I love you, Shane. I do, sweetheart. But

coming out—this could take years. And I will not put you through this another second."

"What-what are you saying?" His voice grows frantic, quicker as the realization wraps around him, forcing him to flinch. "You're not doing this to me, we're not ending this." Ilya's frozen in all the denials—he can't say once more that he has to let him go. With no response, it only pushes Shane further. "I'm selfish, too! I'm selfish too, I'll keep hurting you, I don't—I *care*, but I can't—I can't be without you. I suffer without you, I *need you,* Ilya, *please,* please don't do this now, not now when we're just starting to—"

"Shane." His inhale wavers with the sound of his name. Ilya takes his hands, and kisses both of them. "This is what I should have been strong enough to do years ago. It is not forever, but—"

"Stop it."

"Shane. Shane, Shane," Ilya repeats like a prayer, comforting him as tears spill over. "Sweetheart. I hate seeing you in pain. I want you to be okay."

"Please don't leave," is all Shane pleads. And despite the tears, his voice is mostly level. Still something there within him he's holding back, a hidden devotion, a panic that wants to cascade down and drown him thoroughly. "Give me more time. There's something else."

"No, Shane," Ilya gently says. "No, my love."

He holds him tight, and feels Shane's tears soak his dress shirt. He keeps himself together for him, petting at his hair, whispering, *I love you, I love you,* until that's the last thing Shane will hear of him instead of the words he'd used to let him go.

It's not the last time they will be together. But it is indefinite, and that makes Ilya feel like he is freefalling without the tether he has always had. Who will he go to, to center himself? He doesn't know. It just can't be Shane. It can't be Shane until he's brave enough to let it be.

Chapter End Notes

i forgot to put this freaking note here so ok —though im not rewriting scenes from canon i am taking heavy inspiration from them, the scene in the supply closet being inspired by the bathroom scene. (also now one of my fav love confessions i have written wwowow)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part V.

2016

Heading Towards a Two Season Win

By Lesley Adamson

With the playoffs approaching, we talked to Montréal Voyageurs' captain Shane Hollander to learn more about his strategy, what drives him, and balancing work with his personal life.

ADAMSON: Good morning, Mr. Hollander. So happy you could sit down with me today.

HOLLANDER: Morning, ma'am. And Shane's fine. How are you?

ADAMSON: I'm good! And you? Coming off that win last night?

HOLLANDER: Couldn't be better. I'm glad we finally lined up and could do this. I know you've interviewed captains of teams that've won the Cup for ten years now, right? Your articles always come out first.

ADAMSON: You've read those? Even the one with Ilya Rozanov? I'm surprised.

HOLLANDER: Yeah? Well, uh — we didn't get to talk last year, I kind of broke your streak.

ADAMSON: [laughing] No, that's okay. You're busy. Commercials, sponsorships, practice, games, newly captaining a team just four years after joining it. I think you're excused for missing one interview.

HOLLANDER: I like to stay busy. I love what I do.

ADAMSON: That's always good to hear. Me personally, I'd be crumbling under the pressure. I'd be a mess!

HOLLANDER: Oh, trust me, having help has definitely saved me from a lot of mess-ups. I've got a great publicist. There's a balance you have to find, you know?

ADAMSON: That makes sense. That must've played a part in how you performed last season.

HOLLANDER: Exactly. That's something I wanted to do as Captain, is show my team I can double-task. Triple-task. You need that kind of dependability on someone if you're going to follow their lead.

ADAMSON: It must've worked perfectly. Look what you did your first year in.

HOLLANDER: It wasn't easy. I had my questions, obviously, of how I was going to do, but I didn't back down. That wasn't really a thought that crossed my mind.

ADAMSON: Confident from the start.

HOLLANDER: Yeah, and consistent. That's the biggest thing you need. I'm sure you know that, though. I heard you were just promoted yourself.

ADAMSON: You did your homework.

HOLLANDER: [smiling] Always, always. I like to know who I'm talking to.

ADAMSON: I appreciate that. But you do know I'm the interviewer, and you're the interviewee here, right? I mean, I'm sure you'd be just as good at my job as you are at yours, but —

HOLLANDER: Of course, I wasn't trying to step on your toes. Ask away.

ADAMSON: Well, besides being newly appointed that 'C' last year, there was also a noticeable shift in the way you played towards the end of the season. What gave you that final drive?

HOLLANDER: Well, when I was a kid, that was the dream. First year out, win a cup. It's what I've been focused on since I can remember. And, yeah, with that realization the playoffs are approaching, you have to start getting more serious. Not that my team wasn't pushing it already, but you have to find something deeper, more motivation. The dream gets closer, realer.

ADAMSON: So it was your team that got you through?

HOLLANDER: Always is. They supported me right from the jump, and I supported them. And this season, it's just the same.

ADAMSON: Speaking of this season, you've pretty much matched the pace you went at last year. It's amazing to witness, if you don't mind me saying.

HOLLANDER: That's very kind. We've been riding on our last win and haven't let up, and we don't plan to.

ADAMSON: So obviously, you've found that balance. How have you individually handled set-backs this season? The pressure's more, right?

HOLLANDER: It is. And, yeah, of course there's . . . things. But, hockey's always done this special thing for me, where when I get on the ice, nothing else matters. Off the ice, I've got a great support system, my mom gets to every game she can, and my dad, too. That's the kind of relationship you want to have to lean on, and they've been by my side through everything.

ADAMSON: I'm so glad to hear that. With such a demanding schedule that takes you away from home days on end, it can be tough to connect back to your personal life. Is that something you struggled with not just your first season, but afterwards?

HOLLANDER: I . . . well, my family knows how important hockey is to me. I mean, they've seen it. They get it. And when I'm home, I always see them. But, yeah, I miss them on the road. It's about planning in those little pockets of time, I think. Finding moments.

ADAMSON: Yes. Definitely. When you love someone, you make time.

HOLLANDER: Yeah. You try.

THIS ARTICLE CONTINUES AT **NHLNEWS.COM.**

Hayden:

You ok?

Shane:

I’m sitting right across from you.

Hayden:

Well we’re on a crowded bus.

And don’t change the subject

Shane:

I’m not.

I’m okay.

Hayden:

I read that article.

Shane:

What article

Hayden:

You know what article

I’m sorry, man, It’s just Jackie noticed you sound sort of sad in it?

Shane:

She asked a lot of personal questions.

Hayden:

Dude, all that was cleared before the interview. You had to have had scripted answers.

Shane:

Don’t see the problem with them. Sorry.

Hayden:

[screenshot attached that reads:

ADAMSON: Any plans for after the season? I remember reading somewhere you have a place you like to go to, a cottage near your family?

HOLLANDER: Oh. Yeah, usually that’s what I do. It’s really beautiful. It’s a good way to slow down, get away. This year, I guess it depends how the season ends. But most likely, I’ll stay in Montreal. It’s easier to stay focused.]

Shane:

What’s wrong with it?

Hayden:

You gotta take a break, man.

It’s allowed.

The carpeted floor of his hotel room isn’t the best surface for push-ups, but Hayden’s got look-outs at the gym in the lobby, so here he is, the harsh texture itching at his hands.

He feels locked up. The room is small, it always seems to be when he opts to get one for himself other than with Hayden. But Shane’s been needing the distance. Not just from him, but from a lot of things. His mind is never clear anymore. Silence helps. Breathing into it.

The sun goes down, and takes the light with it. Shane goes on his back, on the floor, and stares at the ceiling. He’s so fucking separated. Nothing happens around him. The windows are sound-proof. His eyes are dry, he hasn’t cried in months, he doesn’t know if he can, and it scares him. He dreams of it sometimes like his subconscious misses the release.

The dark is something he fears anymore. With it comes a settlement to the room, a slow quiet. And Shane will close his eyes, and begin to reach out towards a distant energy. In some chemical, or combination of the emotions that bubble up when he's alone, he can feel this *relief* electrocuting his fingertips.

Shane can't stop trying to call him back. His memory is indelible. It drives him to anger during a game, and yearning in the night. He works all the time, just to keep him away, to stop his shadow from trailing.

It's bad enough that he can feel the pain he'd inflicted. But to carry this burden, too, of Shane taking pieces of him, buzzing pieces before he'd left that hotel room in Boston—his chest aches with it. He hasn't been able to take a deep breath ever since that night.

And he's playing California now. He's been hammered into the boards so many times Shane is surprised that gloves haven't been dropped yet.

The TV provides Shane a sight of him, skating around his zone, passing the puck. He's doing it all right. He's great. And still, people hate him.

Shane unmutes it when he's slammed to the wall again. It's a clean hit this time, but in Shane's opinion, the most of them have been dirty, and deserved penalties. He doesn't understand where his patience is coming from tonight.

Maybe he can feel Shane, too. A shock every time he scores, a branching desire to shove the players who've hit him. Shane wishes he'd do it. Not so he would get the penalty, or so he'd walk away with a broken nose, but because he deserves to defend himself, even in an arena full of people who want to see him beat down.

His time has to be close to done by now. Just a few more minutes, and he could walk away. He's already playing with what looks like bruised ribs and a locked knee. If he keeps letting LA fuck with him, it could get worse before he's safe on the bench.

Do something, Shane thinks. And right after, he wins the faceoff and gets possession of the puck. He's pushed far, *why is he so fucking close to the wall?* Shane grabs at his hair, nervous. *And there it is.* One of LA's taller players slams him forcefully, and Shane can hear as his stick crashes to the wall.

He struggles to get back up. Two of his teammates put their arms under his as the ref pauses the game. He settles, resting on his knee, and *fuck,* he grabs at it with his hand, wincing, not putting weight on it until he's fully standing.

It's the perfect time. While game is paused, right at the end of his exposure on the ice, and while he's still pissed enough to make his punches strong even with his fucked ribs.

Shane doesn't fight on the ice. It's never been his style. But it is *his.*

Shane waits for it. Anticipates it, wants him to. But he skates towards the bench, half-keeled over, and sits down while another one of his teammates goes in.

Damn it. Why didn't he fight? He hasn't been in one for months. Not even when he had every right to, when even announcers were expecting something to happen. He's been asked by the press, and never gives a straight answer.

It's like he's given up. He still plays exceptionally, he's a great captain, though Shane will never admit it. But he doesn't fight anymore.

The camera pauses on him for a few seconds. "Rozanov taking in the game in front of him, telling his coach something here. No doubt frustrated about the defense we've seen from LA tonight—" His eyes press closed, tight. Then open again. Pushing something down and leaving it there. Shane sees his teammate beside him ask him something, but he doesn't answer.

A part of him is gone. A part Shane can't give back without seeing him again, without *loving him* again. It's all his fault. He doesn't fight for himself any longer, he has no energy for it. He's in pain.

He clenches his ribs, Shane catches with the camera's rapid movement, chasing the puck. And when it rears back around, Shane gets a glimpse of his jersey as he leaves the bench and makes his way to the locker room.

Shane turns the TV off.

The press floods into the room with cameras and microphones, walking over to Ilya where he's sitting, toweling off his damp hair. They like to catch him without his shirt on, they ask less invasive questions if he does, instead getting his work-out routine and regimen down for the thousandth time.

He's not up to dealing with them. His ribs are aching, his knee is killing him, and that usual thrum of a split soulmate bond is continuously punishing him, no matter what he does. But they lost—fucking embarassing, their third loss in a row, and Ilya knows it's his fault, and so do the announcers on ESPN, and everyone else who even bothers caring anymore about his preformance.

"Hey, Ilya. How are the ribs?"

It's Johnson that asks it, one of the nicer journalists, if there was such a person out there. He gives Ilya a sympathetic smile, and keeps the microphone at an appropriate distance away from him.

"Hello, everyone. Did you enjoy the game?" He offers them a weak smile, and they laugh. Out of pity, or being uncomfortable, Ilya doesn't give much of a fuck anymore. He's been

media trained seven times in the last five years, and his attitude never changes. People have given up on that. His sarcasm is part of his *charm,* now.

“Gotta commend you for going as long as you did, what with LA’s strategy against the Bears tonight.” It’s Johnson again. The rest will let him talk, and then start to be assholes to Ilya when Johson runs out of nice things to say.

“And what was that? Barely felt the hits.” He shrugs his shoulders. The cameraman pans down to his bruised ribs without permission. If Ilya tries to hide them away, though, it’ll be a whole thing.

“So how are you feeling about the game, Ilya? Obviously, you had to sit out early, but—”

“Yes. I did not do my best. But it is what it is, and tomorrow, we will fight again. Is how these things go sometimes. Get in a—what is it called—”

“A funk?” One of them provides. Ilya forgets her name, but she looks familiar.

Luckily, none of them laugh at his struggle. “Yes. Thank you. A funk. We will come out of it, though. This I know.”

If Ilya could find the motivation, that is. If hockey could suddenly consume him without Shane, without his competition, without him pushing him to be better. The way he’d started working suddenly rerouted all his passion to circling around *Shane.* Being the best only mattered if he had Shane fighting him for the title at the same time, and then bickered with him about it with a knowing grin on his beautiful face.

“And what did you think about your team's performance after you were off the ice?” The same journalist speaks, actually looking interested and not trying to push Ilya to answer with a shoved mic.

“They are always strong,” Ilya starts. Standing begins to hurt. Fuck, he wants to lay down. “They always show up for each other. That is team work, and I’m always saying I am proud of them. Sorry—I know you, yes? We have talked.” Ilya points between them, and she smiles.

“Lesley Adamson. We *have* talked. After so many hits, you were still able to keep your cool, and stuck with your team until that last check into the boards from Hendricks. Is it seniority getting to you now, or was this an approach from your team you all discussed?”

These are not the typical questions Ilya gets after a game. They’re usually especially designed to make Ilya feel like shit on top of a loss.

Her name makes Ilya remember. She’d interviewed him back in 2014. She interviews *all* Cup winners. She’d just interviewed—

“Uh. Well, really, I do not think it is worth it to fight LA. They fight against themselves enough.”

It’s general questions after that, and then they leave Ilya alone. Thank God.

In the hotel, he opens Adamson's newest article with Shane. Ilya looks through the whole thing after dealing with the stupid paywall. Certain answers are normal, boring. Then he reaches the part where Shane starts to talk about *balance.* And it is complete bullshit. A lot of what he says in this is a cover, and if Ilya didn't see his last name before everything he said, he would think this is an interview with a different player.

The only thing that seems to be truthful is how hard he has been playing this season. Ilya's had to see him on every fucking commercial, billboard, and has had to hear his name on the radio. He hasn't stopped to slow down in months.

The whole thing is alarming. He doesn't even tell Adamson to have a good day at the end of things, and when she asks what the rest of his day is looking like, he lists off nine different places he has to go to. *Fuck,* Shane. He's going to burn out at this point. What is he doing?

J.J. forces Shane out of his hotel room and to a party a few minutes away. He doesn't know where it is. He isn't listening. He's just worried about someone he shouldn't be worried about anymore. At least, not until he stops being a coward and admits to millions of people that he loves the guy they all think he hates.

"Rozanov lost his third game in a row. He is running the Bears into the fucking ground, huh?" J.J. shoves Shane's shoulder. Hayden's arm is around his in the back of their Uber.

Shane is numb.

"C'mon, Captain. I thought this would cheer you up! They will take that 'C' away from him at this point."

That's not what I want, Shane thinks, loud in his head. *This isn't what I want, Ilya. This isn't at all what I dreamed for myself.*

Hayden and J.J. continue to knock into him on the bumpy road. He's hot, exhausted. He's ready to let them go into the party and go back to the hotel. No one will want him there, anyway. He doesn't have the energy to be *fun* right now.

The walk from the car into the club over to the bar is a blur. Shane's got a beer in his hand, half empty already, leaning on Hayden to keep him standing, grounded. He doesn't leave his side the whole night, even though Shane can tell he'd rather be joining the rest of their teammates, huddled up in a booth where they're playing some game, betting on it, there's cash on the table. Shane doesn't know.

He's at the other side of the club with Hayden, J.J., and some of J.J.'s friends he knows here in Toronto. There's three women, one guy, laughing, drinking, thanking J.J. for getting them all good seats for their game tomorrow.

"Hey. Hey, buddy," Hayden says in his ear. He shakes Shane, like he'd fallen asleep. Maybe he had. They're all standing, but maybe. Maybe he had.

"Yeah? You okay?"

"Am *I* okay? Are *you* okay?"

That's funny. Shane starts laughing, and brings his beer to his lips. "I'm good. D'you wanna dance?"

Hayden's eyes go wide, like, comically wide. He gives Shane a disbelieving laugh. "Since when do you dance, man? I don't think I've ever seen that."

"Well, I'm going now."

"You can barely stand." Hayden follows him, away from their table, and grabs Shane's arm. "And you're not even drunk," he whispers, more serious. "Shane. What has been going on with you, brother?"

Shane's face goes blank. "Nothing," he says. "I'm gonna dance. You should go join everybody."

The music approaches. Darkness approaches. Lights flash blue and green and white, turning Shane's vision blurry before he looks down. He's centered between warmth, squished by bodies, hips moving to the rhythm of the EDM shit they play that Shane has never really gotten into.

If he's lost here, then good. It's great, even. It's fucking loud, so different from what he's given into, from what he thought he needed. But he doesn't. He's gonna stay here forever, amongst noise where no one can hear him crying for what he's lost.

Shane can't move, so someone else does it for him. Large, hot hands clasp at his hips from behind him. Immediately, Shane leans into the comfort of the body against him. He keeps Shane there, as the music slows, and cups his jaw. Lips leave wet kisses and bites on his throat, and this isn't what Shane wants.

So he makes the nameless, faceless guy behind him someone different. Someone who knows him, even without a word to him. Someone who loves him despite it hurting. Someone who

draws Shane's hips back, guiding him on how to grind against him because he wants him all, and not just one part.

Shane groans, and closes his eyes. He can feel himself growing desperate, his pain singing low. He takes the guys hands and clasps them at his stomach, then grinds back into him. He gives in, lets his mind grow foggy and empty.

Fingers run through his hair and place to the back of his throat. Shane lets him go where he wants to, lets him decide for him. Too much control, he's had it for so long, he wants to let go, he wants his decisions gone, he never makes the right ones anymore. He reaches a hand back, to the guy's scalp, and expects to grip hair, a signal for *more, harder, more, Ilya, God, yes, please*—he can't catch his breath, fuck, he wishes it were him, right here and now in front of all these faceless people, kissing down his throat and then dirty on his mouth and nothing else would matter other than them.

It isn't curls between his fingers. The guy has a buzzcut, and brown eyes, and he's messing with Shane's belt.

Shane could let him, and take him into the bathroom and lock the door.

But the song ends, and reality pushes forward.

He's in fucking public, grinding up against a stranger, a *man,* and his whole fucking team is here.

And Ilya isn't. He's gonna get found out, and it won't even be with the person he loves. It'll be with some random guy he danced with for one song and used to forget.

Shane gets out of the suffocating crowd. He goes towards the first door he sees, and is greeted by a freezing wind in a narrow back alley. He's gonna be sick, *fuck*. He puts his hands on his knees, trying to prevent it, but when he thinks of that guy—touching, controlling him, trailing his hand down his stomach that Ilya used to kiss—he gags, and throws up, using the wall to lean up against.

He wants to go home. He doesn't want to be here—Jesus, he doesn't even know where *here* is. He's lost so much of himself, boxed it all up, *who is he?* He doesn't do this. He doesn't spiral.

The ground is cool when he sits down. And he stays there until Hayden finds him.

"What happened to him? Did someone spike his drink?"

"No, man, I was watching him. He's just drunk. Now help me get him up."

“Pictures will be all over the place tomorrow—”

“*J.J.*. Come on, dude. His publicist will handle it, but we need to get him back to the hotel.”

Shane’s head hurts. “Hayd?”

“Hey, buddy. How you feeling?”

“‘M great,” Shane slurs.

“He’s hammered.”

“Yeah, well, don’t act like you haven’t been. Stop judging him, he’s got a lot on his plate.”

“I am not *judging,* Hayden, fucking look at him, this is not just *drunk,* this is—this is a breakdown, or something!”

The world comes back, blurry. Shane’s still sitting on the ground, but the sidewalk this time. He’s got Hayden’s jacket on for some reason over his, and J.J.’s hat. He blinks, glancing to where the arguing is coming from. The two of them are standing in front of Shane, blocking his view. And then, Shane registers, it’s not just them.

He’s been circled in. The way they do on the ice when anyone is badly hurt. Shane can’t move without knocking into one of his teammates.

“If you two are done, you gotta get him out of here. There’s the car.”

Shane doesn’t know whose voice that is. He can’t look up without his headache growing.

“Well, since J.J. is being an asshole—”

“I can’t ask questions?”

“Time and place,” Hayden yells. “Someone else help me with him. He’s done the fuckin’ same for every one of you.”

Shane tries to get up himself, but his legs fail. Then, Hayden’s lifting him by his left arm, and his head lulls onto his shoulder. “What—where are we going?”

Hayden grunts, carrying Shane’s weight. Just as Shane loses his balance, J.J. is on his other side, stopping him from falling and taking Hayden down with him.

Shane sees Hayden throw out his free hand, back to the rest of their team. He’s flipping them off. “Back to the hotel, man. Move your feet.”

When they're back, Shane immediately locks himself in the bathroom and throws up again. He stays there until hours, maybe, have passed, and finds Hayden sitting on the bed when he comes out after brushing his teeth.

Shane winces. "Hayd—"

"No, it's okay, man. You don't need to explain yourself to me."

"I feel like I do." Shane takes his jacket off, and goes for a clean shirt. "I think I'm just sick, you know? And you were right, I need to take time for myself. So when we're home, I'm just gonna chill out, okay? Don't worry."

He turns around, and Hayden's staring him down, a worried tremor to his hands. He blows out a shaky breath. "Fuck, Shane. You're hiding so much, aren't you?"

Shane freezes. He diverts his eyes. "I'm not hiding anything—"

"You're hiding something. I have *never* seen you like this. If you have something to get off your chest, then—"

"*Hayden.*"

"*What*? You seriously just want me to go back to my room after I found you half-passed out in the snow next to your own vomit? You're scaring me. You're scaring everybody."

Shane dryly laughs. "I'm sorry this is so hard for you."

"That's not what I meant." Hayden shakes his head. When Shane doesn't budge, he stands up. "It doesn't have to be with me, but you gotta talk to someone. You're out of control, and it isn't you." He picks up his jacket forcefully, yanking the door open. "Feel better." And slams it when he goes.

By the next week, Shane is dating Rose Landry. The news comes out at the same time blurry pictures of Shane are released at the club. He doesn't talk about it. His team doesn't ask if it's him.

He's dating Rose. And that's all everyone needs to know, and that's what's told to news outlets to say, and that's what the paparazzi photographs.

Chapter End Notes

I have a Lot to say abt this chapter given its my favorite but im saving it for the end of the fic, but what i will say now is how i put a lot in there of Shane feeling small, trapped physically, the way that he was mentally, just to really drive it in, and then hanging off hayden, reaching out physically in a way he cant verbally (similar to how he's used to with ilya and forgets hayden Isnt used to it from shane)

and yes i did listen to all the things she said while writing the club scene.

Also…blue green white lights…hmmm…wonder what those colors could mean together…

Since shane's cup wins are pretty quick in both the book and the show i got to do my own thing of what they meant for shane and make them connect to the fics plot which was reaaallllyyy fun

(stick with me here this ch was important for their individual growth okok)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part VI.

2017

She's nice, Rose. She makes Shane less lonely. Holding her hand isn't the worst thing, and he likes listening to her talk about her passion for her job, and her stories from set. She comes to his games, Shane goes to her movie premiere in Montreal. The camera flashes barely blind him anymore.

Everyone loves him this way. The photographers call his name, say he and Rose are a beautiful couple. Journalists, fans, gossip news channels—they all think Rose and him are perfect.

Like soulmates.

Rose is a great fucking actress. Shane actually gets interested by her new movie, even though he doesn't have the time to watch much of anything with hockey. It's usually shitty ones on the plane, or, until recently, family ones with his parents on weekends with popcorn. Or *Fast and Furious,* with Ilya's head in his lap.

But Rose accepts her praise all night. Gets a standing ovation at the end, and goes down to the front to give her *thank you'*s. She even mentions Shane's name, smiling when she looks at him.

In the car ride home, the smiles fade off. They separate their hands. "Did you have fun?" Shane looks over to her, to where she's taking her make-up off already, balancing a compact mirror in her lap. Shane takes it instead, holding it up for her.

"Thanks. And yeah, it was okay I think? Better than my last movie. I had mono half the time, so. Not my best work."

She gives Shane a private smile. And he manages to grin back, a real one this time.

"Well, you were great in it. Really, I mean—I don't know much about movies, but—"

“Relax, Shane.” Rose puts a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. That means a lot. I’m sorry you have to be dragged into this whole thing. It can’t be easy.”

“C’mon,” Shane says, resting his head back on the seat, still holding her mirror with one hand. “You aren’t that bad.”

Rose scoffs at his joke. “I *cannot* believe you just said that! And I was being so nice, too.”

“I’m really fine,” he assures her. She asks him that a lot, if he’s okay. She tries to get to know him. Not in a judgy way, or even for convenience, to fake chemistry. Just because she really seems to care. “Rumors will die down soon enough. They always do.”

She winces. “I still think you should be able to tell everyone to fuck off.” Shane raises his eyebrows. She always surprises him. “What? I’m serious. Your business is your business, and those assholes should go back to talking about *hockey* instead, because you’re about to win a third fucking Cup.”

“It’s only January.”

“Don’t be modest. And after you do, you can shove it in all of their faces. Maybe it’ll finally shut them up.”

Shane nods, not sure how to respond. Rose has been . . . assuming things. About him. But she was given more information than the public was, obviously. She knows those pictures are real. That they *are* Shane. Shane’s publicist basically confirmed it to her when they all met together. Shane needed someone to help him cover up the situation he’d put himself in, and Rose wanted to attract people to her new movie.

She’s been lying for him for five months. Putting on a show with Shane, wearing his jersey, calling him *babe* in public. And Shane’s been trying for her, too. Posting about her online even though he hates social media, and going to all these fancy events with her. Parties, too. And now they’re at the end of her part of the deal—her movie’s out. And Shane is still stuck in the same place.

“Rose—” Shane cuts himself off. He eyes Rose for a moment. The privacy blind is up, so her driver can’t hear them. And it’s dark, and it’s quiet. And she deserves *something* for all she’s done for him. “Those rumors, they . . . what people are saying about me. What if they’re . . .” Shane shrugs, his mouth dry. He tries to finish what he wants to tell her, what he should’ve said loudly the minute he realized. “What if they’re not completely wrong?”

Rose pauses. Then, she drops her make-up remover. “Yes they are, Shane. There’s nothing *disrespectful,* or *dishonoring,* about dancing with a guy. And if you wanted more than that? With him? That wouldn’t be bad, either.”

“Not with him,” Shane says quickly, automatically. Not with anyone other than Ilya. And if there’s never anyone again, then it’ll be right.

“Then . . . with who?”

Rose eyes him carefully. His suit feels tighter, but the pain inside him is worse. He doesn't know why this is different. She could implode his life with this information.

But, God. Shane is so tired.

"My soulmate?"

Her lips part in shock. Shane worries she's going to turn out the same, insult him, pressure him on who it is. Then, she smiles, and he exhales. "You have a soulmate?" she asks excitedly. "That's—that is *amazing,* Shane. God, you should be with him!"

"I know. I know," Shane whispers. His eyes betray him, filling with tears. It's been so long since he's seen Ilya. Even when they had a game two months ago, Shane was restless, tried his best to ignore him, but Ilya was . . . Ilya was impossible to look past. Shane was ready to crawl out of his skin by the time he was back in that stuffy hotel room. "But it's complicated. It's all . . . a mess. My career, it could—a lot of things would be said about me. And I wouldn't be able to take it back. It would be out there. Forever."

"They'd get over it." Rose grabs his hands. Then, she takes one of her make-up removers, and wipes underneath Shane's eyes. "They'd have to. You can't argue with fate."

Oh, Shane has learned his lesson on that. "One day," he tells her. "One day I'll get to say it."

Fuck this year.

That's all Ilya repeats in his head, for the entirety of January. It's only a month in, but truly, *fuck this year.* His brother won't stop calling him, he's playing like shit, and Shane and him can't even blink without getting criticized. He's sick of it. *All* of it.

The rumors Shane mentioned start to make sense. They must've been buried well up until now. His publicist has been covering for him. But this time, they were so talked about they got back to Ilya. And a day later, he's dating some movie star.

Not a coincidence. But Ilya can't help looking at the pictures of them when he can't sleep, reading comments on the posts Shane makes about them. *New it couple. Soulmates.*

Fucking *soulmates.* What do any of them know about *soulmates*? They get to do whatever they want, kiss and touch and gush about each other. And the whole thing is a fucking hoax. But if he and Shane were to do this, they would be hated. Hated for celebrating their bond, and all the years they've been orbiting each other. A real love, a destined one, and it would be seen as ugly.

This is exactly what Shane feared, being treated as less. It's his nightmare. He avoids them, he doesn't want to look. One, because it's an invasion of Shane's privacy, his life. And because they make Ilya nauseous to look at. *It should be us,* is all he can think. He can't get over his misery for not being brave enough.

After the announced break-up with Rose Landry in February, and when March comes, he wants to reach out again, the way he'd done at their last game. Things start to settle with the Voyageurs' success continuing, running off the adrenaline of two season wins in a row, but the questions are out there now. They must be killing him. He wonders if Shane would even answer if he did try to talk to him. He'd left that letter, but what did it mean to him if he couldn't say it to his face?

Ilya turns off his phone before and after games now. He has to. He gets too caught up in his thoughts, the stupid ones that say just one call or text wouldn't be so bad. He knows—*he knows* that he can't. But he was so, so proud of Shane when he watched him lift that cup above his head again. He didn't look like he was in pain, not physically. He was strong, for his team and for everyone else who depended on him to win. His tolerance for the way the hockey world treated him was horrible in its relentlessness.

He's been having to talk down Andrei more and more, panicking about their father. He tells Ilya to get back to Russia. To do something, for once, for his "*fucking family that he doesn't care about."*

Ilya cares. It's them that don't. He puts so much energy into them that they don't appreciate, and the minute he loses his usefulness, taking the money away, Andrei is on him about being a horrible son and brother.

He wishes, by the time he receives the news, that he was so cold. Then he would've saved himself a year of pain. Saved Shane, too. Andrei doesn't know him, what he loves, how he loves it. But he loves his family, in his own fucked-up way. And that toxicity, that *entanglement* has *ruined* him.

Two months ago

The game drags. Shane feels like he spends it wasting time on the ice, then wasting time on the bench.

Because Ilya's here. Close. His, a couple months ago. And everything Shane is able to keep away comes back with him, like he unlocks something for Shane.

Their bond is heavy, calling. Confused why Shane isn't letting himself extend it to Ilya. Still, it grants him the courtesy of taking away his pain, wrapping it up until tomorrow when Shane's going back home to Montreal and Ilya will stay here in Boston.

They're both on their benches, the second-half underway, and Shane's eyes jump from him to the game, drawn from one love to the other.

He's sluggish tonight. Every night, but now that Shane's here with him, he reads it better. It's like he'd rather be anywhere else. Shane doesn't hear passing chirps from him to his team, and Ilya's tangible energy that usually gave Shane a spark was nearly burned out.

But he's still so loud in Shane's heart. He'd broken it up, left it be, and it's still his. It's horrifying to realize that even without their bond, it'd still belong within his care. There's been others, but none like Ilya. None that even compared. None that he thought of like him, needed.

He doesn't think of this shit. He can't. It's in the past, it's on pause, it's something that isn't allowed to overtake him anymore.

The Voyageurs win, just barely. It's 2-1, a tedious sludge through a usually interesting game between rival teams that filled the seats. Shane wasn't what the world needed from him tonight, and it turns his muscles into hard, locked parts of him he can't relax.

His hotel room is a welcome escape afterwards. He watches the lock screen of his phone as it's overtaken by notifications, and tells himself to *look.* Just answer the texts, watch the game's reviews.

It's a lapse in how he's been. But seeing Ilya the way he was—it's shaken him. Which is frustrating, honestly. Now he's throwing him off. And despite it, Shane can't stop how much he wants to go find him right now, and hug him until their bond is healed neatly, stitched from Shane's soul to Ilya's.

The temptation gnaws at him. Opens up memories Shane hasn't lingered on, making him *smile,* even, as sad as it turns out to be with tears in his eyes.

Ilya shouldn't be here.

His cold, empty house is waiting for him. The pain's there, too, always there, asking Ilya in. And fuck, he always answers. It's been there before Shane. Growing, taking until Ilya accepted that he'd feel it forever.

He doesn't want to, though. Maybe sometimes, on quiet nights where his mind is too fast. But never when Shane's around. He makes it stop, and turns Ilya hopeful.

Ilya's too selfish to fully let him go, and too guilty to knock when he's in front of his hotel room's door.

The rest of Shane's team will be out celebrating, but not him. Too hard on himself. Ilya places a hand on the door, feels their connection buzzing inside him, asking for him to get inside, but that's not what this is.

This is just—

This is Shane being alone, in misery. And Ilya being alone, in guilt. Two agonized souls connected by something better than they can fully accept.

Ilya hears his back knock against the door. Sliding down to sit. He follows him, even though he's in the middle of the hallway, and Shane's team could be coming off the elevator any second now, returning from their celebrating.

Ilya takes as long as he can. The nervous anticipation comes and goes of seeing him, touching him. Rising and falling with hope. It's so unfamiliar, what Shane does for him. Sometimes it makes Ilya flinch. He's never been loved before, not like this, not with this much fury.

Shane knocks twice from inside. Ilya answers with his own two, more silent. What it means to him, he's sure it means the same to Shane, and it's so hard to know him so confidently yet not be able to show him.

They get a good ten minutes before the elevator dings faintly down the hall, and Ilya's on his feet, hesitantly. Before he's gone, he traps a note into Shane's door. Says *bye, sweetheart,* in his head, like Shane's going to hear it.

When he's left, Shane feels it. A dull ache in the back of his head, chasing the ends of relief it won't have for a long, long time.

He doesn't need to check to know he won't see him, but he opens the door, anyway. Just for a glance of his back, or *something* of him.

The hall is empty. Shane wasn't fast enough, or maybe he didn't want to see him and make things worse, and—maybe he was ashamed, too, of those photos, of the fake relationship, and *what did Ilya think of him now?*

As he goes to close the door, he hits his hand on a piece of paper, wedged between the doorknob. He picks it up quickly and stares at it for a moment, folded two ways, no name on the front.

But it's Ilya. Has to be. He'd broken their separation for this, to tell him whatever the letter says, and—what if it's bad? What if, what if, what if.

He unfolds the letter carefully, and begins to read.

My Jane,

Sorry I was not what you needed tonight. I am off balance. I think, if I'm the stars then you're the one who makes the lines between them and forms them into constellations. Like maybe you make me make sense.

I don't have much of a right now, but I worry. A lot more lately. People will say what they want no matter how great you are. This is scary, but real, and it's pushed you.

You're going to stay great. Forever. And this can't be changed either. No matter who you show them.

Love you still.

Your Lily

The funeral happens quickly, formally. And just like at his mother's funeral, they don't talk. No happy memories are shared, no comfort is given. His dad is dead. And that is all. Everyone saw it coming. Ilya did. For years, it's been in the back of his head, this future. He just didn't expect it to feel so differently once it was real.

The last thing he needs is an argument with Andrei about the fucking money. But he doesn't care, he doesn't respect Ilya enough to recognize that maybe *he* does, maybe *he* needs a second to breathe.

Svetlana stays with him afterwards, sitting outside with him. "He doesn't even know, now," Ilya says to her in Russian. She takes the offered cigarette from between Ilya's fingers. "He doesn't know what I ruined. Because I loved him. He never fucking knew how much I loved him. And hated him. And now Andrei will turn out the same. Cursed with his anger. Maybe I am, too."

He thought this was right. Loyalty to his family. Doing what his father told him. His lessons were so ingrained into Ilya's head that the yelling of them still rang in his ears. He *wanted* to be a good son and a good brother. But neither of them *let* him. Trying, and trying, and trying so much that his dedication to them was the very undoing of him and Shane's relationship.

Wasted fucking time. He's been so stupid. This has always been his burden, though. He loves too much. Even when what he loves does not treat him kindly.

Ilya rants to Svetlana through the end of the dinner. She listens until she has to go, and he still has more to say. So much to figure out that he has no one to help him with. Alone, in front of his house, and no one steps out to bring him into the warmth. This is not what a place he's meant to love should feel like.

Everyone is at a distance, but Shane feels so cramped in. Like he can't stretch his legs, like he can't breathe too heavily or a sob from the back of his throat will finally release. He's staying away, he's trying, he's trying to keep what his parents thought he was still strong in their heads, praying they haven't seen those photos, but deep down, he knows his mom had to have. It drives his shame into rarely seeing them, rarely calling.

It's all his fault, a misery he created. So fucking ashamed of what lives inside of him that he tries to kill it. Shane thinks of the ouroboros, a snake eating itself, hurting, caving in on itself, causing its own destruction.

He wonders if it's how his team sees him. If Hayden does. If Ilya was only lying in that letter so Shane wouldn't have some breakdown, if his real thoughts when he saw those stupid pictures was, *this is the guy I love?*

But no one's going to sit Shane down and talk to him about it. There's an obvious shift to his behavior, even to him. Spiraling towards some desperate scream, visceral and uncaring in how it makes others uncomfortable.

Maybe it would've stopped by now, if they made him sit on the bench, or told him he couldn't come back until his head was on straight. But by then, Shane would've already come out with Ilya in order to find himself again. And that's not the Shane they want.

They want him to go back to who he was. Hiding himself, his emotions, biting his tongue, always polite and never aggressive. But if they can't have that, they'll take the broken down version of him. Just so long as he continues to lead the team towards the Stanley Cup.

It's a game against Boston tonight. When he's in the arena, lacing up his skates, and the pain doesn't dull, he just figures, *this is it. This is how I'm always going to feel.* The pain will never find its relief again. Its relief is too distant. But Shane can't blame him. They're in the same position, too terrified to tell the truth.

It's the worst part. Shane couldn't hate Ilya for this if he tried. And he *does,* all the fucking time. He tries so hard, in the gym and on the ice, for bringing to the surface all of Shane's emotions and his vulnerability just to tell him they *can't,* not yet, and left Shane to navigate who he was now by himself.

But he loves him. He loves him so much that sometimes he forgets they're doomed. In his dreams, he's kissing him in front of cameras, and Ilya is placing a ring on his finger, and they're wearing the same jersey, and going to sleep together.

He thought this would be easier, letting Shane go for an unspecified time. But somehow, it's all been worse. He's at the top of his game, and still, Shane is hollowed out.

There isn't time to think of it anymore. They have a game. Shane has to win, to show his team he isn't completely gone.

"Ready, Captain?" Hayden sits beside Shane, getting his pads on. With all the pushing away Shane has done, Hayden could've stopped talking to him. He would've understood. But he's stuck by his side, and hasn't let Shane disappear.

"Ready. You?"

Hayden smiles, nodding his head.

It's all routine at this point. Shane's methodical with how he gets his gear on, his jersey. It's the one thing that seems to clear his head these days, other than being on the ice. The pain is worse today, focused, but Shane won't let anything take him away from the only thing he seems to have not fucked up yet.

"Looks like Rozanov is out," J.J. announces to the locker room.

And that's when Shane's chest *burns.* Pushes at him. "He—what?" Shane tries to hide it, facing away from J.J..

"He is not playing tonight. ESPN will not say why."

Hayden looks at J.J.'s phone. "Is he injured?"

Shane thinks of that game against LA. His ribs, his knee. But that was months ago, and Shane's been keeping up with his games, anyway, and he's seemed fine. Checked out, as he has been, but not hurt. Not more than he usually is.

"It was just announced an hour ago. There's nothing yet."

"He doesn't miss games," Shane says, without thinking of it first. His body punishes him for it, taking large areas of Shane's nerves it usually doesn't mess with and slicing into them. *Something is wrong,* he says to himself, but doesn't let it linger.

J.J. shrugs. "Maybe the Bears finally wised up. He is playing for two-and-a-half seasons now like he's forgotten how."

"Seriously," one of Shane's teammates joins in. "I don't know how they even go out and play. It's embarrassing at this point."

"It's like they *want* to keep losing—"

"Oh, just *shut up!"* Shane yells. It tears out of him. He's useless to stop it, the grief, his annoyance with all of them. They don't fucking know what he's going through, and they never will. "Can we *please* focus? If you guys hate him so much, then you'd think you'd stop talking about him, but you're *obsessed* with him. It's fucking *enough.* It's enough for me. Now let's go out there, do what we're supposed to do, and win this game. Okay?"

Shane doesn't wait for them as he leaves the locker room. He can't be there anymore, his breath coming in shallow. He wants to find Ilya and have him heal him. Why isn't he here? Is it their bond stopping him? With the way Shane's body is aching, he doesn't even think he's here in Boston.

He can't stop coming up with theories the whole time he warms up. He's tempted to ask one of Ilya's teammates, but he isn't exactly friendly with any of them. They'll probably tell him to fuck off. It's making Shane crazy with worry. If the game wasn't about to start, he'd go and get his phone. Just text him, just *check in.*

It's too late, though. There's no time. He'll have to wait until first period is over.

With the game underway, Shane lets it take him to that place of focus and determination within his head, growing smaller and smaller the more his body tries to tell him to *stop.*

It's distracting. It puts an error in how Shane works, letting the puck get taken from him too many times, even missing a fucking goal. He's frustrated. He wishes Ilya were here. Even if

they wouldn’t talk. It’s better when they don’t, anyway.

Hayden grabs his shoulder when there’s time, after Boston actually manages to score, and asks in his ear, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Shane answers.

“So everything’s horrible, then?” He flashes Shane a grin, and skates off.

His team is in good spirits, even with the way Shane had screamed at them. They’re all thinking this’ll be an easy game, but slowly grow irritated with Shane’s mistakes.

To anyone else, it would be fine. It would be the way any average hockey player goes about a game. But Shane’s getting checked into the boards, harsh, and his team makes it clear by not defending him (other than Hayden), that he’s bringing them down.

They’re nearing the end of the period when Shane’s left foot starts to scream in pain. He winces, tries to push through it. But then it’s radiating up, all the way to his chest, setting him ablaze. It makes him slow down, in the middle of play. And because of it, he doesn’t see it coming. He doesn’t register he’s down on the ice until he sees Hayden above him, and then skating away, screaming. The fans are loud, but Shane can’t hear anything over the blood rushing in his ears and the calling in his heart for the only person who will make it stop.

Shane doesn’t want this to be it. But a secret can only be held in for so long before it forces itself out.

Chapter End Notes

2 more chs left very crazy thank you everyone who has stuck with me the support has rly made me excited while publishing this slash inspireddd <33333:)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part VII.

Ilya's brain and that ever-stubborn, loyal thing in his chest have been calling for him to get home to Shane the whole week he's been in Russia. He's numbed it with alcohol, pain meds, and thinking of Shane. That last one was harder to do, turning missing him into needing him into crying for him and hating the tears that were for something else, too, multiple things.

He's watching the Bears/Voyageurs game when it happens. He's supposed to be looking at his team's technique, *being their captain,* but he's focused on him. It wouldn't have been noticeable if Shane was any other player, but he's *him,* second best in the league, first when Ilya's yearning for him enough.

Usually, Ilya's protecting Shane against these hits he's taking. He can't *always* be there, but the rivalry against their teams was strong, and where his teammates could get hits into the Voyageurs captain, they did. But most of those were given by Ilya. They weren't harsh, just harsh enough to excite Shane, to flare up his competitiveness and show him how exhilarating it was to be with him on the ice.

He doesn't let his team fight Shane. Not the way they are tonight. And with the way he struggles to get up for a last time, Ilya wishes he had left Russia early, the second the funeral was over. Maybe then he wouldn't have had to see the way Shane wasn't looking, how he winced and held his stomach as he stopped in the middle of the ice. Maybe he wouldn't have had to see him get shoved into the boards and not get up.

He only sits there long enough in front of the TV to see Shane get carried away by the medics. And then he's booking a flight to Boston, one-way, praying that Shane can feel him coming to him.

There's a song that plays in Shane's head on the way to the hospital. The medics can't hear it over him screaming, but that's alright. It's not for them, anyway. It still sings to him as he gets tired, as the ambulance turns dark.

Two years ago

Ilya drags Shane up from his bed, and leads him into the living room. They're only in their boxers, Shane is freezing, and it's two in the morning, but Ilya seems determined. He leaves Shane there standing on the living room carpet as he goes for his phone, and types, *what music do you like?*

That's what was so important? He has to go in an hour, and instead of being in bed with Shane, he's curious about his taste. *I don't listen to much music,* Shane puts down. He crosses his arms, the air cold against his bare skin.

Ilya smiles. *Of course you don't.*

Shane rolls his eyes, and doesn't reply. He grabs Ilya's sweatshirt from the couch instead, tossed haphazardly in their rush to be together. It's long in the sleeves, baggy at the waist, but warm. Soft.

Just as he's about to grab Ilya's hand and lead him back to his bedroom, music filters through his phone. It's not something Shane recognizes, and not Ilya's usual dance music that Shane will hear filtering through the hotel room before Ilya will pause it and answer the door to him.

Obscurity knocks. Trashcan Sinatras. Very different from your podcasts, huh? After Shane reads it, Ilya turns the volume up, and tugs at Shane's (his) sweatshirt, pulling him against him. Shane accepts his hands on him as easy as breathing, but can't resist leading them until they're underneath the sweatshirt, curling around his waist.

He gives Shane a boyish smile, crooked and happy, trying to loosen Shane up by spinning them slowly. Shane's clumsy with his feet, following Ilya's lead, but he's a horrible dancer. He looks down to where he's stepped on Ilya about five times already, frustrated. And then Ilya's touching light at his chin, tilting his face up, and kissing the tip of his nose. He doesn't pause to laugh at Shane, or make fun of him—he shrugs his shoulders, as if it doesn't matter, and continues to pull Shane closer and closer into relaxing.

He takes Shane's arms and throws them over his shoulders, and then starts to move with the upbeat swerve of the song. When Shane starts to jump with him, getting past his hesitation,

Ilya *giggles,* and kisses his cheek. Shane lets go of feeling stupid, childish—because maybe it is, but Ilya's doing it, too, and he looks the happiest Shane has ever seen him.

They dance there together in the dark, the music loud, laughing in each other's ears. Shane forgets Ilya has to go, and stays there with him, in a rare and happy moment. He kisses Ilya around their smiles, and when the next song comes on, Ilya mouths the words into Shane's neck, holding him close by the waist, tapping the beat underneath his sweatshirt.

The hospital is packed. Ilya can't tell where he's meant to go, briefly intimidated by the chaos of all the people in the waiting area. He tries to get the receptionist's attention, but she's on the phone, and everyone is moving like the world isn't currently out of balance, like Shane is completely fine, but he *knows* he's here, he can feel him, he didn't need ESPN to find the hospital.

It was how intense Shane's pain truly was. Ilya had numbed it, thoughts only of him, but Shane was focusing on the game, doing everything to keep him out of his head.

Ilya makes eye contact with the older woman at the front desk, waiting impatiently for her to get off the phone. There's about three other people Ilya jumps in front of to get her attention, holding onto the desk like it's the only thing keeping him upright.

"How can I help you?" She asks, distracted, jotting something down on a sticky note.

"Looking for a patient. Shane Hollander?" It's been so long, *too long*, since Ilya's said his name. He didn't think his refinding of it would be when he had to ask for it at a hospital. He thought he'd get to whisper it against Shane's skin, delicate. Now it comes out unsteady, to a stranger.

"Are you family?"

Ilya's stomach drops. "No. But—we are . . ." Ilya shakes his head.

"Unless you're family, I can't give you any information."

Stupid fucking regulations. Didn't his *care* matter enough, or the annoying tremor in his voice he couldn't shake? With how loud him and Shane's bond was beating against his chest, he was surprised everyone in the hospital couldn't feel it, or even *see* it. Nearly, Ilya can, shining bright in front of him in small twinkles like the stars, dancing and circling and anxious to land.

They want to *reach.* They're tugging at Ilya, bringing the truth up. He doesn't have the time to rationalize what he says, just that it could get him to Shane. "What if we are soulmates?" he blurts out. He's not going to be kept away from him. Just the thought of it has him shaking his head, unwilling to entertain the idea.

"Sir—you would need some kind of proof—"

"Let me see him, you will get your proof."

She sighs, but Ilya waits her out. "I would have to talk to his doctors."

"Fine."

"And his family."

Ilya leans forward, trying to see what she's typing. What she's doing other than *this,* like anything was more important right now. "Why? They would not know. No one knows. Just us."

"Well, then, you can tell them, and then *they* can tell me you're allowed to see him. But until then, I'm sorry—"

"You will kill him," Ilya interrupts. He can feel Shane's pain, drumming at his chest. It's stretching towards Ilya's desperation to get to him, grabbing onto the sprouts of love, taking comfort where it can get it when Shane is so hurt. Ilya doesn't mean to scare her, or anything, but he feels out of control of this, of the wild need inside to heal his soulmate. "If I can't see him, he will die. Let me talk to his doctors, I will explain it, but I need to—"

"*Okay."* She holds a hand up. How unworried she is just unnerves Ilya more. "Okay. I'll see what I can do. Please take a seat."

Ilya smiles politely, thin. "Thank you." He doesn't sit down. He heads for the elevators, and follows Shane's energy, leading him past each floor.

2015

Wish you could write Russian.

Ilya holds the notepad between them in bed, supporting it while Shane puts down his answer.

Teach me something.

Ilya grows hot with the phrasing, his hand sweating around the pen. He draws out letters in the air, thinking. Then, he puts down a word in Cyrillic. Showing Shane his language is more intimate than maybe he catches onto, like he's telling him with every word about his life, his past that he doesn't fully know.

What does that mean?

Ilya grins. *It's your name.*

Are you fucking with me, Shane says, and Ilya's already laughing, nodding. Shane slaps his chest light, scoffing. Ilya brings him closer to get fingers through his soft hair, to hold him. There's an anxiety that starts as their time closes up, when Shane starts to get more distant, but Ilya doesn't allow it just yet.

What does it say??

Ilya shrugs, flustered. *It is secret. Nothing bad.* Shane learning Russian, what a thought. Like he isn't already speaking it in Ilya's dreams, pushing back against Ilya's chest as he straddles his thighs.

You're an asshole.

Ilya circles the word in Cyrillic, and points at Shane. He continues to think Ilya's calling him *boring,* or some other tease. But it's not anything like that. *Sweetheart,* it means. Ilya's own private nickname he gives him in his head. Now, on paper. He wants Shane to hear it his first time. Not like this, when Ilya can't put all he wants behind it. Everything Shane deserves.

Their tether leads Ilya to the fifth floor. He goes down a lengthy hallway, looking at room numbers, not paying attention. It's stronger than it's ever been, maybe because for one of the first times, Ilya's not resisting it, saying *no.* He *wants* it to take him over, to fulfill it and be with Shane. Its drawl is heavy, steals Ilya's focus, and he ends up running *right* into someone, knocking into their shoulder.

"*S-sorry,*" he says anxiously, already starting to continue on his search.

"Rozanov?"

Ilya turns around, and it takes him a minute to notice who it is. His heart's too fast, his breath is too irregular. His mind is a mess, but— "Oh," he whispers. Their bond tries to keep his feet

moving, but he stops in the middle of the wide hall, the fluorescent lights flickering in and out to the beat of the energy swirling through his chest.

“Why are you . . .” Yuna Hollander walks up to him carefully. Ilya notices her red-rimmed eyes, the tissue in her hand. She seems *lost,* drained, to Ilya, and though he doesn’t know her yet, it worries him. For her and for Shane.

“Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya awkwardly says, not sure how to address her. Or the current situation. “I—“ He means to ask where Shane is. How he is. Instead, it’s, “Are you okay?” And he notices he really *does* want to know, the wires crossed on that and if it’s also because Shane would want him to check on her, too.

Her face crumbles, but she doesn’t let a sound out. “I just—“ She exhales, rough. “Weren’t you, uh—you weren’t at the game last night. You didn’t see.”

Ilya shakes his head. “I did. See.” It’s been replaying in his head. Only once had he looked, but it was enough to sear it into his memory. Shane hunched over, supporting himself with his hands on his legs, and then—and then.

“Oh.”

They stare, until Ilya has to look away. He clenches his jaw. This isn’t how Shane would want them to meet. He’d set up a reservation in the summer at a nice restaurant, at the best table, ramble to Ilya in the car about how his parents were nice but protective and Ilya would put his hand on top of his and everything would be okay, it would all go well because it was *meant to.*

“*Oh,*” Yuna says again. *Oh.* Like all she needed from Ilya was two words to understand, so maybe they knew about Shane? Not Ilya, but him, what he’s felt like he’s had to hide all these years.

“Yes.”

“You’re here for—“

“Yes,” whispered. “Is he hurt?” The words are around cotton in Ilya’s mouth. He wants to—*needs* to know, as much as accepting it is going to break him.

“He—“ She shakes her head. “He keeps screaming. They don’t know why. Do you—do you know why?”

A cry tries to release, but Ilya muffles it. *Screaming.* Because of how hurt he was, because their bond became agonized that they were so far away, and that Shane wasn’t focusing on it at all. It did feel like a punishment sometimes, the pain, but it was mostly a reminder that being in denial was blocking them from being happy.

“I do.” Ilya’s desperate to see him, but he doesn’t want to ignore Shane’s mom. It seems like she’s here alone. Ilya doesn’t think she should be. “I, uh—I think he should tell you, but . . . I can tell his doctors. Help him, maybe. If you don’t want me to—“

Ilya's not here to overstep, he's not going to act like just because they have a connection rooted to the Earth it means Shane's parents don't have that with him, because Ilya *knows* they do. Everytime he talks about them, he starts to smile to himself.

"No," she interrupts, though, grabbing Ilya's arm. "If you know something, then *please.* I can't listen to him—he sounds so . . . wounded." Her hand shakes over her mouth. Unable to speak, she drags him along down the hall, and Ilya follows.

"This is what you dream of?"

Shane loves the beach. Sunsets into the ocean, sparkling water, the salt wind blowing onto his warm skin. And he loves the calm of the waves, the peace it washes over him. There's joy here. Not worry.

"Yes," he replies. "What? It's a good dream."

"Could be more . . . hm. Imaginative?" Ilya turns over on his stomach, looking up at Shane. The sun is in his hair, in his vibrant eyes against the ocean they contain. He's tanned from the shine, and they've been here for a long time, have they? However long Shane wants. Forever?

"We're here. Together."

"Is fair," he mutters. He drags his pointer finger up and down Shane's chest. "We could never do this."

"That's why it's a good dream," Shane says, lovingly, pushing hair behind his ear. "And we could. Do this. When we're ready."

Ilya frowns, resting his head in his hand. "And when will you be ready, Shane?"

With a rushed explanation and spotty English, Ilya gets into Shane's room.

It's dark, is the first thing he notices. Quiet. Shane is turned over in the bed, and when Ilya's closer, he sees the IV in his arm. Doctors said they had to sedate him. That there's possible damage to his vocal cords from the screaming, so they had to. All because Ilya wasn't here. Because he was in Russia, dealing with getting the house in order, arguing with his brother and Polina.

The whole affair seems distant now. His father's death has barely registered. It rings numb in his head, in his heart. It will rush forwards soon enough, take him under, maybe. The same way his mother's had? He hopes not. He still finds himself buried in memories of her, trying to get over the grief, and it never stops piling on.

He doesn't attempt to wake Shane up. But being with him settles the pain, has Ilya holding his hand, kissing his palm, and then the back of it, over his fingers. He lies his head against it. "I love you," he whispers into the still room. "Distance will not change it. I just. Love you forever, now, I think. Right? And after that, too. Like you said." Ilya grins. "You are good with words. I don't understand them all, but you are good with them. They always make me happy."

After a second, Ilya closes his eyes. "Shane," he adds on. It shakes him. "*Shane.* You should not be here." Ilya buries his face in the sheets, hunched over in the plastic chair. He doesn't cry, but the emotions choose to run through him, putting a tremor in his voice. "I'm sorry for it all. So, so sorry. Sweetheart."

"Is this a *store?*"

Ilya's still in shorts, flip-flops. His hair is all curly from the beach-air, the humidity, the sea. Shane leans on the cart, taking him in. *Beautiful,* like the first breath of fresh air when he steps outside into the early morning.

"Yes, it's the store," he says, smiling wide. Shane's flannel is unbuttoned, the sleeves rolled up, he thinks he wore this at some point with Ilya, years ago, in a cold city. And Ilya laughed because of him being freezing, and then warmed him up underneath the blankets, his breath against Shane's lips. Sweating underneath the flannel, but not taking it off because he wanted it to smell like Ilya, just for a few days before he inevitably washed it.

"You dream of us getting groceries together."

"*Yes.* What's wrong with that?"

“*Nothing,* but—“ he sighs. “Okay. Everything. So many scenarios you can imagine. Us, *anywhere.* And we are shopping?”

“That’s not what it is.” Shane steps forward, kissing Ilya’s cheek. “It’s public. It’s . . . normal.”

“It’s boring,” Ilya continues. He slips a finger underneath the sleeve of the flannel, just as he had in bed—wanted to touch Shane, all of him, but didn’t want him to be cold, either, keeping him comfortable even when on the surface he was joking with him.

He’s always cared. And hasn’t exactly hidden it. Shane just. Didn’t look deep enough. He couldn’t.

“Exactly.”

Shane keeps dreaming. One hazy, imagined world into the next. All of them contain Ilya sun-kissed, crinkles around his eyes, young and talking. Shane doesn’t quite understand why, at first, but—he looks so free this way. Happy. His.

That’s how Shane wants him to be. And until the end of time, it’s how he wants to be, too.

He’s groggy when the dreams stop. His fingers are cramped, he can tell, and his throat is burning. But beyond that, he doesn’t hear, or *see* anything for a while.

The first is Ilya’s voice. He’s heard it so little, but he knows it. *Dreaming again,* he thinks happily, reaching towards him.

His Mom is there, too, talking with him. This is different. His dad comes in, and then someone Shane doesn’t recognize. They’re blurry figures, muffled voices.

It scares him. “Ilya?” He calls. He’s guided him through his clouded mind so far, why is he gone now? Shane doesn’t want to stop living dreams with him.

“Right here,” he says, distant. “Everyone is here.”

“Oh,” Shane slurs. That’s good. He doesn’t quite know why, but it is.

“It’s okay. Just sleep.”

More pressure applies to Shane’s hand. It sort of hurts, but it’s warm, too. “Yeah?”

“Yes. It’s okay.”

“Okay.” Shane closes his eyes. Dreams again. Dreams of him.

Yuna’s sat beside Ilya, taking the chair with a cushion. David went to go get coffee, even asked Ilya what he wanted. He almost told him to see if they had ginger tea for Shane. It could help his throat. But it would grow cold by the time he wakes up again. The sedation is taking its time to wear off.

Both of them watch over him. Yuna had closed the blinds, Ilya had tucked the blanket tighter at his feet. Shane always complains about that, having cold feet, no matter how warm the room is, or if he has his socks on. He’ll push them underneath Ilya’s legs, and Ilya will flinch at first with how cold they *truly* are, but it makes Shane more comfortable, so he lets him.

“You didn’t play last night,” Yuna interrupts their somewhat awkward silence. Her voice is as scratchy as Shane’s had been when he was awake.

“I wasn’t here. In Boston.” His brother keeps coming back to his head. It was the right decision to cut him off, but he still worried. Not just for him, but for his daughter, and his wife. He wondered about their future, but he wasn’t responsible for it. He always thought he was, his brother led him to believe it, and he’s guilty, and maybe he will be for the rest of his life, but it will be a life without his brother telling him he should be, and that was better. It had to be.

“Where were you?”

“Russia,” Ilya says. It hits him then, how tired he is. He didn’t sleep on the plane, too worried, and he’s been running on coffee to get him through the mess of paperwork for the house. He couldn’t sleep well, anyway, too distracted, too hurt. Too much grief he didn’t know how to navigate, and he still doesn’t, really. “Family emergency.”

“Hope everyone’s okay?”

She had Shane’s empathy. None of Ilya’s father’s apathy, his confusion over simply doing something just to be kind. She’s the kind of person to sit down and explain this—death. Make the world make sense. His father didn’t, after his mom died. Ilya asked where she went, and

his father had said nothing. Ilya went there for a while thinking that meant she was somewhere bad.

In a way, she had. Her death was violent in how silent it was after how loud her misery had been with Ilya's father. There's yelling when Ilya's meant to be asleep at six, and eight, and eleven. And he's not meant to think of that. Only her smile. Only her.

"My father, he . . . he died. But. I saw it coming."

"Oh, Ilya," she sighs. His first name sounds too familiar from her already, too close. He closes his eyes against the tears. "I'm so sorry. That must be horrible."

It was. And if he were still alive, it'd be just as bad. Suffering to a drawn-out end, losing his mind, calling Ilya Andrei and Andrei Ilya yet screaming at them both equally loud for a reason he could never explain.

"He was very, uh—not loved, but—celebrated? Looked up to. Hard to impress." At least Ilya can't disappoint him any longer. "But, thank you. I should be comforting you instead."

"I think I've done enough crying." She offers Ilya a weak smile. "He'll be okay. He'll recover."

She says it sure, confident. It seeps into Ilya's worries, just a little. "He is very strong. More than he thinks."

"Yes," she agrees. Ilya sees her wipe at her eyes again. "I haven't—he hasn't come and seen me. Not for a while now." Ilya hesitantly puts a hand on her back, unsure of what to say. "I think he's been very lonely. Not just now, not just these last few months, but all his life. So . . . internal. He fights *everything.* Now this happens, and—"

"Hey," Ilya interrupts, soft, before she can let the guilt take her completely. "He will be embarrassed when he wakes up that I told you this, but he is always talking about you. I feel like I know you at this point. Really."

Her wet laugh makes Ilya smile. *Talking to Shane's mom. Comforting her.* Didn't think this was how his day would go.

"I've tried to ask him what's wrong. But I didn't want him to push me away. And then that's exactly what happened. But when he was younger, he-he told me *everything.* He'd call me saying what he ate that day, and he used to buy me little souvenirs with every new city he went to. These little frog keychains with, 'I heart NY,' on them, or whichever state he was in. I still have them on an earring tree. All lined up.

"I just . . . maybe I should've kept him with me for longer. Protected him. 'Cause he's *so* good. It's not right, how he's been, it isn't him. I should've—"

Ilya hadn't known how much Shane was isolating himself. The news shocks him. He thought, with the way Shane went on about them, he'd open up to them. He'd have his outlet. The

way he seemed so burdened in the hotel when he admitted he could've told them, Ilya figured it was only a matter of time.

But he went backwards. Spiraled, the same as Ilya had, but Ilya had taken his team down with him. Shane had done the opposite, so no one bothered to look further into how he was doing. And when they did, like his parents, he put them at a distance. With the photos coming out and the media's response, maybe it was his final straw, the decision made to accept he could never release another truth again, not even to his parents.

"You know how independent he is," Ilya says. Somehow their hands had moved to lay against each other. Not hold, but. Just to touch. To know they aren't alone. "He probably thought he was protecting you, too."

"Always thinking about others. Never himself. That's my Shane." It's both loving and self-deprecating, turning Ilya's stomach. He wants to make this better for her, but he can't seem to do the right thing. She shakes her head. "I know you can't tell me what you told the doctors. That it's for Shane to say, if he wants. And I really do hope he *wants.* But it does have to do with why he was staying away. Right?"

"I think so. But maybe he will say different. That's why I don't want to . . . that's why I can't."

The doctors know Ilya is his soulmate. He explained the bond to them quickly, rambled, and handed over Maya's number if they really didn't trust him. They've been recording his vitals since Ilya got here, and his rapid heart rate has slowed dramatically. So finally, they left them alone, and Yuna and David were able to breathe again with the news that he would be okay.

They sit together in silence once more, watching Shane's chest go up and down, listening to his even breath. Ilya's done this before, when Shane would fall asleep after a busy day, then staying up with Ilya. He'd look so peaceful, his muscles would relax. Ilya would rub his back, which he doesn't think Shane is aware of. But he would, in the hopes that it would let him sleep for longer, just the same way, deep and quiet and cuddled close to Ilya.

He suspects Yuna's done it, too. When he was a baby, newly-home, watching over him. She's a good mother. Makes Ilya miss his own.

David comes back with coffee. His hair is a mess, and he admits he'd fallen asleep for a minute in the cafeteria, which makes Yuna laugh and press her head against his chest. *These are Shane's parents.* He gets it, now. Why Shane loves so much to talk about them. The love from them, the support, the concern they've shown for him—he is their whole world.

Ilya feels like he's intruding. Shane and him, they hadn't left off the best. An understatement, but Ilya couldn't think of it right now. They'd drudge it up when Shane was awake. He had a fear that Shane wouldn't want to, but until he said so, Ilya was going to wait. Wait for him to open his eyes, and speak.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter underwent some major maintenance and ch8 is having it too, aim is for it to come out tomorrow but we'll see, i was unsatisfied with 7/8 and i dont want to just upload 8 when i dont like it so pls forgive me if its late. Im going back to editing it rn but tbh was an error on my part releasing this fic before i was completely happy with how i wrote the ending (and not realizing that ofc i would be overthinking it) so sorry but i hope u all enjoyed this chapter i feel after editing it that its better :)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

part VIII.

The world is clearer now. Closes in on Shane and brings him back. There's a distant voice chanting the same words, over and over like a prayer, a language Shane doesn't understand, each note laid across its lines in varying tones. A beautiful song, Shane thinks. And a shame he's the music sheet Ilya has drawn each note onto when he can't translate them back to him.

He taps out the syllables instead. One. Two three. For five. Imprints over the beat of Ilya's pulse at his wrist. "You're awake," he says, this time in English, and it's Shane's first instinct to say *No, I can't be. You're here.*

But this Ilya . . . he is different, but just as beautiful. More so. Shane's imagination can't capture this, the correct details of how his eyelashes web together, or that dark pink in his lips, and the sharp valley that shapes his top one, curved up into a stunning grin.

"You were very tired," he tells Shane. Shane doesn't fight him on that. Because, yes, yes he has been. He's not let himself act on that exhaustion, but it's been there a while. "It's good you sleep. The doctor said that. And your voice—the, whatever they're called. They're . . . strained. But you can speak. It shouldn't hurt too much."

That reminds him. Something he doesn't have right now that will walk in as soon as Ilya walks out. "Speaking," Shane mutters. "Should we . . ." He lifts his hand weakly, and presses at Ilya's bottom lip with his thumb.

"I love you." Promised against Shane, a lyric he understands. Music is on his mind, Ilya likes music. "And I want to."

He's looking into Shane's eyes with the declaration, and there's no fear. Resolution, maybe. To be settled with it, and at peace. "I love you," Shane says, his voice rough. Then, "Does it feel . . . does it still feel like agony?"

Slowly, Ilya shakes his head. There's an unsteady smile still on his face, pressed against Shane's hand. "Not anymore," he whispers. Not anymore.

They're all there some time later when Shane's awake again, careful and quiet like he's going to break apart. But, really, he's *okay.* He's being discharged later, *Ilya's here,* and their bond has turned its pain into an amplified dose of endorphins, cycling through Shane's blood with a powerful energy when Ilya's back in the room.

It feels like it plugs up the parts of Shane that have been bleeding out. Healing over infected cuts and sucking out the poison that weakened him.

Maybe there's another layer of the atmosphere. Some unseeable current of electrodes that struck certain people with a link between them and binded them with its heartful energy—described as this *divine gift* granted and blessed to that Shane hadn't understood until now.

Earth's energy, like Pearl said. The very distinct love it created and held for every drop of rain, every leaf that fell gently to the ground. Ilya, Ilya and him had that now. None of the built-up resentment, the anxious pressure of a hard-kept secret.

Shane gets lost in him. Takes in a lot of things at once, like that he's in a hospital bed and Ilya's eyes are teary and he's shuffling like he doesn't want to stay still but he can't get his arms around Shane right now, either. Which is why he lifts a hand up, runs it through Ilya's hair. Whispers, "Soft." Ilya's eyes flutter shut, his head sags against Shane's touch. *There you go,* Shane thinks, to give him what he needs, so right. "Were you scared, my love? Don't be scared. I'm right here." He tries to get Ilya closer to lay beside him, murmuring, "Missed you. Did you miss me?"

"Shane." Ilya grins small. "Your parents are here."

"No, it's sweet," his mom says, at the same time his Dad goes, "My son, the romantic."

He'd forgotten where they were for a second. And Ilya's ability to distract him didn't do much to help that. "I should explain. I'm sorry." He forgets to at first. Because, *can't they see it?* "I was going to, I really was, but we were—" Shane looks at Ilya for help. "Not happening? For a while? It's a whole soulmate-related thing—"

Ilya puts a hand on Shane's. "Shane. They—I didn't tell them that yet."

He catches up, his brain short-circuiting, and all he can say is, "Oh."

"*Soulmates?*" They both exclaim, shooting out of their seats. His Dad gets a word in first. "You're *soulmates.* You two. That's why you helped him. Oh my—wow. Wow. That's—"

"Unbelievable," his mom finishes. "But—oh. My gosh. *Shane.* You have a *soulmate,* oh—" she kisses his cheek, and he laughs, unsure. He's a little floaty still, shocked that he actually just confessed to them and an earthquake hadn't happened, the world hadn't imploded in on him.

Maybe shame can't reach him now. He spent so long with it, and now it seems . . . exhausting.

"You're having a better reaction than I did. That's good."

Ilya slaps his leg, lightly over the thin blanket.

"What? They are."

"I think you are still a little out of it."

Shane squeezes his fingers together. "Just a little. Not much. I'm here enough."

"So you and Ilya . . . you're together."

Ilya had given an excuse of needing to make a call to leave and give Shane a moment with his parents. His mind was clearer now, and with Ilya outside, (he could tell, he was in front of the building—not the sidewalk, but a little further out, keeping away from the front door where patients would come out) Shane felt *normal* without him, that tug at their bond humming distant. No pain, but no euphoria, either. It let him be *level-headed.*

He was so fucking relieved.

Not that the new found energy didn't feel amazing to have, but when they were apart, it meant Shane could *focus.* Hockey wouldn't need such a ritual of telling himself *mind over matter,* he wouldn't need to be popping Tylenol every four hours.

He couldn't be stopped now. After his week out— prescribed by his doctor, because he didn't trust Shane not to yell, being the captain of a very energetic hockey team—there wasn't a limit. Not for him, and not for Ilya, either.

It snaps him out of his daze, and he answers his dad. "We're . . . I mean, yes." If Ilya wants that. Because Shane *does.* But he could be hesitant, still. "Yes."

"Soulmates. Chosen by fate, isn't that the quote?" His mom asks.

Every person in position of giving answers on soulmates boils it down to that, an easy, comprehensible statement, because it's otherwise something too overwhelming to grasp. *Chosen by fate.* That wasn't hard to settle with. Fate was fate, the answer to it was something no one was meant to know, like the subjects of religion, mythology and the curious question of death.

“It is. There’s a lot of science behind it, too.” He figures he’ll stop at that, but they stay quiet, a sign for him to continue. “Pearl—she’s a witch I’ve been talking to—“ he gets raised eyebrows at that, but goes on, “she basically told me it’s every scrap of felt love, even these miniscule moments of affection, all laced together, and put between us. Me and Ilya. Like, if he were here right now—we’d catch onto all the love that’s been passed back-and-forth in this very room, and we’d feel it at the same time.”

It *is* a lot. Maybe that’s why the general public hates it. They don’t like to leave space for the unknown, things they don’t understand in their life unless they can make sense of it. That’s what religion *was,* there to make sense of grief and cradle hearts when they were abandoned and lost. But soulmates *had* no logic.

It wasn’t meant to. A soulmate pairing just . . . *was.*

“Oh, Shane.” His mom gets teary, laughing around them. She looks up to him like he had just given her the greatest gift. And maybe he had. She’s always worried, deep down, Shane knows, that he’d be lonely. Dedicating himself so thoroughly to hockey would leave him half-empty. But now, she doesn’t need to carry that any longer.

“That’s gotta be—I don’t even know, son. Consuming.”

His dad doesn’t say it negatively. But like Shane, he’s a logistical person. He likes ends and solutions, making things right.

“It is,” Shane says. “But I think that’s why you never hear of one person holding all that. It’s always two. Carrying the weight together. Then it’s not so heavy, or scary.”

He doesn’t reveal to them about the pain. He could, it would answer them why he stopped in the middle of the game, but—he wouldn’t be a good son, would he? Not for that. They don’t *need* to know how he suffered, or that part of the reason why he did was because he felt like he couldn’t tell them the truth.

No. Shane would take that on. And Ilya.

“Are you happy? Not related to it, but, I mean—*you.* Do *you* want it?”

Shane’s patient with his dad’s question. He would’ve phrased it the same if he didn’t know, but. “It *is* me, Dad. When I saw Ilya for the first time, and he saw me . . . it was all us. Everything we felt for each other right away was what made the bond form. It wasn’t forced. We didn’t know that would happen, but—it was us.”

“What, like—love at first sight?”

Shane grimaces. But then he thinks about it, and even though it wasn’t what he thought back in Regina, that *was* it, all summed up. “Yeah. I think so.”

When Ilya comes back, they're clear to leave the hospital. "We're gonna see about booking a hotel for all of us tonight. We'll be back in a minute. You two should, uh. *Talk.*" His mom, playing innocent, shrugs, then grins at Ilya.

"Did you two become best friends or something?" Shane's holding up the hospital-provided sweatpants to his hips when he asks. They're from the gift shop. And the worst part, they say *Boston* on them. He's tempted to ask Ilya for his plain black ones. His team's going to have a field day if there's photos.

Ilya stands behind him, and begins to untie Shane's hospital gown, wisps of his fingers at the bottom of his neck. Goosebumps rise, slow. *Two years.* Two long, horrible years without Ilya's hands on him. "Something like that. She loves you very much. And I do. We have many things in common."

The first tie comes undone. Shane's able to let it fall to his feet afterwards, left cold in his briefs. Ilya's arms snake around his waist, fingers splayed on his stomach. He kisses his back, and Shane can't help the soft moan that leaves him, going pliant against Ilya's chest.

"What'd you talk about?"

"Not telling."

"Ilya."

He spins Shane around carefully, and takes his sweatshirt off. "Was nothing. Put this on, you're freezing."

"Thanks." Shane leaves the hood over his head when he does, and Ilya lets him steady himself with his hands on his shoulders as he helps him step into the pants. Shane's not dizzy or anything. Ilya just wants to help him.

"I was thinking. Since you are staying here tonight, and can't play for a couple days—"

"A week."

"*A week.* You could just stay with me. And your parents. Is more private, yes? And there's plenty of room. You can go home when you would like, but. It will give us chance to talk."

Shane's heart skips. "You'd do that?"

Ilya stands, slow, kissing up Shane's chest. "I think I would do a lot of things for you if you asked me."

With his horrible, scratchy voice, Shane laughs. The confession is so big he doesn't know what to do with it *other* than laugh. Other than tell Ilya, "I love you, you know? I missed you.

Missed . . . this.” Shane breathes against Ilya’s lips, feels a need uncoil from his stomach. “Love you. Miss you. All over. *Ilya.*”

“Shane,” he says back. He grabs at Shane’s chin, then moves his hand down to his throat. He looks . . . *taken* by him, absorbed. The both of them become lost in their bond, in the love it vibrates the beat of between them. “Are you hurting, sweetheart?”

Shane gasps, as Ilya’s hand runs down his thigh, hitching it over his hip. “*Yes,*” Shane whispers. “Fuck. *Yes,* Ilya.”

He kisses Shane’s desperate plea, licks into his mouth, fills a hollowed out space that hasn’t made itself known in over two years. Shane whines, tugs at Ilya’s hair, keeps his lips on his even when Ilya tries to kiss his neck. Doesn’t wanna separate, not yet, not ever.

“Fuck, Shane. Never again.”

It reminds Shane of all their reunions, the franticness that always came with them. The sedation had slowed Shane down, otherwise he would’ve run to Ilya, jumped in his arms, wouldn’t have been able to stop himself. And now, he’s confident, he wouldn’t want to. Anyone could see them, see *him* this way, and all he’s focused on is getting to love Ilya again. Being happy. Fulfilled.

Their time is cut short by Shane’s mom texting, asking if he knows any good hotels in the Boston area.

Ilya grabs his phone.

Shane:

My house. If you are okay with that. Ilya

Mom:

You don’t have to do that.

Shane:

Yes, but I want to.

Mom:

Are you sure?

Shane:

Very. Will be down with Shane in a minute. Then we can go.

He locks the phone, and puts it in his pocket. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane says. He’s still adjusting to having him near, to him and his mom talking. But it isn’t bad. A lot to think of, surreal, but he’s not going to fight it. Or at least, he’s not going to try to.

“Once we leave, everyone will know. The press is only holding onto photos of me coming here until you are discharged. So they do not get—what is it? Backlash.” He taps at Shane’s waist to make sure the word is correct, and Shane nods a little. His face contorts, his eyes only focused on Ilya’s chain, pulling it from beneath his shirt. “What, you are not thinking too much about that already?”

“Wasn’t,” Shane mutters. He kisses at Ilya’s chest. “Too busy thinking of you.”

A pain departs from behind Shane’s sternum with each lovely, private confession. It pleases him to tell Ilya, to put it out in the open. “You are sweet,” Ilya whispers, caressing Shane’s cheek. “My sweetheart.”

“Yes.” He closes his eyes. “Yours.”

“My sweetheart?”

Shane scrunches his nose at the tease. “Your sweetheart.” When Ilya smiles, dimples forming, Shane rolls his eyes. “You're taking advantage of how happy I am right now.”

He laughs quietly, then pecks Shane’s cheek. “Very much so. Very much, sweetheart.”

TMZ is the first to get their hands on any information. Ilya looks at it only because his teammates are blowing up his phone with links, asking if it’s true.

Each headline is more annoying than the next.

SHANE HOLLANDER AND ILYA ROZANOV CONFIRMED SOULMATES

THE TRUTH BEHIND SHANE HOLLANDER AND ILYA ROZANOV'S SECRET RELATIONSHIP

RIVAL HOCKEY CAPTAINS REVEAL RARE SOULMATE BOND

'*Reveal.'* As if someone in that packed waiting room hadn't disrespected Ilya and Shane's privacy in a desperate moment. It still managed to shock Ilya, how little regard some people had for them, like they were not real. Only puppets.

Shane's been weirdly calm about the whole thing, ever since getting to Ilya's place. He's chatting away with his parents in the kitchen, chugging water to help his throat, but he's *laughing,* even, telling them about the time Ilya had danced with him at two in the morning.

It feels like a dream. Ilya's house has never been so warm before. He can't even remember the last time he used the pans Yuna drug out from the cabinets to start on dinner for them all. He joins Shane at the kitchen island, smiling privately, listening to him talk.

"It's weird, but that was all I could think of after I got hit. A lot of random memories were popping up, but I couldn't get that song out of my head—and how it felt to, like . . . I don't know. Move? Be unworried. Even though I was definitely confused at first *why* you had the impulse to make me dance in the middle of the night—"

"Is half wrong," Ilya declares, and Shane scoffs. David's cutting up a tomato, and laughs at Shane's expression. He hates to be wrong, and it's very cute.

"No, it isn't! It was two years ago—"

"Yes, *but,* I didn't wake you up." Ilya nudges his abandoned ginger tea towards him, and, wordlessly, Shane takes a sip. His parents pause making dinner, giving their full attention, their smiles never wavering. Ilya feels comfortable with them, seeing him and Shane this way. So long without anyone knowing, and now everyone does. "I was sitting in your window. I had it cracked."

"You were *smoking.*"

Ilya laughs at Shane's irritation. "Yes. *Yes.* But! I put it out when I saw you. And then, I take you into the living room . . ." Ilya stands at the same time, reaching for Shane's hand, pulling him up. He groans, like he isn't completely on board with Ilya's antics. "As apology, I turned on that song. To make you smile. And then I danced with you. Must have worked, huh? You forgot all about the smoking. Just remembered laughing together."

Shane's grin widens. His eyes go a little teary. Ilya wants to kiss him and bring him down to the floor, but he holds off in front of Yuna and David. This is good, though, having his arms around him. He never wants to let him go.

"You shouldn't have been smoking," is all Shane has to say. Ilya rolls his eyes as he sways them.

"I barely do anymore. Promise."

"Really?"

"Yes. You told me you don't like it."

"Yeah, *nine years ago.*"

David says they bicker like an old married couple, and Shane tries to hide that he's blushing. It reaches to the tips of his ears, coloring them red.

In bed, Ilya draws Shane on top of him, cuddling him close, keeping him warm.

"What was that other song?" Shane asks softly. "That we danced to. You were mouthing the words under your breath. It was slow."

Ilya remembers right away. Shane's not the only one to have thought of it, over and over. "*Just Like Honey,"* Ilya replies. "It reminds me of you now. Of us."

The song plays over its lyrics in Ilya's head, and he pictures that memory at the same time. Shane's wide eyes, throwing out his arms. Ilya had shrugged, and then Shane pointed at the cigarette. He put it out, mostly because of the second-hand smoke thing and Shane being in briefs and nothing else. Then, he apologized with a few songs and kisses over Shane's freckles.

Walking back to you

Is the hardest thing that

I can do

That I can do for you

Shane's biting his lip as Ilya pushes into him at an unhurried pace, his stomach fluttering with an anticipation that trails into relief. It's gentle like the first time, and—it almost feels like it is. Because Shane can say what he wants to, Ilya can. It won't hurt, it won't slowly kill them. It'll fix what's wanted for it for nine years, begging. Ilya looks over Shane, studies him. "I love you," he says, in Russian, Shane thinks. He'd tried to teach Shane how to say it.

"Love you," Shane says, after a moan falls from his lips. He's not supposed to strain the muscles of his throat more than he has to, so he lets every noise out. Ilya accepts them generously, taking them past Shane's mouth into his.

There's no more pain. Nothing left over. His soul grapples onto every end of Shane, and every link is love-filled, washed with affection. He holds his hand now. Tight, needed. Looks into Ilya's eyes as they glaze over with admiration, his face going red, breathless. Shane keeps his gaze on him, takes him from his place buried in his neck and locks their eyes.

Shane thinks he can feel it. After so long of agony, he can feel Ilya's love.

Communicating about what's happened between them comes at four in the morning.

They were just kids. Kids dealing with a problem all on their own, feelings that had never been so strong. Terrified of misstepping, shaken by the idea of being the first one to say what was really inside them.

"I think I was . . . taking on a lot. Too much, you know? And then I went to that club, and . . I noticed it. How different I had really become. But it was ahead of me, and I was too slow, and—I wanted it to stop, but I couldn't. It's like I needed to hold it in. Control. Never enough control when I'm breaking. It's . . *bad,* I know that, but it does make me feel better. And I was out of it, and there was a cycle I was in of getting it back and losing again, and—it was *so* tiring. God, it was so—"

Shane cuts himself off, covering his face.

"You should not have been alone," Ilya simply says. Like if they were together, he could've stopped it. And *could he have?* His letter had made Shane feel better, but it had made him cry, too, laying on the gross hotel carpet. "I saw . . those pictures. I tried not to. But they were shown to me. You were forced into a relationship you did not want to be in—"

“Rose is great. We’re friends and everything.”

Ilya blinks. “Okay. Is not my point. Point is, that was fucked-up what happened to you, Shane. It was like—I was drained, but then I saw . . I saw you go down, and everything came back to me. And when it happened, how our fucking rookie hammered into you—he will be staying late after practice until he is traded, I promise—“

“Ilya, *Ilya.*” Shane kisses him quickly to stop his rant. “Hey. Why weren’t you there, anyway? Been meaning to ask you, but so much has been happening. Were you sick?”

Ilya’s grin fades. That glint in his eye dims. “No. No, I was in Russia. That is probably why your pain was so bad. I am sorry about that, too. I should have let you know. Like I did every summer.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay now. Why were you in Russia? What happened?”

He sighs, running a hand over his face. “We don’t have to talk about it—will ruin your mood, and—“

“Hey.” Shane moves his hand away from his face. Concern knocks at his stomach, his ribs. “You can tell me. Promise.”

Fingers touch feather-light at Shane’s hair. “Okay.” His voice is barely intelligible, but the rest of the room is bathed in silence. Shane hears him clearly. “It’s my father. He was very sick. And . . . my brother called me to tell me he wasn’t—that he was dead. So I had to take care of the funeral, and—“

“Jesus, *Ilya.*” Shane’s eyes dart over his face. The words reroute over and over in Shane’s head, but it’s hard. Ilya hasn’t said a word about it to him the whole day. It throws him, that he’s been carrying this, all on his own. “I’m sorry. Fuck. I’m so sorry.” He kisses his cheek, holds him tight.

Ilya doesn’t say anything back, but his exhale is shaky into Shane’s neck, and he can feel his tears on his skin, released silently. They stay like that for a few minutes, and then Ilya’s pulling away, and telling Shane about his dad. About Andrei, about Svetlana, about his two years on his own. Everything.

“Can I tell you something that’s maybe . . sad? And you will promise not to make those eyes at me.”

“*Eyes?* What *eyes?*”

“*Those* eyes. The sad ones that make me want to hug you. They are horrible. I am so weak for them.” He covers Shane’s eyes with his hand, and Shane smacks it away.

“Fine. I won’t do anything with my eyes. Tell me.”

He laughs quietly, turning over on his side, and Shane follows. He reaches out to path a finger down Shane’s arm as he talks. “I was . . okay. Not great, but. Okay. I think I could

have lived like that. For a long time. But would I have been happy? Would I have—would I have really been living?" He shrugs. "I don't know. But I would've kept playing.

"And that's not good, either. I could have handled all this sadness. So big, bigger than me. Could have held it. Because I have been. All along. It wasn't new. Was just . . more. Sometimes that's scary, I think. That I can always handle more pain. I don't like that, I . . want that to stop. Maybe now, it will."

After he's done, he draws his gaze up from the sheets to Shane's face. And sighs. "Fuck. You are looking at me like—"

"Like *what?* Like I . ." he hesitates, a learned response. But then remembers, he doesn't have to. "Like I love you?"

Ilya's smile fades, more serious, and he cups Shane's cheek, his palm warm. "Yes. Maybe that's why it makes me feel so . . so."

"Loved?"

"Shut up."

Shane laughs into his neck, crawling on top of him to hug him. "Ilya. If it . . if that pain gets more again, then. Then you can tell me. And we'll go from there. Because I don't want that for you either. Not ever again. Okay?"

Shane looks at him seriously, caressing under his eye to catch his attention. It takes him a second, but he nods, and whispers, "Okay, Shane."

Hayden calls Shane in the morning, and prefaces it by saying, "We can get into it some other time, I know you're probably fuckin—goin' crazy with everything in the news, but. I just wanna ask one thing, and then I'll let you be until Jackie starts getting on me to invite you for dinner."

Shane fights how he wants to laugh, glancing at Ilya still asleep. "What's the question, bud?"

"Do you think you're gonna be okay?"

He's putting the blanket further up Ilya's back when Hayden asks. Ilya presses into the touch, curving his shoulder back. Shane's fingers each join at one beauty mark on his skin, like it's all mapped out. Like he was meant to hug him, to stretch his hands out on him this way, comfort him always.

“Yeah,” Shane truthfully says. “I’ll be okay, Hayd.”

They get to be mostly together for five days after Shane's parents head back home.

Shane sleeps in Ilya’s clothes, drinks the ginger tea he makes him, and listens closely to every detail of Ilya’s games. He’s going a little crazy not being on the ice, and Ilya knows it. He finds it better, though, to firstly kiss Shane into the couch when he arrives home and make him laugh and whine and talk and answer his whispered questions.

It’s always *yes. Yes* and *please* and *more,* and then Ilya’s hands are on him, around him, all over until Shane can feel the ghosts of his pressing fingers on his heated skin. “You are so perfect,” Ilya confesses against his lips, holding Shane’s thigh at his waist. “How, how—how didn’t I . . . should have known, right away. Perfect for me, always perfect for me.” And then he’s mumbling in Russian, more soft, coaxing words to bring Shane closer.

“Love you,” Shane whimpers, pulling Ilya to him, until their foreheads are pressed together. “Love you, love you, love you, *fuck*—“ Ilya understands what he needs, and travels two fingers up Shane’s throat until they’re at the back of his tongue. Shane holds his wrist tight as he comes, as every noise falls away other than this promise they’ll continue to make—*I love you, I love you.*

The press conference happens in July, when the season is over and Shane and Ilya are back from Shane’s cottage. It’s startling, to be in front of so much press after two weeks away from the chaos.

They ask invasive questions, as they’re prone to do. Think they’re entitled to answers. Shane’s sticking to his provided script as much as possible, but it’s a challenge.

“Some soulmates have specific powers between them. Is there anything your bond gives you that interferes with the way you play?”

Shane’s too busy trying not to roll his eyes, keeping his mouth a thin line to answer, so Ilya takes the question.

“What, like super strength? That would be cool, huh, Hollander? But, no, no powers. Not yet, at least.”

His charisma is half the reason Shane hasn’t yelled at someone yet. Plus, this was Shane’s idea, and he doesn’t want Ilya to see how much he’s regretting it. Then he’d be all, *Some of your ideas are good. Some!* and Shane would—well, Shane would shake his head and kiss him, but he doesn’t want to admit he was wrong.

He thought it’d be good so people would quiet down. Ask them hockey related questions in post-game interviews instead of their relationship.

“Was your bond the reason your team failed to win the Cup this year, Shane?”

Honestly, he should’ve gone with what Ilya said. *Fuck them. It’s our business. Why should we let other people in?*

Frankly, Shane doesn’t even know where to start on the reporter's question.

Luckily, Ilya does it for him. He’s been carrying him through this whole thing. Shane’s gotta up his points—support him more, he means. *Not a competition.*

“I think you are forgetting the previous two seasons. Hollander managed to win *two* cups while playing through all of this.” He doesn’t mention the pain, keeping a promise that he made with Shane for his parents to never learn about it. “Personally, I think you should be saying congratulations, going through what we have for nine years and still managing to be one of the best in the league. But that is just me.”

The room is quiet, all except for the clicks of cameras. Then, a satisfying, “Congratulations, Shane,” from the reporter.

“Thank you. It wasn’t easy. But I love this sport. I have for a long time. I wouldn’t stop playing for anything. Our bond is . . . it’s special. Taught us something I’d rather keep between us, but it also showed me my own will. Yeah, it brought me down. One time. One game out of almost six-hundred. And me and my team weren’t able to win the Cup this year, but we did in the last two seasons.

“It was difficult at times, what’s between me and Rozanov. But it’s fate. And if you wanna sit here and yell over it, criticizing us for what we couldn’t control, we could do that—but I’d much rather help you all see it the way we do. It’s not as horrible as you think.”

Ilya taps at his shoe with his own. *Proud of you,* it means. Their bond thrums, satisfied to be close. It’s intimate, reveals their emotions at all times. There’s no more hiding with it, and Shane doesn’t want to.

“First soulmates in the NHL,” a journalist says. “How does it feel to make history?”

They turn to look at each other at the same time, eyes never leaving the other. And then Ilya leans towards the mic, and responds through a true, wide smile, “Pretty fucking good.”

Chapter End Notes

aaand the end :)) sorta scared of releasing this chap into the wild but i rewrote it a lot so uhh ..!!!

to yap a little ..... In my fics i like to use curse words when they will have the most impact so usually when a character is angry/freaking out but it was likeee theyre doing both the whole time in this !! also shane and ilya curse a lot anyway so ig this kind of worked in my favor but anyway the word fuck is said over 200 times im crying usually i try to be more descriptive then ‘fuck oh no!!!!’ but sometimes it rlly is ‘fuck oh no’ like

music is used more here in the last two chaps as sorta a second line towards shane accepting his love for ilya. In which shanes never rly liked music (loved someone …) but ilya introduces him to it (..!!) and then its music that keeps him afloat while hes in the ambulance .. and then relating ilya saying i love you in russian to a song ilyas singing to him when he wakes up … Yeahh✌️

books that i drew inspo from (to remention cause i think yall will like them if u liked this☺): sorcery and small magics, the tarot sequence, & adam binder series. all m/m urban fantasy books with a soulmate element :)
songs (less inspired more Motivated me): always for you by the album leaf, all i need by radiohead, and marrow by coloma. genuinely i think i couldnt have written this fic without these songs 😭

i rlly love this story and i hope you all have to, thank you so much to everyone who commented, left kudos, all of it, it meant and means so much to me 🫶🫶i will probably be back here with a new fic soon bccc writing hollanov inspires me Obviously as i wrote like 40k words in two weeks thats crazy?? what can i say they make me a litte insane.

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