your heart is a muscle (it has the strength of your courage)

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by eurydicees

Summary

It's not something that they ever talk about. They don't need to acknowledge it, and no one else ever needs to know. Or, no one else needs to know until suddenly Shane is in the hospital and no one will let Ilya see him.

(Ilya and Shane are soulmates. It doesn't change everything, but it changes enough.)

Notes

- cw: a medical institution accidentally harming a patient after not thoroughly completing their examinations (unnecessary use of anesthesia resulting in the patient not waking up for longer than expected)

- cw: lots of talk of death and grief, but no character actually dies and there is a happy ending

- cw: brief couple of lines referencing canon-typical levels of homophobia

Hospitals have rules about visitors. Ilya, having spent his fair share of time lying in hospital beds with hockey-related injuries, knows this well. He knows that, most generally speaking, there are a limited number of visitors who are permitted to get that paper wristband to mark a visitor and the room number of a patient.

Shane's medical emergency contact list presumably includes his parents as primary caregivers, his coach, and maybe Hayden Pike. Depending on the severity of the injury—*bad*—and time since the injury—*barely any*—these are most likely the only people who can visit him without question.

Ilya is not on that list. He's not an emergency contact, because he considers himself terrible in a crisis and because no one knows that he's ever been in contact with Shane outside of the rink. There is no one in the entire fucking world who knows that Ilya cares about him, and that he *needs* to know if Shane's okay. There is no reason that he should be let upstairs and into that hospital room.

Except: there is the name cut into the skin over his heart in Shane's handwriting. There is that allowance of visitors that would be welcome within the two person limit of Shane's hospital room in this Montreal hospital. It could ruin him, it could ruin both of them, to try to use that.

But Ilya isn't thinking about *ruin* right now; he's not thinking about the necessity of secrets and hiding and lying to everyone he's ever known. He's thinking only of Shane's body hitting the ice and *not fucking moving.* He's thinking of how still Shane had been, how the entire arena seemed to go frozen and silent, how the entire world seemed to stop spinning just to give way to sheer panic.

He's not thinking about anxiety over being outed, he's thinking about the worst fear he's known in a long time: the pure wrenching terror that Shane isn't going to get back up. He was so still.

Is he okay? Fucking tell me—

Right now, Ilya needs to get to Shane and he doesn't care who he has to get through to do it. He doesn't care what secrets he has to trade.

So when the nurse at the welcome desk asks, bored, "Are you immediate family or an emergency contact?"

Ilya doesn't breathe, doesn't allow himself to think, before he's saying, "His soulmate."

"You're his soulmate," the nurse says flatly.

She clearly doesn't believe him. Soulmates are rare, these days; the things of fairy tales and Victorian novels more than reality. But they were on the cusp of twenty years old, just as the stories go, and the names carved their way over their hearts on the first day of the new year, again just as the stories go. Just as the stories go, except it was real, in an entirely life altering way.

It fucking hurt, like someone was taking a box cutter to his chest and slicing him open to reach his bleeding heart. Ilya still remembers the pain vividly. Even more so today, watching Shane collapse, his head hitting the ice *hard*. He felt it in his soul, he felt it in his muscles, he felt it in his bones. And he fucking panicked.

"Yes," Ilya insists, starting to sound frantic. If the nurse doesn't believe him, he doesn't have hope of getting to Shane. "And there are rules about soulmate pairs, there are exceptions, so I can—prove it, the mark is over our hearts, please, I can—just let me—"

"Mr. Hollander is…not an unknown name here," the nurse says stiffly, eyes trained on her computer. "There have been at least two women who have come to see him claiming to be long lost sisters. I don't mean to say I don't want to believe you but…"

Ilya clenches his jaw, trying to steel his expression into something unhurt. No one in the fucking world knows that Ilya loves him—even Shane himself doesn't truly know—and now all that hiding and lying is keeping him from getting to his soulmate.

None of it has been worth it, he thinks bitterly, because Shane might be—might be—*fuck*. And Ilya is just fucking standing here arguing with this goddamn nurse who won't look at him.

They've been through so much for this, and fought so hard to make something *real* out of teenage curiosity when the entire world was telling them they're supposed to hate each other. The realization that they're soulmates only made all of that harder. *They* know this is something that matters, something fated, but that doesn't mean they can have it, or keep it.

They can have each other's names carved into their chests in a way that cannot come off, but that doesn't mean they can be together in a way that the rest of the world accepts. They can be fated to always orbit around each other for the rest of their lives, but that doesn't mean they can ever reach out and touch.

This has been their story for so long: orbiting, drawn in by each other's gravitational pull, constantly running in time with each other; and never, ever being able to find each other in the middle. Never being able to reach that space between.

Except recently—recently it's been *something.* It's been something that matters, even if they haven't spoken about it definitively. Even if it hasn't been spoken aloud and even if it hasn't been announced to the world, it *matters.* Their relationship, the fact that their heartbeats beat at the same rate, the way they have each other's handwriting over their hearts, the way their souls slot together like puzzle pieces—it fucking matters.

Everything they have now has been a fight to earn. Something that should have been so natural, an obvious destiny, is in reality something that they have battled for every inch of. And even like that, they've come *so far.*

Ultimately, the most important thing is that they are now choosing to fight for the impossible dream of having something real, and that choice matters so much fucking more than whatever this nurse is looking at on her computer.

But here she is anyway, telling Ilya that he's nothing. That he must be some fan pretending to be Hollander's soulmate to get to him in order to do who-knows-what from there. The worst part is that she's not wrong, except for in all of the ways that she is.

"You really think I would lie about this?" Ilya asks, and his words are choked and stumbling off his tongue. "That I would tell you this lie even when it is so dangerous?"

Is everyone in this hospital so stupid? he doesn't ask.

The nurse stops typing, looking up, and for the first time, it seems to register that the man standing in front of her is Ilya Rozanov. She stares at him for a long, tense moment. Ilya feels like every part of his body is coiled up too tight and ready to snap at the first wrong word she might say.

She says, disbelieving, *"You're* his soulmate."

Ilya takes a short, sharp breath, resisting the urge to flinch at that. His fists clench in his pockets. "And you will ruin us both if this goes public, but I am telling you anyway, because I *need to see him."*

"Okay," the nurse says slowly. She hasn't taken her eyes off of his face, not quite meeting his eyes but unable to look away from any of the features she finds so distinctive. "I have to see your ID."

Ilya nods sharply. He digs his ID out of his wallet, flipping it to the backside so that she can see the marker easily. Right next to the spot labeled "organ donor," there's a little symbol: the outline of two overlapping hearts. When you turn 21 and have to renew your ID, they force you to check or not check a box. As if it could ever be so simple as a checkmark.

Ilya doesn't let himself breathe until she's taken the ID in hand, she's checked it against the systems she needed to, signed him in and given him the stupid wristband, and said, "Room 429. Elevators are down the hall to your right."

He nods once, and then turns away, his shoulders hunched up to his ears and trying to hide himself. He just hopes the nurse is bound to some kind of confidentiality and it's not a fruitless effort. He rubs his hand against the mark over his chest, mumbling old prayers from childhood under his breath.

The room that the nurse had directed him to is at the end of a long hallway on the fourth floor. Shuttered blinds cover the clear glass viewing into the room, so Ilya can't see if anyone is inside already. He just has to risk it. He rubs his hand over the mark once more, then tugs at his jacket to cover it with another layer of fabric over his shirt. It feels marginally safer.

Then he opens the door. He opens it quickly, stepping inside and closing the door as fast as he can so that no one sees him loitering outside of Shane Hollander's hospital room. He's already done enough damage.

He's so distracted by closing the door with the least amount of noise possible that he doesn't notice that Hayden Pike is standing there, gaping at him, until it's too late to back away and

get out of there. When his eyes finally flick upwards, they catch on Shane first—

lying in that hospital bed, still unmoving. His hands are folded over his stomach carefully, but as if someone else had arranged them there. His eyes are closed, and an impressive black eye is already blooming. There's a cut under his eye, and he's so *still*—

Then someone clears their throat pointedly, and Ilya's eyes shift to the side. Hayden Pike is still gaping at him. Then his eyes narrow and he snaps his mouth shut.

He and Ilya just stare at each other for a long moment, and Ilya wonders if Pike can see it on him, see the panic and the fear and the worry and the need to know Shane's okay. He wonders if Pike can see it, because surely Pike feels it all too, because at the end of the day, what they have in common is that they both love Shane Hollander.

"What are you doing here?" Pike asks immediately, his eyes still intent on Ilya's face like he wants to punch him before Ilya can answer the question, because he just knows already that Ilya's answer isn't going to be satisfactory, no matter what it is.

Ilya is kind of thinking the same thing—whatever he says is not going to be enough—but he has to try anyway, if only because he doesn't want Shane's best friend to cause a scene by punching him in a hospital room.

"I—" he chokes on the words, struggling to get through the excuse he had come up with earlier for this exact scenario— "I came to check on Hollander. As team captain. On behalf of —of Marleau."

Hayden's narrowed, angry gaze doesn't shift at Ilya's words. If anything, he looks angrier. "Well, you came. You did your duty. Bye."

Ilya flinches at the immediate dismissal. He knows he deserves it, because no one in the world is supposed to know that his heart beats in time with Shane's heartbeat, no one in the world is supposed to know this secret, no one in the world is supposed to know how their souls align.

They are rivals. They hate each other. They tried so goddamn hard to hate each other, and they failed at every turn.

There was this moment, years and years and years ago, when they were playing against each other in one game or another. He can't remember who won and who lost, but he remembers shaking Shane's hand after the game.

He remembers looking him in the eye and thinking, *So. This is what it means to be the best. It means to always be chasing after him, and catching up, and then him chasing after me. I will be the best in the world, and he will be right there on my heels, always.*

There is something to be said for fate and destiny, probably. Even if you don't believe in soulmates—like Shane pretended not to, for so long; like Ilya refused to, for almost as long—there is something to be said for the fact that they kept meeting, and they kept surpassing

each other like no one else could, and they kept challenging each other, and they keep making each other better. Better players, better men.

Ilya Rozanov is a once-in-a-generation kind of a hockey player. And so is Shane Hollander. Together, they stand at the top of the fucking world.

But, to everyone who looks up at them from below, this supposedly means they hate each other. This means that they do not visit each other in the hospital. They do not shatter at the sound of the other mumbling in pain in a hospital bed. They do not start to panic at the way the other is so still and motionless, his breaths shallow.

They especially do not argue with each other's best friends about their right to love each other. They do not, after all, have that right.

So Ilya, of course, does all of that immediately. Shane groans, just the smallest of hurt sounds, and Ilya and Pike's eyes both snap to him, ignoring each other for the briefest of moments. Pike sits back down at the edge of the chair he had drawn up to Shane's bedside, leaning closer to him.

"Shane?" and his voice is so soft, so gentle, so caring— "Can you hear me?"

Ilya, against his will, lets out a wounded noise as he connects the dots. "He hasn't woken up yet."

When it becomes clear that Shane isn't going to wake up magically at Ilya's appearance, Pike leans heavily back in his chair, and stares at him. "No, asshole, he hasn't."

"Oh," Ilya breathes out. "What—do—I mean, have the doctors—have they said—"

"Honestly, man? None of your fucking business."

Ilya swallows hard, narrowing his eyes on the corner of Shane's bedspread so that he can avoid Pike's gaze and he can avoid the reality of Shane's shallow breaths. He thinks maybe he's about to fall apart, and fucking Hayden Pike is going to be the only one left to pick up the pieces.

"Please," Ilya says quietly, the words croaked out with the hoarseness of a man who has already cried himself dry. "Please, I need to know that he's going to be okay."

Pike glares at him even more intensely. "I don't really know why you care, Rozanov. You've seen guys get hit. *You've* put guys in the hospital. This is none of your business."

Ilya flinches at the reminder of his own violence, of the regularity of people getting hurt in this sport. It's just part of the game, it *is.* He's not about to have a moral crisis about it.

But right now he wants to scream, scream that this is different because this time it's his soulmate, it's the love of his life, it's the music to which his heart beats, it's *Shane.* Can't Pike understand that? Doesn't he love Shane too?

All that he can manage to say is, "It is my business."

“Sure.” Pike doesn’t look convinced. “As the captain of the guy who put him here. And you’ve done the captain sportsmanship thing. So you can leave him alone now.”

“I can’t,” Ilya chokes out. “I can’t. I can’t explain. I just need to know.”

He sounds desperate, and it sounds pathetic even to his own ears, but he can’t seem to control the tremor in his voice. Why the fuck hasn’t Shane moved at all? Why isn’t he waking up?

“You can’t explain,” Pike says flatly. Ilya shrugs a little helplessly. “Look, Rozanov, you can either tell me why you’re actually here or you can get the fuck out. Shane doesn’t need this right now—”

“What does he need then?” Ilya asks, his voice harsher than he meant it to be. It’s just that he doesn’t know how to bite without teeth and he doesn’t know how to pull his punches; he never has and won’t learn now, because he’s been the one on the defensive from the start of this conversation. “He needs you to sit there and do nothing? He needs doctors who don’t know anything? He needs—”

Pike rises from the chair, fists clenching at his side. “Rozanov—”

With that, Ilya deflates, rubbing his palms viciously over his face. “Sorry. Fuck. I know—that—fuck. But I can’t leave. Please. Please don’t make me leave.”

Begging Hayden Pike for permission to be somewhere is a new low for Ilya, but he can’t be bothered to feel self-conscious about that right now. Still, he drops his trembling hands and shoves them into his jacket pockets so that Pike can’t see.

“How did you get up here anyway?” Pike asks, finally reaching a conclusion that Ilya had kind of expected to come several minutes ago. “He’s not supposed to be allowed any visitors from random people while he’s like this.”

Random people. Pike made a vague hand gesture towards Ilya when he said it, and something in him broke a little. Just the tiniest piece of him, chipped away under Pike’s words.

Ilya takes a shaky breath. He looks over at Shane, who might hate him for this. For telling the nurse, for confessing it to Pike. For giving up this secret that they’ve both sworn to each other to keep. They’re going to lose everything if this gets out, and Ilya doesn’t see a way out of it. That nurse holds his entire future in her hands.

But he can’t fucking stay away from Shane; he’s never been able to. That’s most of the fucking problem.

“I am—” Ilya stops, cutting himself off, and looks Pike in the eye— “He’ll be mad. If I tell you. And he might never forgive me.”

Pike raises his eyebrows. “Then why are you telling me?”

“Because I need you to understand that—that I need to be here.”

“You need to be on a flight back to Boston in, like, eight hours.” Pike does not know how to pull his punches either.

“I’ll put it off,” Ilya says, shrugging stiffly. He waves a hand, trying for nonchalance. “Family emergency or something, I don’t know. I’ll figure it out. I just need Sh—Hollander to be okay.”

Pike’s eyebrows raise even further, that doubtful look not leaving his face. “And they’ll believe that.”

“Yes.”

If they find out what I told the nurse at the front desk, they will. The thought makes Ilya want to throw up, kind of, or maybe just scream a little.

It’s terrifying, being on the cusp of your world falling apart on every level all around you. He’s secluded in this hospital room with Hayden Pike, where none of the media circus can touch them. Everyone could already know by now, if that nurse told someone who told someone, or maybe no one knows, if she’s bound to confidentiality. Ilya will not find out until he leaves Shane behind him and re-enters that crumbling world.

But even within this silent, muted sanctuary of the hospital room, his world is collapsing. Shane is still quiet; the rise and fall of his breathing is barely visible. Something is beeping; his heart rate monitor seems to be at a suspiciously low number, but Ilya doesn’t actually know enough to know if that’s true. He just knows that his own heartbeat feels slower than usual; his breaths are shallower and fill his lungs less.

Soulmate is kind of a strong word for what the marks mean. It’s the most romantic word. But it’s also less of a soulbond—an intangible concept that Ilya, even after all these years, still doesn’t really understand—and more of a connection between your hearts.

Studies have found that the muscle tissue found in the hearts of soulmate pairs have the same genetic makeup, even though everything else about their biological bodies are different. It’s like having another set of DNA within you, only applicable to the make up of your heart—and it matches your soulmate’s heart.

It’s the same heart, kind of. So when one person’s heart rate speeds up, the other person’s heart panics too. When one person’s heart rate slows, the other’s heart rate slows to match it. When one person dies, the other will feel it as a physical, hollow loss, as a phantom limb.

They can sometimes feel each other’s pain when it’s especially debilitating, and during particularly strong flashes of emotion, they experience each other’s feelings. Ultimately, the biggest tie is that the muscle of their hearts is tangibly, genetically, and emotionally linked together by the universe’s design.

Ilya can only remember a few times before this that the bond has left him feeling so hollow.

The first was not too long after the bond had cut itself into their chests. It was in that hotel room next door to Scott Hunter, the one with the thin walls from their rookie year’s All-Star

game; that was the first time they had seen each other since they got the marks.

They hooked up, all the lights dimmed and as silently as they could manage to be—which was not actually very silent—and then talked about it afterwards.

Or, they tried to talk about it—after the briefest of conversations, Shane left and Ilya felt the worst kind of heartbreak deep in his chest. Whether it was his or Shane's, he still isn't sure. Ilya doesn't remember what he himself said that night, but it was something along the lines of *My heartbeat is my own. Believing in anything otherwise just hurts people.*

He still thinks that, kind of. It's not that he disagrees with the sentiment entirely, it's more that there's an addendum now: his feelings, his soul, who he is at his core are all things that are his alone; it is also true that the love he and Shane have is a shared, reciprocal, integral part of them both.

To carry a heart together instead of separately is not a pain or a weakness or a dependency. It's support, it's companionship, it's care, it's love built so inherently in your being that you can never defy it. Of course, Ilya had done everything in his power to defy it anyway.

But before that addendum existed, Shane had probably taken all that as him not believing in soulmates at all. Ilya doesn't remember what specifically he himself said, but Shane's words still vividly resound in the back of his head all of the time: "I don't want the burden of a soulmate anyway. Bigger things to worry about, right? We don't have to talk about it."

The second time was two years of not talking about it later—in Vegas, after the season-end awards. He hadn't kissed Shane when they fucked; he hadn't wanted to get even more attached to someone who viewed the weight of his heart as a burden, not when that's always been his worst fear regarding his shared heart. The hollow, lost feeling panging across their connection afterwards felt like it would kill him.

The third was just before Shane started dating Rose Landry, not too long ago, something that still stings. Shane had been the one to hurt him, that time. Ilya had felt as if his heart had been scraped out of his body, leaving an open, gaping, bloody wound in his chest in the shape of Shane Hollander. That feeling, he knows now, reverberated between the bond every day for months.

And now—now, when Shane collapses on the ice and doesn't fucking get up. Now, when Ilya is staring at him in his hospital bed and watching that heart rate monitor beeping and knowing that his heart is at the same slow rate, which is probably why he feels vaguely nauseous and weakened right now.

Now, when Hayden Pike is still staring, waiting for an answer that Ilya should not give him. An answer that he will probably give anyway.

"What—" Pike's voice is careful, measured— "did you tell the nurse at the front desk that got you here?"

Ilya shakes his head the tiniest bit. Shane is going to hate him so much for this. But betraying Shane is nothing compared to this fear he has right now; this fear that he will be forced away

and Shane will be hurt irreparably and no one will ever think to tell Ilya so he won't *know,* not until his own heart caves in.

"His heart rate. You see the number, yes?"

Pike's eyes flick over to the monitor, then look back at Ilya. "Yeah. It's a normal rate, the nurse said so."

"Good." Ilya swallows hard, taking a shaky breath that rattles in his chest like an echo. "If you, uh. Hook me to one of those. It will match. Our hearts will beat the same."

Pike's expression doesn't change. "So you have a normal heart rate too. Congratulations."

"Fuck, Pike, you are so fucking stupid," Ilya hisses. "He's my fucking soulmate."

And—they both freeze. Pike is silent. Ilya is silent. Everything is so silent in the wake of the truth.

Ilya tries to inhale but no breath fills his lungs. He tries to exhale but no air comes out, no sound comes out, his body just tenses even more.

Through the tension, the thought coming vividly to the forefront of his mind, he thinks: *He'll never forgive me for this. For outing him, just because of my own unmanageable fear. He'll never forgive me.*

But even if he hates me, at least he'll have woken up.

Ilya's hands are shaking where he's shoved them into his pockets. His breaths are coming shallower with the longer that Pike just stares at him, lips just slightly parted. No words come out.

Finally, Pike licks his lips and then says, scoffing, "Yeah. Okay. Sure. It's *you."*

Ilya suddenly can't meet his eyes. His gaze darts around the room, his entire body stiff and tense, poised to snap in half. He lands on looking at Shane's heart rate monitor. The number is rising, a beeping speeding up frantically. Breathing is supposed to be easy, supposed to come naturally, but Ilya feels it right now to be an insurmountable task.

"Pike—"

Before Ilya can say anything, one of the monitors makes a panicked sound and Pike whips his head away from Ilya to look at Shane. "What's happening? What's wrong with him—fuck, I need to call a nurse—"

"It's me," Ilya chokes out. "I—shit. Pike, don't call—just shut up for two minutes, it's fine, it's not—he's fine, it's me. It's me, Pike, please shut *up."*

Pike stares at him again, still disbelieving, his hand hovering over the call button that will bring a nurse to them. "What the fuck are you—"

“Just—shut up,” Ilya says, weaker than he wants it to sound. “Let me breathe for—for a second.”

They glare at each other, the tension in the room pulled taut by their stares. Ilya imagines he can see his own reflection in Pike’s eyes, gaunt and terrified and guilty and panicked. Unable to breathe. So, so different from what he is on the ice. It’s pathetic and Ilya can’t help it at all.

Pike looks much the same, though. There’s none of what Ilya usually sees on the ice, if he bothers to pay attention to him. There’s only a kind of haunted look to him, a fierce loyalty that’s morphed into grief by the severity of the situation.

To his credit, for Shane’s sake, willing to try anything to calm him, Pike shuts up. Ilya takes a shuddering breath. Tries to calm his flight or fight instincts.

Even as his eyes dart frantically around the room for something to hone in on, he focuses on the sounds of the hospital beyond the room’s closed door. Two nurses talking. Something rolling by on squeaky wheels. A baby giggling, maybe a newborn’s first laugh. It’s a nice thought, even if maybe improbable.

“Okay,” Ilya breathes out. He’s not calm, not really, but it’s enough. The beeping that represents their shared heartbeat has slowed and evened out again. The calming has more to do with Shane’s steadiness than his own, Ilya guesses. “Okay. Ask your questions.”

“Shit,” is all Pike says at first. He looks down at Shane, then up at Ilya, then back down at Shane. Spoken more to the calmed heart rate monitor than to either of them, Pike says, quietly, “They asked me, after, if I knew he had a mark, but didn’t say what name it was… *shit.* You’re really not lying.”

Ilya rolls his eyes, still feeling a little unsteady. “Why would I lie? We will both lose everything when this gets out.”

“I won’t tell.”

Pike sounds so earnest when he says it that Ilya just nods sharply, and trusts. “Good. Because I will make your life hell if you do.”

Pike sits down heavily in the chair by Shane’s bed. “I wouldn’t do that to Shane.”

I would, however, do that to you, goes unspoken. Ilya doesn’t know if Pike intends his words that way, but Ilya gets that message as if written in smoke in the sky: the only thing keeping him from being outed is the fact that his soulmate happens to be Pike’s best friend and not a stranger.

“Okay.” Ilya takes one step further into the room, stiff and unsure.

“How long have you guys been keeping this secret?” Pike asks. He’s still not looking at Ilya, but his voice carries hollowly across the small room.

Ilya swallows. He fully enters, gingerly sitting on the hospital bed by Shane’s feet. He keeps his hands in his lap, his eyes on Shane’s bruised face.

“The marks always appear on the first day of the year that the older person turns twenty. You can do the math.”

“Jesus,” Pike mutters. He lifts his gaze, for just a moment, to ask, “And you’ve never told anyone?”

Shrugging, all Ilya can say, eyes still hard on Shane’s bruises, is, “We’ve barely talked about it, just the two of us.”

“Why not?”

“Complicated.” Ilya takes a heavy breath, and bravely reaches for Shane’s hand. It’s a small, subtle movement, just brushing the backs of his fingers over the back of Shane’s hand. Shane doesn’t move.

Pike doesn’t look convinced. “That’s all you have to say?”

Being fated to be partners in life with the person everyone tells you to hate, being in love with someone you can never have without giving up everything else, admitting that you want it all anyway—it’s complicated. Complicated in ways that they cannot fix. But Ilya can’t say any of that to Hayden Pike.

“Yes. Love is complicated,” is what he settles on saying. “That’s all.”

He can feel Pike’s eyes on him, not without a degree of doubt and judgment. “He’s in love with you?”

There is a terrible lump in his throat and a painful breakage in his lungs and his entire heart is lying in this hospital bed, and fucking Hayden Pike is asking questions about love that Ilya can’t answer. It’s an active effort to keep his breath steady, even if he wants to panic again, even if the situation is so absurd that he might break down into hysterics at any moment.

“I don’t know,” Ilya says; quietly, honestly. “Maybe it would be better if he were not.”

“Why? If you’re soulmates…isn’t that, like—like it’s destiny, you know? It’s the ultimate proof that you’re supposed to love each other. Have a relationship. A life. All that.”

Pike sounds so certain of what he’s saying that Ilya almost wants to laugh at him. He probably would, in any other scenario, in any other world where they aren’t discussing this over Shane’s hospital bed.

Instead, he just rolls his eyes again. “You have a lot of opinions on this for someone who hates me.”

“I hate you, yeah,” Pike says, not sounding the least bit apologetic. “You piss me off at every possible moment, and I really couldn’t care less about you as a person. But I do care about Shane. So I know that he deserves someone who loves him, and so if you’re what he thinks he wants, and you actually love him…”

“What gave it away?” Ilya asks dryly. He doesn’t bother denying any of it. He’s basically already said as much, and anyway, it is true.

Pike seems to decide that he’s not really looking for an answer to that question, and he goes quiet for a moment. They both look at Shane, unsure of how to proceed from here. Ilya doesn’t think he’s ever had a conversation with Pike that wasn’t on the ice and trying to goad him into a penalty. He’s heard stories from Shane, but that’s different from sitting in a hospital room with someone.

Finally, breaking the awkward quiet, Pike takes a heavy breath and puts his hands on his knees. “You should know then, I guess.”

Ilya flinches at the sudden sound of his voice, looking over at Pike. The ever-present fear rears its head again. He motions impatiently for Pike to continue, because if he sits in this unknowing limbo any longer, he might start crying, and he refuses to do that in front of some fucking player from Montreal.

“The doctors said, uh, broken collarbone and probably a concussion,” Pike starts, and Ilya feels the spinning of the Earth start to slow down. “That’s the official verdict. But during the initial scans or whatever, they thought they caught something else—unrelated—wrong with his heart. Some issue I don’t remember the name of.”

“His heart,” Ilya repeats, somewhat faintly. Then, with increasing urgency, “Fuck. Fuck. They were seeing the bond but they didn’t—they didn’t know that’s what they were seeing. They thought it was something bad when it was just—*fuck.”*

Pike shrugs helplessly. “Yeah. Probably. Knowing he’s got a soulmate answered a lot of questions. They should have caught that on his ID, but it was such chaos at first—anyway, they dragged him into surgery, put him under anesthesia, then found the mark and brought him back here. But for some reason they don’t know, he just won’t wake up. Breathing’s fine, heart’s fine, head is as fine as it can be, but…”

The Earth stops spinning entirely, with that. Gravity just gives up. The floor slides out from under Ilya’s feet. His whole world crumbles all over again. He knew, conceptually, that Shane wasn’t waking up; he could see it right in front of him. But that’s not the same as hearing it as a diagnosis. As something that no one can fix yet.

As something that’s his fault. Not in any way he could have controlled, not really, because it sure as fuck wasn’t his choice for his heart to be intrinsically tied with Shane’s heart in this way, but still. It’s him that they were seeing when they did that scan. They were seeing the soulmate bond, something so rare these days that they didn’t know what they were looking at—so they thought something about them was broken.

Ilya tries to swallow, but his throat is suddenly parched and his breath gets caught. “And the doctors—they can’t do anything?”

“They said it’s a delayed emergence and that there’s really no telling,” Pike tells him, voice subdued. “Whatever the fuck that means.”

“And us? We can’t do anything to—to get him better?”

Pike shrugs a little helplessly. “They said talking to him might help. Sitting with him. Being nearby, in case.”

In case, Pike says. In case he wakes up. In case he doesn’t.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Something in him clicks into place with that, a kind of determination that breaks through the walls of fear and floods through his whole body. He tightens his hands into fists, trying to still the shaking by digging his fingernails into his palms.

Looking at Shane’s face, Ilya clenches his jaw and refuses to let any kind of pain show. That’s not what Shane needs right now. No, right now, Shane doesn’t need a broken heart. He needs one that beats for him with the strength of two.

“Okay,” Ilya says again, marginally less shaky. “So we sit here. And we talk to him. And we stay nearby.”

Pike is looking at him a little strangely, like he’s suddenly seeing an entirely different person from the one who had been sitting there at the foot of the bed two minutes ago. Then he swallows visibly and turns back to Shane.

He mutters, “You really care about him. What the fuck.”

Neither statement is really a question, so Ilya doesn’t bother replying. He keeps his eyes on Shane, and tentatively places a hand on the place where his ankle is under the sheets. It’s a light, careful touch, but it feels deeply intimate all the same.

“Hi, my love,” Ilya says softly in Russian, the petname coming out familiar and new all at once. He’s never called Shane that, but it feels appropriate now.

He continues in Russian—he wants this to be private, for just him and Shane, for Pike to wonder about and never, ever understand. Shane won’t understand either, not with words, but if he can hear this, Ilya knows that he’ll recognize the feelings.

He’s begun to understand every signal from every tremor of Ilya’s voice. It’s part of why Ilya used to keep their talking to a minimum. The closer that they get, the more Shane unravels him. Ilya has yet to decide if this is a good thing or not.

No—that’s not fair. He knows. He knows what he wants, and so he knows that he’ll let Shane unspool his every emotion and every secret and every desire all at once, and he won’t ever regret it.

Still looking at him, studying his face, Pike opens his mouth to say something, then thinks better of it. He goes quiet; even his breaths are so smooth and even and silent. He goes quiet, and just lets Ilya murmur all his love confessions in Russian, in a language no one else in the room knows him in.

“I missed you out in that game today,” Ilya tells him, because that’s all that’s coming to mind and the result of the match will probably be the first question Shane asks. “It’s not the same. Playing without you, I mean. It gets boring. No one else challenges me like you do. No one comes even close.”

Ilya closes his eyes for a moment. He refuses to imagine a world in which Shane Hollander is not playing hockey, and he refuses to imagine a world in which Shane Hollander does not wake up. Opening his eyes, he lifts his gaze from Shane’s hands to those bruises on his face.

“Fuck,” he whispers. Then, a little louder, a little more confident, he continues. “Last time I spoke in Russian to you like this, I was in Moscow and I told you I loved you. Do you remember that? You didn’t know what I said, but I had to say it anyway. I had to tell you or it was going to kill me, maybe.

“So I told you in Russian, because—*fuck*—I was so fucking scared, Shane. I was so scared and I was so sad and I wasn’t ready. But after this—there are things so much more important than being scared and sad. And I think I could be ready now, if you are. So you need to wake the fuck up and play more hockey and let me—let me tell you that I love you in a way you will understand.”

Ilya stops, swallowing around the desire to cry. Pushing it back. Shane does not need his broken heart. Shane needs his heart to keep beating strong enough for both of them. He repeats that to himself, silently, again and again and again. This is not the time for broken hearts. This is not the time for broken hearts.

“Even if you maybe don’t feel the same,” Ilya says, less like someone defeated and more like someone sending a prayer up to anyone who will listen, “I’ll still be your heartbeat, however you want me.”

He takes a heavy breath, and glances at Pike out of the corner of his eye. He seems to suddenly have found the sheets of the hospital bed very interesting, and he’s absentmindedly picking at a hangnail.

Ilya exhales slowly. He trains his gaze on one side of Shane’s chest, where the hospital gown covers the marking of Ilya’s name. A secret no one before this has ever known; a secret that encompasses Ilya’s entire soul in it.

“Shane, you are in my heart, always, and I am in yours,” he murmurs. Then, stronger, his voice hard, “We’re tied together, remember? We share a heartbeat. So don’t you dare leave me now.”

Silence is all that answers him. Shane doesn’t give any sign of hearing Ilya’s voice at all. Ilya takes a shaky breath; he doesn’t know what he expected out of that. For Shane to magically wake up at the sound of a confession in a language he doesn’t know?

Fuck. A naive dream. It doesn’t matter. He knows that he still had to say it.

Not looking at Pike, but now speaking in English, Ilya says quietly, “I felt it. When he went down. I felt it like the wind got knocked out of my chest and my heart stopped, for just a

moment. It just stopped. And then there was this…hollow feeling. Like my heart had been taken from out of my chest. Carved it out and left empty space where I should be able to feel him."

There's not a good reason to tell Pike any of this. But no one else in the entire fucking world knows the depth with which Ilya loves Shane Hollander and how much it hurts, and Ilya needs *someone* to know before the secret cracks him in half. He needs someone to understand that Shane isn't waking up, and it might fucking kill Ilya too.

"That's why you were so desperate to get here," Pike murmurs. He's looked away from the sheets and up at Ilya, still picking at that hangnail. "You thought you felt him…die."

Ilya shrugs a little helplessly, pulling his hand back into his lap and looking down at his upturned palms. He wants to hold Shane's hand so badly, but he doesn't need to give Pike any more insight into their secret than he already has.

"How was I supposed to know what was happening?" Ilya asks bitterly. "I've never felt the other half of my heart go away before. I've never felt that emptiness. Even when we—when we weren't talking. I could still feel him there. And then no one would fucking tell me where they took him, or what was wrong, or if he would be okay—and I was just stuck there, playing shitty hockey and feeling like a walking empty shell of a person."

Pike nods, making some low hum of sympathy. He sounds almost afraid of the answer when he asks, "Can you feel him now?"

Ilya doesn't have to think about it. Feeling that connection to Shane comes second nature to him, a sixth sense. The low, ever-present beat of Shane's heart just underneath his own has always, always been there. Even when he didn't understand what the sensation meant, he could feel it. It's as familiar to him as his own heart, as his own body. That gentle thrum of Shane's emotions are as recognizable as his own.

He says, barely audible, "No. I can't feel him at all."

A sharp intake of breath. "But the connection is still there. I saw it—the monitor sped up when you…it's still there, right? So he's not—"

"He has to be there," Ilya cuts in, unwilling to hear any more. "I can't—he *has* to be."

Pike nods, a single jerky movement. "I mean, maybe it's the anesthesia. That's what's keeping him asleep, maybe it's…numbing the bond, too."

"Maybe," Ilya says, but he sounds doubtful even to his own ears.

"Maybe," Pike echoes quietly.

Distantly, studying the bruises on Shane's sleeping face, Ilya thinks about the future. He thinks about all that he cannot have, all that the world has prevented him from taking hold of. It's a bleak future, and not reassuring at all.

He should have been braver, on that call back in Moscow. He should have been braver, at any point between then and now. Even if they were still confined to sneaking around and hiding and lying, even if just in the afterglow of sex with emotions they don't talk about, he should have asked to hold Shane's hand. At least once.

They were always running on borrowed time, is the thing. Their relationship, even as noncommittal as it was, has always been destined to blow up in their faces.

They're soulmates, yes, but that doesn't actually change anything. The league will still reject them for being *disgusting cocksuckers* and *terrible role models*; the fans will still make a laughingstock of their game with words like *weak* and *soft;* the critics will still doubt the integrity of their careers, saying *are locker rooms safe* and *soulmates aren't real so it must just be a bad excuse for betraying their teams.*

Still, despite the fact that they've been living in the space between *safe behind closed doors* and *caught in the act* for the entirety of their careers, Ilya had never thought it would go like this. He thought they would have just a little more time. He thought they would get to *choose* to walk away—because it was all always going to end—from both each other and from the game.

He should have known, really, that he himself would never be able to make that choice. He was never going to be able to stay away from Shane. And now he's in a hospital, unable to walk away, unable to put all these feelings back in an unopened box in the back of his heart, yet still also unable to handle them as they thread throughout his entire body and soul.

Now, he's in a hospital with Hayden Pike, and all Ilya wants to do is curl up into someone's arms and let himself tremble as his mind wanders through every worst case scenario. Pike is talking, saying something to Shane, but it sounds muted and drowned, and Ilya doesn't bother focusing on it.

He wonders what will happen, if Shane never wakes up.

The moment that Shane Hollander dies, the moment in which his heart gives out, Ilya will feel it. He will feel it deep in his core, worse than the emptiness that exists now. He will feel an integral piece of his heart get carved out of his chest with all the cruelty of a serrated blade, like the muscle is nothing more than a piece of meat that must be cut out and discarded.

The moment that Shane Hollander dies, Ilya's heart will break. It will split down the middle, one half of him bleeding out and one half of him already gone. He will feel it as his physical body separates from something vital, and he will feel it as all the intangible parts of him shatter alongside it. His soul, his love, his desire, his hope, his want.

Then, after all of that, Shane Hollander will be gone, and—if Ilya's heart does not entirely stop too, something he does not dare to hope for—Ilya will go on as a hollowed out carcass of what he was, because he has no other choice. He'll stitch up the remaining half of his heart to stop the bleeding, but it won't at all suppress the pain.

Still, he and his empty shell of a body with half a heart will keep going. Shane would never forgive him for choosing to die too.

The morning after Shane Hollander makes a wreck of Ilya's heart, Ilya will wake up. Shane will slip away quietly, in this anesthesia-induced sleep, as if that isn't the end of the world. And still, the morning after, Ilya will wake up.

That thought—of waking up in a world where Shane does not wake up too—settles in Ilya as a deep terror. It burrows through a layer of skin into muscle and bone. It infects every piece of him, until he's trembling all over, until all he wants is to curl up in someone's arms and cry under the weight of his own fear. He wants Shane to wake up and hold him, rock him back and forth, murmur his name and hopeless promises to take care of him.

He wants his mother. He wants to bury his face against her and let her hands move in gentle strokes up and down his back. He wants her to pull him close against her, tell him that it's going to be okay and she loves him and she's there and she's not ever going to leave him. There is no comfort like that of a mother who loves you so much.

When he was young, before his mother died but after his father's cruelty became unbearable, Irina told him a story to try to get him to go to sleep. It was an old fairytale, about two lovers who had fought against all odds to be together.

Ilya doesn't remember the details, but he remembers her saying that they tried to defy every expectation that other people put on them. But eventually, the two lovers had been separated. They were cursed by someone; a witch or devil or something of the like, Ilya is pretty sure.

However it happened doesn't matter. The point is that one was killed and his soul banished to wander the underworld alone for eternity, while the other was forced to stay alive for the rest of time, searching the land of the living for the other half of herself—someone she'll never find.

Ilya remembers, when he first heard it, thinking that it was a terribly sad story. They loved each other, but it wasn't enough. Where's the happy ending in that? How could that be a fairytale?

"But they were rewarded for their love and loyalty," Irina had told him, smiling that small, gentle smile of hers. "The universe saw how much they wanted to be together, with one wandering the Earth in her grief and one wandering the underworld in his own grief."

She stopped then, and squeezed his ankle. "Can you guess what they were rewarded with?"

Ilya shook his head, and Irina continued, smiling fondly. "The universe created a bond between their hearts. Even separated, they could feel each other's presence. That was the greatest secret, and the greatest power too, that the universe was able to give them: they always, always knew they were still loved."

"But how would that even *work?"* Ilya had asked, brow wrinkled and looking up at her with all the curious questions of a child who wants to know *everything.*

Irina had laughed a little. She was sitting at the foot of his bed, her hand on his ankle as she told him the story. “This is the story of the first soulmates, and it’s the reason we have soulmates in our world today, or some version of them. So that, even in times of grief, there is someone out there whose love you can feel. Does it matter how exactly it works?”

“I don’t want a soulmate,” Ilya had said, grumbling a little as he turned onto his side and yawned. Even then, he could feel a second layer underneath his own heart; even then, he refused to admit to what it might mean. “I want my heart to be my own, not anyone else’s problem.”

“Well, you’re in luck,” Irina told him, squeezing his ankle. “It’s an incredibly rare thing. It only happens between the people who need it the most.”

The people who need it the most.

Those words come back to him now, staring at Shane in the hospital bed. He doesn’t realize he’s crying silently, motionlessly until his vision blurs. He blinks hard, tears spilling down his cheeks.

He thinks, *Oh. Right. I need him. Like a body needs a heart—I need him.*

Will he feel Shane still, even in death? Even in grief? They had barely shared real love while they were both conscious. Can such a thing still live in him always? He feels so hollow right now.

Unable to hold back anymore, he reaches out to grasp Shane’s hand in his own. He clings tightly to his hand, trying to find life there. Trying to find some kind of sign that Shane is still in his head, in his body, in his heart, and can still come back to him.

“Shane,” he whispers. “You’re scaring me. It’s time to wake up, Shane.”

There’s no sign of movement from him. Then there’s a knock on the door, and Ilya and Pike both jump in their seats, torn out of the moment. Ilya practically rips his hand out Shane’s hand as the door opens and a nurse walks in. She glances between Ilya and Pike and then to Shane.

She glances down at a clipboard in her hands and then lets out a short breath. “Mr. Pike. And you must be the soulmate.”

Ilya tenses. It’s unfamiliar, tilting him somewhat off-kilter to hear someone refer to him that way. “Ilya.”

“Ilya,” she repeats. She pronounces it wrong but Ilya can’t be bothered to correct her. He’s lived on this continent enough to stop trying. “Well, I’m just here to check on Shane’s vitals.”

Ilya and Pike both nod, Ilya standing up to make room for the nurse to come over to Shane. He hovers, instead, at the side of the room, his back to a small window facing a parking lot.

While she busies herself checking the monitors and writing things down on her clipboard, she talks. It’s quick and clinical, completely matter-of-fact in her intonation.

“Shane is displaying all the normal indicators we expect,” she says, fussing with an IV. “Not waking from the anesthesia after this amount of time is uncommon, but it’s not unheard of. He should be able to wake up on his own, when he’s ready.”

Pike takes an audible, slow breath. “So there’s nothing new.”

Shooting a look at Ilya, the nurse corrects, “Well, not nothing.”

“What then?” Pike asks, clearly getting frustrated.

“When Shane was brought in—” the nurse starts slowly; carefully, like what she’s about to say is forbidden— “the fact that he has a registered soulmate was…overlooked.”

“Overlooked,” Pike says flatly.

The nurse at least looks embarrassed, though whether that comes from two intimidating hockey players glaring her down or from her hospital’s mistake, Ilya isn’t sure.

“It’s on his ID.” Ilya knows this for a fact, because he’s seen it. He’s traced his finger over the symbol in wonder, in awe at the fact that Shane checked the *yes* box even after he walked away in Sochi. “And there’s a database. Hospitals have access to it.”

The database is a concept that Ilya hates. A count of soulmate bonds are collected alongside the census; the name of the match itself isn’t recorded but the fact that you have a bond at all is. At least, that’s how it works in Boston. Shane has mentioned a similar thing in Canada, but Ilya isn’t entirely sure of the details.

“Because he was brought through the emergency room, his ID wasn’t given to us until afterwards,” the nurse tells them apologetically. “And the database is only checked when there is reason to.”

“You *had* reason,” Ilya growls. “You saw his heart in your scans and saw the bond. You should have done a physical exam and found the mark *before* drugging him. And you should have checked the database before you did anything after that.”

“This was all…” The nurse hesitates. She looks at Pike, instead of Ilya, when she continues. “Improper procedure. We acknowledge that.”

Pike and Ilya both stare at her. A fury is boiling under Ilya’s skin, threatening to spill out. He wants to punch something, wants to scream. Improper procedure. Fucking improper procedure, and now Shane isn’t waking up.

Next to him, Pike looks much the same. He says, something dangerous in the undercurrent of his voice, even despite the mostly polite tone, “So fix it. You have to be able to fix it.”

“We’re doing what we can,” the nurse says. Gently, but mostly sounding condescending. “Having the other half of his heart—his soulmate—close to him will help. We are seeing positive progress. I’ll be back soon to check on him again. Press the call button if you notice any changes.”

As soon as she closes the door behind her, Pike falls back into the chair and puts his head in his hands. “Fuck.”

Ilya goes back to sitting at the foot of Shane’s hospital bed, this time on the same side as Pike. He reaches for Shane’s hand silently, cradling it in both of his. Pike’s eyes are on them, but Ilya can’t bring himself to care right now. He already knows everything.

Then Pike lets out a startled, choked laugh. “Fuck. His mom’s gonna go ballistic when she gets here. I should update her soon—this hospital is going to feel the full wrath of Yuna Hollander.”

Ilya smiles a little half-heartedly, a more sobering thought on his mind. “This isn’t how she should find out. About us. This isn’t how Shane would have wanted it to go.”

“She doesn’t know?” Pike asks, and Ilya just gives the tiniest shake of his head. Ilya keeps his eyes on Shane’s hand as Pike exhales slow and long. “Shit. Were you two seriously just going to keep this secret forever?”

“I don’t know.” Ilya hates how flat and unaffected his voice sounds when this is a subject he’s been fighting against himself about for over six years. But he doesn’t know how to explain any of that to Pike. “Probably.”

In the corner of his eye, Ilya sees Pike give him a short nod. His eyes are still trained on the place where Ilya is gripping Shane’s hand tightly.

“You were going to love him in secret for the rest of your life,” Pike murmurs, as if finally realizing it, “and no one was ever going to know you were soulmates.”

Ilya shrugs stiffly. “No one has ever needed to know but us.”

“Until now.”

“Until now,” Ilya agrees. A pause. Then, “But even now, he’ll be…upset. That I told people just to get here.”

Pike is frowning, Ilya can tell just from the sound of his voice. “He’ll understand. This is kind of an extreme situation.”

“Still. I broke the promise.”

He broke the promise, yes, but the truth is that Ilya doesn’t regret it for a second. Not when he’s so in love with Shane, not when his heart is hardwired to love him. There’s no protesting fate.

Oh, he’s tried anyway: he’s fought and argued and hated himself and hated Shane and forced them to stay apart and told himself he’d break it off next time and he’s done everything he can to deny this. He’s tried so hard to keep this from becoming what it is.

He’s also failed. He’s failed at every turn, at every try. He’s tried, for so many reasons, but everything about Shane Hollander keeps drawing him back in. There’s a connection between

them that lies in their hearts and in their fates.

These days, there's also a connection between them that Ilya is choosing. Again and again and again, he's choosing Shane Hollander. Choosing to listen to his heart.

They haven't spoken about it, not really. They haven't named it. But Ilya knows that they both feel it. He can feel Shane's love for him as a constant pulse under his skin. He can feel Shane's love deep in the core of him. He can feel Shane's love everywhere that Ilya feels his own: body and soul and heart. They may not have called it what it is or what Ilya wants it to be, but he can always feel Shane's love when he needs it the most.

But just as Ilya can feel his love, he can also feel Shane's fear. Only the most extreme of emotions get communicated across the bond, but the fear—it's the most extreme of emotions. It's constant, and paralyzing. Shane's fear and paranoia and anxiety all permeate his every decision and his every interaction.

The problem with this, really, is that Ilya can't even actually tell him that he's *wrong* for feeling that way. All of those feelings come from the threat of very, very real consequences. Being with Ilya, admitting that they're soulmates, committing to loving him in any manner—it could, and very likely would, bring ruin to the individual lives they've built for themselves.

The fear is genuine, and it is justifiable. Ilya can't tell him they should be brave and risk it all despite the reality, because it just isn't that simple. It can't be that simple when Ilya is terrified too. He's sure that Shane can feel Ilya's fear just as much as Ilya can feel his, if not more strongly.

"Would you want to be something, if we could?" Shane asked, once.

"It doesn't matter," Ilya told him then, and his voice had cracked down the middle, and Shane had kissed him that night even though it *can't* matter.

It doesn't matter. Ilya really did believe that, once.

He loves Shane. When he thinks of safety and home and trust and want, he thinks of Shane. When he goes out to drink and dance, he wishes Shane were with him. When he's surrounded by everything a man should ever want, he wants Shane more than all of it. Loving Shane is a fact of his heartbeat.

But they cannot be together, so his love cannot mean anything and cannot ever be spoken aloud for Shane to understand. That—that is, maybe, not a fact.

For the first time, Ilya is looking at Shane and that specific fear that lives in him doesn't taste so bitter. There are very real monsters to be afraid of, but God knows they can both keep a secret. Besides, maybe secretkeeping won't hurt so much if Ilya can feel Shane's love as it is when untainted by shame and burden.

Both of them have tried so hard to outrun their own heartbeats. They've finally slowed down, finally started to match each other's pace, and then—then Shane went down on the ice, and Ilya was left hollowed out, and now there's no solution in sight.

Breaking the tight silence in the room, Ilya blurts out, “I don’t know if he would have done it for me.”

He doesn’t know why he says it. He shouldn’t have. But the words are out of his mouth before Ilya can stop them. They just spill out, not masking their pain at all.

His whole body is tense, even his heart straining to continue beating normally. He hates those words, hates that he spoke them into existence, because while the thought is *true,* it can only hurt if he admits to believing it. While the doubt and insecurity have both been building up in him for the past few hours, they can only take control if he admits he feels them.

“What?” Pike asks, sounding baffled that this would even be a question.

Ilya shrugs stiffly. He admits, quietly, “I lost it, out there on the ice, and afterwards in the hotel. Played like shit and then had a panic attack that Marleau had to talk me down from.”

Pike frowns. “That seems kind of like an appropriate reaction to me.”

“Not for the rival you’re supposed to hate.” The bitterness in Ilya’s voice is reflected in the misery on his face. “And Shane’s always had more self-control than me. He would have thought about consequences before—before showing up unannounced and admitting that we’re…”

Ilya trails off, letting the rest of the sentence go unspoken.

Soulmates suddenly feels like such a big, heavy word. It encapsulates so many of the fundamentals of their relationship, but it doesn’t at all make up the parts that Ilya treasures the most. It’s an intangible, confusing, metaphysical concept; one that Ilya still can’t really define even just to himself. One that the greatest scientists and boldest philosophers still don’t have explanations for.

It’s something that he can admit to now, but only really ever in the quiet and the dark. In the privacy of his own thoughts. In the secrecy behind the locked doors of hotel rooms with thick walls. In the whispers between kisses pressed to the place where his name is cut into Shane’s chest. In the intimacy of murmuring it into Shane’s mouth.

But admitting now, to Pike and all these nurses, that it is true still feels like a betrayal. He and Shane had agreed to never tell anyone. They had agreed this needed to be kept secret; there wasn’t a single person on the *need* side of *need to know basis.* They had promised each other, sworn that they would never tell.

Ilya makes a low, frustrated noise in the back of his throat. He doesn’t want it to be like this. He doesn’t want this relationship to be so stained with fear and shame and secretkeeping. He wants to be brave enough in this moment—one uninfluenced by panic—to just choose to fucking say it, out loud and in a way someone else can understand.

Pike already knows, so why is Ilya so fucking scared to say it again? Is it because he’s still scared of what it means? Because it changes everything, for someone else to know? Because

it changes everything, if Ilya says it like it means something? Because Shane might not forgive him for admitting to it at all?

Trying again, Ilya chokes out the sentence once more. “Before showing up unannounced and admitting—that we’re—”

Pike is fucking *staring* at him, not at all understanding this impossible contradiction of emotions, and Ilya kind of wants to collapse. Lie down with Shane on this uncomfortable hospital bed and close his eyes and not think so hard ever again.

He loves Shane, and now he could lose him. Even with everything they never said, even after everything they have said, Ilya might lose him. He wants to be able to admit this secret so badly. He wants to stop hiding all of the time. He wants it so badly it hurts, deep in the hollow of his half-hearted chest.

We’re soulmates, Ilya thinks, clenching his jaw and setting his lips in a flat line. His heart beats steadily. *That matters. To us, even if to no one else.*

Then the heart monitor starts its distressed beeping pattern again, and this time it’s not panic coming from Ilya’s end. Ilya draws his hands away from Shane, eyes going wide with fear. He tries to breathe, tries to keep steady while Shane can’t, but the fucking heart monitor is beeping, and Pike has straightened up, already reaching for the call button, and there’s a rushing of loud movement in the hallway, and Shane’s breathing is going strange, and Ilya is so fucking *scared—*

—“can say it.” Mumbled, garbled words. Hoarse, weak. Barely comprehensible, really, but Ilya would know the sound of that voice whether yelled or soft or in song. Ilya’s breath catches in his throat. And again, a mumble: “…You can say it.”

Ilya’s gaze snaps to Shane, hands dropping. His eyes are fluttering open and closed. They settle on closed, after a moment, but his breathing continues less shallow and so much more even. The heart monitor evens out. Ilya sees his hand twitch a little towards Ilya.

“Shane,” Ilya whispers. His panic has given way to a leap of adrenaline. *“Fuck,* Hollander.”

“Holy shit.” Pike’s voice is thick with some overwhelming emotion, the kind of relief and hope that has no name.

“‘m up,” Shane murmurs. His words are no more enunciated than before. Like he’s simply waking up from a long, unsettled nap in the sun. “Hey.”

Ilya chokes out a laugh, and he feels tears spill over with it. He manages only to say, weak and wet, “Hi, sweetheart.”

“I’m calling the nurse,” Hayden says, but he catches Ilya’s eye first to mouth, *Sweetheart?* and raise his eyebrows.

Ilya glares so hard in return that Hayden raises his hands in surrender before pressing the call button. He’s still suppressing an amused smile though, and Ilya can feel his cheeks flush.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya asks, keeping his voice as soft and even as he can. He thinks probably his panic is still there, but fuck, so is Shane and so none of that matters. “Shane?”

Shane mumbles something that Ilya doesn’t catch, and, judging by the questioning look they both send each other, it seems like Hayden didn’t either. Shane blinks a few times, then squints a little at Ilya before squeezing his eyes shut again.

“Too bright, yes?” They’ve been sitting in the hospital room with all the lights on at their brightest. Ilya motions towards Pike and then towards the door. “Pike, go dim the lights.”

“Why don’t you dim the lights?” Pike grumbles under his breath, but he stands up anyway and a moment later the lights dim enough that Shane relaxes a little, his eyes opening slowly.

Shane hums quietly. His fingers twitch towards Ilya, and Ilya is a weak man, so he takes Shane’s hand and squeezes gently. “Better.”

“Good.” Ilya still sounds choked and pained, but he doesn’t bother to mask it. Shane is *here.*

Shane looks at Ilya, something soft and unguarded in his expression that’s never been there before. He holds Ilya’s hand loosely, weakly, but he’s still doing it and Ilya might start laughing or sobbing and he’s not sure which will come first.

“You didn’t say it,” Shane murmurs. He blinks a few times, bleary, like he’s still coming back to himself. “‘nd I can’t—can’t feel you as much. In my chest.”

“It’s probably the anesthesia,” Pike tells Shane, sitting back down in his chair. There’s so much relief in his voice that Ilya can’t bring himself to be annoyed that Pike is present. He does, after all, love Shane too. It’s hard not to—after all these years, Ilya would know.

Ilya nods. “It’ll come back, we think.”

He doesn’t know that to be entirely true, except for how it *has* to be true or Ilya might lose his fucking mind. If he can’t feel Shane’s heart there in his own chest, if he can’t feel Shane’s love as a constant undercurrent to every one of his own heartbeats, he might go insane with the silence.

Like having music playing around you every second of every day, your favorite kind of music, all of the time—and then one day it just stops, and you can never hear it again. It might break him. These past few hours alone have been bad enough.

Shane hums a little. “Good. I like feeling you.”

“I like feeling you too,” Ilya says. Honesty feels like a small price to pay for Shane to be awake and talking to him.

“But you didn’t say it,” Shane mumbles. “Heard you…’nd I wanted to hear you say it.”

He closes his eyes again, head falling to the side.

“Hey, hey, stay with me, Hollander.” Ilya is not going to panic. Ilya is not going to fucking panic.

Shane makes a small, pained noise. He shifts to lift his head again, but keeps his eyes closed. “‘m okay, Ilya, I swear.”

Ilya swallows hard, saying quietly, “The nurse will be here soon, okay?”

“Okay, that’s good.” Shane’s voice is small. “I still want to hear you say it.”

Ilya sends a helpless glance towards Pike, who at some point had gone to stand at the door and wait for the nurse, and who suddenly looks like he has a lot of interesting questions to ask the shuttered blinds over the viewing window in the door. He’s clearly listening, but he’s also not giving any sign that he’s going to interrupt this.

He’ll judge it, probably, once Shane is better. Make annoying, pointed comments about the whole thing, maybe. But he’s not stopping Ilya now, not when Shane has only one request.

“Say what, Shane?” Ilya takes a small, shaky breath. Gathers all of the courage in both of their hearts. Breathes out. “That you’re my soulmate? Or that I love you?”

“Holy shit,” Shane breathes out, eyes suddenly open and wide, and Ilya’s heart stops and stops and stops and stops and then Shane says, “That. Definitely that. Ilya. I love you too.”

“Fuck, Hollander.” Ilya barely manages to choke out the words. And in Russian, “I love you,” and, “all this time,” and in English, “I love you,” and, “so much.”

And in the other language he’s always loved Shane with, he lifts Shane’s hand to his lips. He presses kisses to his knuckles, to the back of his hand, to the heel of his palm, to the pulse point on his wrist. He thinks he can feel his own heart beating there, alongside Shane’s heart, perfectly in time.

“Oh,” Shane murmurs, barely a breath. He closes his eyes, inhaling deeply. “There you are. Found you.”

There—Ilya can feel it too, now. His heart pounds in his chest; just a little louder, just a little stronger. There is something bolder, braver, and yet also something more stable and consistent in the rhythm now. Like a lone piano transitioning into a piece for four hands; a single dancer on an empty stage lifted gently into a pas de deux.

It’s the sound of Shane’s heartbeat coming back to him in full. It falls back into place slowly, slowly, until suddenly it’s all there. Until it’s once again as steady as Ilya’s own heart.

This is a familiar sensation, listening to Shane’s heartbeat. It feels as if it was never gone, not truly. Stifled, maybe. Numbed, or toned down.

But maybe it was still there, at least a little—it must have been, because the dual heartbeat he’s holding so close to the chest now doesn’t seem like it’s skipped one beat. It must have been there, really, because Ilya has always needed it, he can admit that now, and soulmates are made for the people who need them the most.

All the power of the soul, and the heart, and the fight, and fear, and love—all of it, right there in Shane's heartbeat. *Now*—there—the greatest secret—Ilya can see it, can understand it, can hear the beat of it, can feel it so intimately; yes, there in the sound of Shane murmuring his name, there is all of the love in the universe, and more.

The corner of Shane's lips turns up just a little. Just enough for Ilya to understand everything.

"There you are," Ilya whispers. "Found you."

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