

kismet

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by [lovablelamb](#)

Summary

He flops down, starfishing in the shade. When he opens his eyes, there's somebody above him.

It's probably the most beautiful boy he's ever seen in his *very* extensive seven years of life. He has dark eyes and hair, a smooth nosebridge, and freckles that dot across his round cheeks. Ilya sits up immediately, and the boy retreats, drawing his knees up to his chest.

They stare at each other for a few moments. Ilya beams. Something in his belly is on fire.

"I'm Shane," the boy says.

Ilya recognizes that phrase! With glee, he replies, "Ilya!" and scoots forward. He resists the urge to reach out and wrap his arms around this boy—Shane. He knows him somehow.

Or: 6 times Shane and Ilya hit a milestone, +1 time they watch someone else reach one.

Notes

obligatory: no ai used, fuck ai, fuck you if you use ai
i just like ellipses

set in an alternate universe where they faced little adversity to being in a relationship once in the nhl. don't question it we're here for fun

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

Shane, 1995

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?” his mother asks, pressing her thumbs into the palms of Shane’s tiny hands. Her hair looks soft. He wants to touch it. But *that hurts, Shane*, so he doesn’t; just bounces up and down a few times, wrapping his fingers around his mother’s thumbs.

“How you feel, sweetheart?” he echoes, liking how the words feel in his mouth. He doesn’t get them perfectly, but he doesn’t know how to do better, either. He pulls one of his fists out of her gentle grip and sticks it in his mouth for a few moments before removing it and telling her: “Really far ‘way.” He feels his face move around, and suddenly the back of his throat burns. He takes a step forward and hides in his mother’s chest.

There’s a tugging, low in his stomach, a sense that he isn’t where he’s supposed to be. Or maybe that there’s somebody who’s supposed to be with him. Which, of course, has been explained to him a million times, so he has the words, technically, to understand what the feeling is, but not the ability to actually process them. It’s frustrating. He gnaws on his fist again.

His mother runs her hands up and down his little back, looking over him and making eye contact with his father, presumably. Then her lips are in his hair, and he feels a teeny bit better, but the tugging doesn’t dissipate.

Warmth to his left, and his father is kneeling beside him. “Hey, bunny,” David murmurs, pulling Shane from his mother’s grasp and settling him in his own lap. “You know that just because your soulmate is really far away that doesn’t mean you’ll never meet her, yeah?”

Shane smushes his face against his father’s chest. David always smells like the stuff his parents put in the laundry machine, which Shane loves. “Hurts,” he says. It comes out a little bit pathetic for somebody who’s supposed to be a ‘big boy’ as of three days ago, according to his grandpa. His eyes well up again, and when he pulls away from his father’s shirt, there’s a darkened wet patch on the fabric from his tears. His lower lip wobbles. Behind him, Yuna pets through his hair.

“And she’ll be feeling you, too, bug. You’ll try to find each other,” his mother adds, but, at this point, Shane is inconsolable.

Leading up to his birthday—which had been stressed to him as being *very important, honey. Maybe the most important one*—he’d been excited. But all of the kids from his preschool he’d told his mother to invite had been busy, and so the party was emptier than he’d been anticipating: just his parents and his paternal grandfather. He thought it was kind of a weird coincidence that *all* the kids were busy, but he knew that sometimes grown-ups’ work got in the way of playdates. And they’d had dirt and worms cupcakes, so he got over it.

Then, sitting in the living room, freshly four and rocking back and forth in front of the television, the bond had opened up, making his head and stomach hurt, and Shane had known that his soulmate was impossibly far away. Oceans away, probably. There’s a carpet at his

preschool that has a map of the world on it, and sometimes, he likes to sit in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean and imagine that he's a kraken, but a friendly one. Who picks people up from the Senegalese coast or Eastern China—Soulmates, separated by a sea—and unite them, usually in South Chile, since it's easy to reach.

He likes memorizing the country names, too. He's better at it than anybody else. He can do all of Europe and Africa.

Where's his soulmate? Somewhere nice, hopefully. At least there won't be a language barrier—perks of a soulbond. He knows *where* she is, kind of, but not how to vocalize it. There's a sense. An innate knowing. He could walk there without making a wrong turn (if, of course, his soulmate weren't so far away as to be overseas), but he wouldn't know which direction to point.

He cries for the rest of the afternoon.

The idea of a soulmate had been so appealing. Somebody perfect for him, destined to like him and be his best friend. Shane doesn't have a best friend. At preschool, most of the other kids already had friends, so by the time Shane got there, they weren't looking for any more. He doesn't really mind, but it makes his stomach hurt sometimes when he sees them play together, and he feels bad for staring.

But his soulmate is somewhere far away. There's an arrow in his middle, a gentle but unrelenting ache pulling him. He wants to be gigantic. He could spread his legs and take a massive step over the Atlantic, then another over Europe, and then he'd be there. He'd shrink down and run from door-to-door, knocking until his best friend opened the door, and they'd play together, and when the streetlights came on, Shane would get big again and put her in his pocket and step back into Canada.

His parents sit with him in his bed, rubbing his back and stroking his hair. His father offers to tell him a story, but Shane doesn't want one.

What he *wants* is what he was promised.

The preschool teacher Shane likes the most is Miss Sarah, because she doesn't get frustrated with him when he freaks out. He hates preschool. Things are always changing. They're going to get fruit snacks for snacktime, but when the cabinets get opened, the fruit snacks have melted, and so they have crackers instead. And Shane likes crackers, but he was expecting fruit snacks. Miss Sarah also plays with him when he doesn't have a playtime partner, and she's good at doing different voices to differentiate the people ShaneKraken picks up.

He falls asleep in between his parents, feeling very hollow, and very confused.

That night, he runs around an open field with a blond boy about his age in his dreams, and when he wakes up, his stomach doesn't hurt anymore.

Canadians, Ilya discovers on the first of grade one, are not all that different from Russians. People are just people, apparently. His father will be furious to hear that, though, so Ilya won't tell him.

It's recess. Ilya only knows how to introduce himself in English, and a handful of vocabulary words, but he's, as his mother likes to say, *exuberant*, so he's managed to find a small group of kids to run in circles with. Today he feels extra jumpy. Like there's some kind of fire in his stomach. After a few minutes of exhausting himself on the barkchips, he's tugged by some invisible force over to the edge of the playground, where soft grass pokes around his sneakers.

He flops down, starfishing in the shade. When he opens his eyes, there's somebody above him.

It's probably the most beautiful boy he's ever seen in his *very* extensive seven years of life. He has dark eyes and hair, a smooth nosebridge, and freckles that dot across his round cheeks. Ilya sits up immediately, and the boy retreats, drawing his knees up to his chest.

They stare at each other for a few moments. Ilya beams. Something in his belly is on fire.

"I'm Shane," the boy says.

Ilya recognizes that phrase! With glee, he replies, "Ilya!" and scoots forward. He resists the urge to reach out and wrap his arms around this boy—Shane. He recognizes him somehow.

"You're new," Shane says. His eyes dart around, like he isn't used to making eye contact, but they continuously settle on Ilya's face. "I don't recognize you. But I think I've seen your face before."

Ilya furrows his eyebrows. He doesn't know that phrase, but he understands what Shane is saying. It's like Shane's words are subtitled with invisible Russian. "I'm from Moscow," he says tentatively, barely able to restrain his excitement. Coming to North America was scary, for a number of reasons, but it's also alleviated a great weight from his shoulders. It's a little bit lighter here. "I know your face too."

Shane looks confused, and his head tilts a few degrees to the right. "That's in Russia," he says. A small smile crosses his lips. Ilya likes that smile.

"I know," Ilya says. "Can you understand me?" he asks, in Russian this time.

Shane nods. Then his dark eyes go wide and he shoots to his feet. Ilya mirrors the movement, and then they're standing a foot apart under the shade.

Ilya pokes him, and Shane giggles.

"Don't poke me," Shane says, but he's still smiling.

"Sorry," Ilya replies, feeling like he's floating above himself. Who is this boy? Is he magic? Is Ilya dreaming? "Why are you alone under the tree?"

“I don’t have any friends,” Shane says with a tiny shrug. Something sad flashes across his features, but he recovers quickly. “They don’t like me. It’s okay. I like sitting alone.” He leans toward Ilya.

Ilya shakes his head vehemently, grabbing Shane by the wrist. “No. You have a friend,” he says with resolve. “Me!”

The look on Shane’s face at those words, and the way his hand moves to lace with Ilya’s, solidifies the suspicion that’s been crouching in the back of Ilya’s mind.

His mother had explained it a few years ago, but once the bond opened, Ilya had been sure he’d never meet his soulmate. While sitting on the plane to Canada, peering out the window, he’d felt a rushing sensation in his stomach that, in retrospect, was the feeling of nearing his soulmate. He had, also, admittedly, not expected a boy. Even though he knew he liked boys the same way he liked girls, he figured that God would be nice and not make him deal with the fallout of his *soulmate* being a boy.

But now, staring at Shane, he doesn’t think there’s anything he wouldn’t deal with for *this* boy.

The suspicion is confirmed point-blank when Shane drags Ilya over to the pick-up area after school and Ilya meets David.

David crouches and says something, but all Ilya can make out is “I” and “you.”

So he hasn’t spontaneously mastered English. Ilya just stares at him.

“He says he’s excited to meet you,” Shane says, pulling on Ilya’s hand. “He’s my dad. He’s nice.”

Ilya nods, and shakes David’s hand. It’s softer than most of the hands he shook back home, but no less firm. “Ilya,” Ilya says, feeling silly. He doesn’t want Shane’s father to think he’s stupid, which he isn’t. He’s worse at English than Alexei, even though he tries twice as hard.

“He’s my soulmate,” Shane says simply, looking up at his dad. His eyes are so big. Ilya kind of wants to stare at them forever, but he also doesn’t want to make a bad impression on David. So he bites his tongue and mirrors Shane’s movement, turning his head to the man.

David’s eyebrows shoot up, and he says something to Shane. Shane replies, staring at his feomitet. David reaches up and his hand nears Shane’s cheek and for a moment Ilya’s heart is in his stomach, and he closes his eyes, because he hates getting hit in public primarily due to the fact that he hates people *watching* him get hit, but then David’s fingers brush over Shane’s cheek, cupping his face, and he says something more quietly.

Ilya drops Shane’s hand, but his headache immediately protests, and he picks it back up. Shane squeezes his fingers.

It's a few minutes before father and son step away from each other and Ilya can reassume his position at Shane's side, their hips knocking together.

Shane turns, saying: "Do you need a ride home?"

Ilya's father had made it clear that Ilya was to walk home—in order to begin forming a mental map of their area of Ontario, obviously, not because he'd been overzealous on the car ride there and said something he shouldn't've—but their house was six kilometers away, Ilya didn't know which turns to take, and the prospect of even a few more minutes with Shane was enough to make him nod. "Yes please," he says.

So he sits in the backseat of the Hollander sedan, pressed up beside Shane, feeling very settled.

When he gets home, the first thing he does is kick off his sneakers and scurry to the kitchen, where he finds his mother at the stove and grabs her skirts, breathing in the familiar scent, before wrapping his arms around her waist, face smushing into her stomach.

"Hello, Ilyushka," his mother murmurs, stroking through his curls with one hand, stirring something with the other. "How was your first day?"

"I met my soulmate, mama," Ilya says, completely unable to bite it back.

The hand in his hair freezes. "Did you, baby?" Irina sets her spoon down and wipes her hands on her apron, kneeling in front of Ilya, who's small for his age, even though he feels gigantic. People always say that they look alike. Ilya hasn't really seen it until right now.

"Yeah," he says. He feels like he's going to burst with excitement, and he bounces on the balls of his feet, beaming at his mother. "His name is Shane. And he speaks English, but don't worry because I can understand it. And he didn't have any friends before today but now I'm his friend. And his father is kind, and they gave me a ride here—"

"Hey, hey. Shh." Irina grabs his waving hands, folding them together in her palm and pressing them against her chest, over her heart. With her other hand, she gently squeezes the nape of Ilya's neck. "I'm happy for you, baby. Really. A lot of people don't find their soulmates, and you're going to have more time with yours than most. But you're not to tell your father about this. Do you understand me?"

Ilya nods, eyes wide. He hadn't been planning on telling Grigori, anyway. His father has a special talent for squishing all of the joy in the house. Sometime around Ilya's fifth birthday, Grigori had stopped treating him like his son and started treating him like a company subordinate. Ilya can still remember being smaller, and sitting on his father's lap. Helping his mother in the kitchen and then joining Alexei and their father in the living room to play. What changed?

Speculation is pointless—*things are different now* is the long and short of it.

"Tell me you understand, Ilyushka," his mother insists.

“I understand, mama,” Ilya says with solemnity. And even if he didn’t understand, he wouldn’t have gone against her, either way.

Shane, 2002

“Shut up!” Ilya shouts across the classroom, wrapping one arm around Shane’s shoulders, making his heart swoop. He feels so silly around Ilya. They’re young, he shouldn’t feel so much about this boy. His mom likes to say that she and his father were the rare exception to the ‘high school relationships always fail’ rule, so Shane figures middle school ones are doomed as well. But this isn’t a *relationship*. Ilya is his friend. His very...passionate friend. Who also, maybe, incidentally, happens to be his soulmate. But that doesn’t even matter; plenty of soulpairs are platonic. “Fuck you, he is best memorizer in school, in country probably, is not weird, he is just very smart!” Ilya adds.

Shane flushes and ducks his head. There’s nothing on his desk to look at except the quiz, on which a 99 is scrawled in red ink. His stomach twists at the number, which makes him feel doubly terrible, because there are plenty of people who want—or even need—his 99, but all he can focus on is the fact that it isn’t a 100.

“Whatever,” Ethan, the boy who’d been taunting him mutters, sitting back and returning to bickering with his friends. The word follows, practically whispered under Ethan’s breath, isn’t something Shane really wants to linger on.

Ilya glowers at Ethan over Shane’s shoulder. “I will kill him,” he says. “I will use my pencil,” he adds, fisting the pencil and brandishing it like a dagger, “and stab his eyes out.”

“A little decorum, Ilya,” the teacher, Mrs. Matthews, says tiredly, passing their desk. “And good job, Shane. You only missed one question!”

She doesn’t mean it like an insult, but Shane nearly recoils. It’s salt in the wound. He scowls and slumps down in his seat, head falling to Ilya’s shoulder.

“Oh, cool. *Einstein* is gay, too,” Ethan half-shouts at them. His voice is loud enough to carry but quiet enough that Mrs. Matthews won’t hear it and send him to the principal’s office.

Shane’s face crumples but he fixes his expression quickly and pulls away from Ilya.

“Gay for the stupid commie, too. If I was gonna be a fag, I’d pick somebody who could understand me, at least,” Ethan adds after being nudged by his friend.

This time, it’s Shane who whirls around. “Shut up!” he shoots over his shoulder. He glances at Ilya, who looks older than he is. Or maybe it’s Shane who looks young for his age, baby fat still clinging to his cheeks and tummy. “Shut up! He speaks two languages, and you barely even speak one! And we’re not gay!”

Ilya stiffens a little beside him.

“Yeah, well, you look it!”

Shane's mouth struggles to form words for a second. He grabs Ilya's hand under the desk. "Fuck you!" he says after a minute. He doesn't usually swear. Ilya squeezes his hand. That's kind of gay. Whatever. No it isn't. It's just Ilya. They're platonic *soulmates*—of course they'll be closer than regular friends. It isn't Shane's fault that Ethan and his friends don't even like each other, let alone have the kind of connection Shane's found with Ilya.

"Whatever," Ethan mutters, slumping down in his seat. "Fag."

"Fuck you, stupid idiot!" Ilya yells finally, puncturing the façade of nonchalance all three of them had built. "You are ugly like—like—Shane what is word: very hungry, like, dying hungry?"

"Malnourished," Shane offers. It's one of this week's vocabulary words, but he'd known it before he'd been given the paper. Ilya should have it memorized, technically, but Shane won't hold the lapse against him.

"Yes! Thank you, perfect Shane. Ethan B., you are ugly like malnourished hippopotamus!" Ilya yells, his perfect face split into a grin.

"I understand you boys are...soulmates, yes? Regardless, that's no excuse for profane language at school," the assistant principal says, peering over his horn-rimmed glasses.

"But they were being mean to him," both Shane and Ilya say at the same time.

Shane sits forward, like if somehow he's ten inches closer to Assistant Principal Howard he'll be ten times as convincing. "And Ethan B. called us, uhm. A bad word. He did it first. And he called Ilya a communist. I don't think he knows what a communist is, but, I mean, that's probably okay because we're only in sixth grade, but it's an economic—"

"Shane, please. I understand what communism is," Assistant Principal Howard says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It doesn't matter who bit who first. Remember, please: *'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.'* While cliché, I think you and Mr. Rozanov both would do well to keep it in mind."

Shane sags, all the wind lost from his sails. Slumping back and staring at his feet, he doesn't miss the way Ilya's bony knee bounces up and down. He wants to hold his hand again. Well, *want* isn't even exactly the right feeling. It's like his palm is magnetically attracted to Ilya's. It isn't a decision to reach out and grab it, it's bigger; a natural operation, a force of the universe.

Ilya, 2003

He stands on Shane's front stoop for almost ten minutes before finally knocking. When the door opens, it's Mrs. Hollander who answers, not his soulmate.

“Call the hospital,” he says, voice breaking down the middle. When she doesn’t move, just furrows her eyebrows and turns her head to call for Shane, he realizes that it came out in Russian. His head is spinning, his ears ringing, but his hands don’t shake. He knows that he didn’t get here in time. He spent too much time crying over her body, and now there’s no hope at all. Even if he’d sprinted over here the second he’d seen her, he’d have been too late.

He blinks, and he’s sitting in the Hollanders’ living room, white-knuckling a pillow. It’s a nice pillow, with some embroidered floral patterns and Roman numerals that probably mean something, but he won’t ask. Yuna’s on the phone. It might be with the hospital, or the police, or maybe his father, who’s in Moscow.

Shane, sitting beside him, is the only thing keeping Ilya from bolting out the front door and running somewhere far, far away. Shane is sniffing, which almost makes Ilya want to laugh. He’s got his head on Ilya’s shoulder and he’s gripping Ilya’s free hand. One of his tears dots Ilya’s striped t-shirt, and he mumbles a wet-sounding apology.

Ilya still feels numb.

He’ll learn, curled up in Shane’s twin bed the next morning, that Shane was accidentally siphoning his grief.

“That was something David and I did for each other during...while we were trying to conceive Shane,” Yuna tells them from the sink. “It’s only possible while your soulmate is experiencing extreme trauma.”

Shane gives his hand a squeeze under the table. Ilya tries to squeeze back, but his muscles don’t work right. Shane might still be taking on his pain. Either that, or he’s somehow become severed from himself. And since he can’t imagine giving Shane even a fraction of what he’d felt for the twenty minutes before he made a mad dash for the Hollander household, he definitely knows which option is preferable. He’ll lose himself in outer space if it means keeping Shane safe.

He spends the next few months with the Hollanders. Alexei and their father are in Russia for the summer, and they’re in no rush to return, apparently. He knows he’ll have to go back to them eventually, when they land in Canada again in the fall, but he’s in no rush to reconvene with his remaining family, either.

For the first week, he sleeps with Shane in his bedroom. The bed is too small for both of them, especially now that Ilya’s getting lankier, but they sleep pressed against each other more often than not, and nearly overheat when the summer heat reaches its peak.

A lot of the time, he doesn’t leave the house. Sometimes he goes with the Hollanders on family outings, but he doesn’t speak much. He feels the most alive, the most in his own body, when he’s sitting in Shane’s bedroom and they’re talking or playing a board game or Shane is showing him how to work the computer.

Terrifyingly, it’s in these moments that Ilya begins to feel the kind of thing described in bedtime stories about soulmates.

The other half of it, anyway, because he's been feeling the love—and the neediness, frankly—since he and Shane met. The desire, though, creeps up on him. It's scary. He still feels young. Older, since his mama is gone. But young still. And while liking boys isn't exactly news to him, it's more frightening with stakes: with *Shane*, who has been adamant since the sixth grade that they're a platonic soulpair.

It's sitting in a field on Canada Day, a few weeks after Ilya's thirteenth birthday, that he brings it up. "Are you sure we're friendly soulmates?" he asks quietly. His hand inches closer to Shane's on the grass.

Shane turns to face him, and they make eye contact. Shane doesn't really meet anybody's eyes but Ilya's.

"Sometimes I feel like maybe..." Ilya begins, emboldened by Shane's response. If Shane were completely opposed to the idea, he'd have refuted it upon mention. He plays with the other boy's hand absently, pulling it into his lap. "Maybe it's not just friends." He meets Shane's eyes again, stomach churning.

Shane's looking at him like he's the sun. Shane's fingers lace with Ilya's, the movement purposeful and tender. "I always thought my soulmate would be a girl," he says with a breathy laugh. "But it's you. And I was sort of...denying that, I guess, by thinking that we were platonic. But..." He looks up at Ilya and a line appears between his eyebrows.

Ilya's heart drops into his stomach. He squeezes Shane's hand, trying to control the quiver in his chin.

"It's probably awful that I'm realizing this now, after your mom...While you're vulnerable. I'm sorry."

"Realizing what, Shane?"

"That I...that we're *not* platonic. That I...want you. Need you. Sort of. Whatever. I don't know."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I feel dumb." Shane looks away, drawing his knees to his chest and resting his chin on them. His gaze moves up to the twilight sky, where a few stars are beginning to make themselves known. It isn't quite dark enough for fireworks yet, but they came out early so they'd secure a premium spot.

Ilya, shaking his head, jumps off his ass and crouches in front of Shane, squeezing his shoulders. "No, no, no. Not dumb. Shane."

Shane struggles to meet Ilya's eyes. It usually isn't a problem, not between them. "Sorry," he mumbles.

Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's shoulders, nosing against the other boy's neck. It's half to comfort him, and half to hide his own smile, which tugs wide at the corners of his mouth.

Shane agrees! Shane agrees, they're not platonic. Shane feels the same way Ilya does! He feels how big all of this is, feels the magnitude of everything between them. The kismet.

"I love you," Ilya says.

"I love you too," Shane replies, and it's far from the first time they've exchanged the words but the new connotations make Ilya's heart soar. He feels like he could run a thousand miles. He feels like he could fly.

Shane is grinning too and holding Ilya back and pulling him flat on top of him so they're both flat in the grass. They play wrestle for a few minutes before it turns into a hug and Ilya's head settles on Shane's chest.

Shane's curfew is at nine, and Ilya's is at *nine-o'clock-on-the-dot-or-I-take-your-door-off-its-hinges*—which isn't in the slightest what Mrs. Hollander said, but is the only way Ilya can interpret a curfew—which only gives them about an hour under the fireworks before they need to return home.

Home is such a weird word. It's changed a lot for Ilya. Moscow, his mother, Ottawa: Shane. Ilya thinks he probably finds it more in people than in places. Shane could drag him anywhere, and he'd follow in tow, happier than ever.

They're not going anywhere right now, though. They're stationary, sharing body heat in the grass, watching rapt as bursts of color begin to populate the night sky.

Shane, 2009

Shane's body is still clinging to some of its baby weight, which he hates, especially now that Ilya looks so much like a man, with his toned body and hair pretty much everywhere hair can grow. In comparison, Shane feels soft and immature, even though he's older—if by only a few weeks.

In the showers after practice last week, one of his teammates snapped a rat tail at him and Shane got angrier than he probably should have; slinging his frustrations at the boy until Shane's eyes welled up and he gathered his clothes in one arm and changed in the toilet stalls. From behind the stall door, he heard Ilya yelling at the boy.

It was stupid. Shane shouldn't have gotten so angry. The boy hadn't meant anything by it. But it's difficult not to hang on to potential jibes when the difference between Shane and everybody else is so stark. He hasn't felt so isolated since kindergarten, before Ilya moved to Ottawa.

Things are different, though, with him here. Now, Shane has someone to yell for him and someone to hold him afterwards. Whether it's his teammates poking fun at his weight, his race, his occasional inability to pick up on jokes, or his relationship with Ilya, Ilya's always there to set things right.

They stand together under the too-narrow stream of water, stomach-to-stomach. Shane's parents aren't home, and Ilya came in through the window even though the Hollanders have stressed a thousand times that the door is fine. Even though the Hollanders are gone, the bathroom door is locked.

Ilya playfully pinches Shane's ass, making unrelenting eye contact as Shane's cheeks flush pink.

It's not like they've never done anything like this before, but they've silently agreed that tonight they'll go the extra, final step, and Ilya will put his cock somewhere other than Shane's mouth. They're both trying to inject levity into the evening but it's difficult when they're both so nervous. It isn't the act itself, really, but everything surrounding it. Many sources describe penetrative sex as the final trial for romantic soulmates, which Shane thinks is kind of silly and overly-traditional—definitely rooted in the various religious beliefs that define old stories about soulmates—but still adds pressure, even if subconsciously.

Shane isn't quite sure what his next move is, so he squirts some shampoo onto his palm and begins working up a lather in Ilya's hair.

Ilya relaxes, his shoulders dropping, and Shane could swear he sees Ilya's ears twitch backwards like a content dog's.

"I don't really know how to do this," Shane says after they're both clean. It's far too simple a sentence for the feeling he hopes it encapsulates. He thinks he could probably word vomit forever, wax poetic ad infinitum until Ilya understood. *I've shown you so much of me. You know me better than anyone. I'm not sure how to clean my asshole for you. What if it hurts. Please don't laugh at me. I don't know how to anticipate my behavior the way I usually can. I'm out of control. I'm drowning. I'm so excited. Please don't laugh.*

Not that Ilya would, of course.

"Probably pretty straightforward," Ilya replies, giving Shane's shoulder a squeeze and opening his eyes, a smirk crossing his lips, and then gentling. "And I'm here, yes?"

Shane nods, posture sagging a bit. "Yeah. This is just, like, awkward, I guess."

"I could do it too," Ilya offers.

Shane looks up, eyebrows furrowing. Surely he's misunderstood. "What? Why...?" "I could do it with you. Even if my, uh, back door won't be getting any use. Is probably good to clean it thoroughly every once and a while?" The sentence ends with an upwards lilt, and Shane isn't sure whether or not it's intentional. Ilya's been practicing speaking in English more. Even though they understand each other, that doesn't mean the rest of Canada will. He misplaces the tone, sometimes, or forgets to include it entirely. Usually, Shane can tell what he means, but in this context, everything is so murky.

"Ilya, that's gross," Shane says, and it comes out in a single breath. He's staring at Ilya. His face is all wet from the shower, and it's Pavlov-ing him into tearing up. Once he starts, he can never stop.

“Not as gross as it would be if my asshole went unchecked, Shanyushka,” Ilya replies with a smile. He’s got a chip in his front tooth from falling and smashing his face into the bottom of the slide in grade three. He’d been trying to catch Shane.

“Ilya!” he scolds, but the smile is infectious, and it creeps over his mouth too.

Ilya holds up his hands placatingly, and Shane wants them on his body again. The space between them doesn’t feel right. “Sorry, sorry. But the offer stands.”

It’s stupid, how much ‘the offer’ suddenly means to Shane. Ilya was already going to stand in the shower beside him while he figured out how to clean himself, but now he’ll do it alongside Shane. Needlessly. Just for Shane. “I…Fine, if you really want to,” he concedes.

Ilya presses a kiss to the underside of his jaw and touches his shoulders again, rubbing up and down. “Okay. Good. You see reason, finally.”

Shane smiles against Ilya’s skin, and they begin. Armed with one YouTube how-to he’d clicked off of after a few minutes and a cursory understanding of his own anatomy, Shane figured the first step would be squatting.

Ilya mimics him.

Logically, Shane knows that they’re *soulmates*. That the universe has decided they’re meant for each other in one way or another. But it’s still kind of mind-blowing, now that they’ve evolved beyond small children, to see that Ilya wants him, especially when they’ve grown up so differently. While Ilya is big and solid and full of frenetic energy, thoughtful and poetic and *smart*, Shane still feels so very young: soft-bodied and bad at clueing in, “cute,” to some of his peers, which stings more than anything else, probably, and utterly lacking.

But Ilya wants him. And he’s here. They’re here, together.

It’s awkward more than it’s messy, and then it’s over. In a way, now that this barrier has been crossed, Shane’s anxiety is amplified tenfold. There’s nothing stopping them from actually, well. Having sex. His teammates talk about it like it doesn’t matter, but that might be because none of them have met their soulmates. Parents, if they can help it, try to keep pairs apart until after secondary school graduation. Prevents distraction, or pregnancy, or whatever.

The shower shuts off and Shane is being wrapped in a towel, gently pushed into the bedroom.

“You’re here?” Ilya asks. “You’re ready?”

Shane nods. His heart thunders in his chest. Ilya can probably hear it. It’s probably deafening. Seismic. Where does Shane Hollander fall on the Richter scale? “Yeah. Please.”

He’s on his back in his twin bed, hair dampening his pillowcase. Ilya is above him, face like the Sun, and his weight covers Shane easily. Shane grasps Ilya’s waist. God. His body is perfect. He’s impossible. He’s fucking impossible.

They kiss for a long time before Ilya shifts his hips down. The friction makes Shane realize he's hard. How long has he been sporting that? Since the shower?

"Can I touch you?" Ilya's voice floats through Shane's mind. It's low and more serious than Shane has heard it in a while.

Their eyes meet, and Shane nods. He wants more kisses, but doesn't know how to ask.

Ilya must pick up on this, though, because his lips seem to be on a mission to touch every inch of Shane's face as one of his hands drifts downwards between their bodies. When his fingers brush over Shane's asshole, Shane physically starts, tensing up and flicking his eyes to Ilya's.

"Do you trust me?" Ilya asks, in Russian this time. Shane can understand, of course. In a way, he can understand Ilya's Russian better than he can understand anybody else in any other language. His understanding is implicit because it's singular to him, translated by some exterior force *for* Shane. *For* him to understand. Sometimes he wishes he had this same connection to other people, even if they speak English. He finds himself needing an English-to-Shane dictionary.

Shane nods. He does. Unquestioningly. "Yeah. I'm just...nervous," he admits. Nervousness doesn't quite do what he's feeling justice, however. He feels his heart pumping, feels the squeeze of his muscles. Feels the space between him and Ilya.

"Me too," Ilya says.

Shane swallows. Exhales shakily. He has to remind himself that he's an animal.

Once Ilya is inside of him, though, the world falls away.

Prior to agreeing to finally do it, Shane had understood on some level that prostate orgasms were different from regular ones, but that didn't in the slightest describe the sheer ecstasy that washes over his whole body. He might be crying, but he's not sure. Ilya's still fucking into him slowly, kissing all over his face and neck.

Shane almost protests when Ilya pulls out. Maybe one day he'll convince Ilya to just stay with him forever. They could do that, couldn't they? Lay in bed cuddled on top of one another until the heat death of the universe? Shane would be happy.

Ilya would be, too, he learns after whispering the question to him once they've both showered again and buried themselves under Shane's duvet.

Ilya, 2016

"Hell-fuckin'-yeah, Cap!" Marleau shouts, clapping Ilya on the back as they settle back onto the bench, watching as line 2 takes their place on the ice. "I get so fuckin' hard watching you destroy your boyfriend on the ice."

“Fiancé,” Ilya corrects smugly after spitting out his mouthguard . He shoots Marleau a grin. “Do not let him hear you talking like that, Marley, my Shane doesn’t share.”

Marleu holds his hands up in acquiescence. “Okay, Roz, I hear you. Hollander’ll stuff a puck down my throat if I so much as look at you. I’m still the best man, though, right?” he asks, bumping Ilya’s shoulder with his own.

“Mm, Sveta will be my best man, but you can be my...favorite groomsman,” Ilya says after a microsecond of faux deliberation, then breaks into an even wider smile.

By the time Ilya’s caught his breath and taken a slug of water, they’re switching again, and he’s back on the ice.

The game ends 3-2. Voyageurs win. Okay, so, maybe Ilya didn’t do as much ‘destroying’ as Marleau gave him credit for.

Shane beams at Ilya as he skates over, helmet off and hair sticking to his forehead. “You promised,” he says, standing a foot or so away from Ilya, keeping a safe, agreed-upon distance. While the NHL had been fairly amenable to their relationship, both Shane and Ilya agreed it was better to maintain an image of rivalry, even if it was friendlier; more light-hearted than it might have been if they weren’t involved.

Ilya feels his heart leap. He did promise. Last week, standing in the dark kitchen of Shane’s apartment. “*You know, if you win the next one, I think maybe I’ll give you a special gift,*” he’d said. Given the recent advent of their engagement, which was public knowledge, but not accompanied by any public affection, they both figured it was time for some good old-fashioned PDA. “Yeah,” he says. “I did.”

Shane moves a little closer, boxing Ilya in against the boards. His skin is flush, his eyes bright. “I didn’t obliterate your ass out there for no reason, you know. I want my present. I earned it.”

Ilya swallows. It’s not like they’ll be poorly received. He’s not oblivious to what people think about him and Shane’s relationship. He’s seen the Tweets. Still. It’s a first. It’s vulnerable. It’s exhilarating.

He cups Shane’s cheek, grinning at him. “Mm, yes. Your reward.” Rarely does he feel so nervous—and even rarer is this anxiety brought on by intimacy with *Shane*, which has been perhaps their purest, simplest form of communication since they began using it. Now, though, his stomach flips. It settles when he presses his lips against Shane’s.

Shane’s hands move, one to Ilya’s shoulder, one to his hip. He reeks of sweat and melting deodorant, and Ilya can’t get enough. Once he feels himself getting fuzzy-headed, he breaks apart and sucks in air before kissing Shane again.

Shane is giggling against Ilya’s mouth, the crinkles under his eyes pulling up. “We’re on the jumbotron,” he says.

Ilya hums, hiding his face in Shane's shoulder. He doesn't really want to look. Shane's his. "We're very hot," he muses. "Makes sense."

It's quiet for a moment—or, as quiet as it can be in the center of a packed rink—and then Shane says, "thank you." He holds Ilya a little tighter.

Ilya's nose gets warm and a lump rises in his throat. "No," he replies. "No, don't say that. I'm...fuck, don't know. Happy."

"I'm happy too," Shane parrots. "This is a little like our first kiss. Kind of."

It is, Ilya thinks. It's their first one that occupies the intersection of their lives and what the public perceives as their lives. In a lot of ways, this is the first kiss that matters at all to anybody who isn't Shane or Ilya. It's sort of terrifying, inviting so many people into the deepest crevices of their hearts. Then again, it's nice, too. It feels a little fuller.

+1 Shane, 2022

While auditioning surrogates, they'd decided not to search for a woman with specific features, but they'd ended up meeting Trinity, an Asian-Canadian woman from Victoria who fit all of their criteria and meshed well with their personalities.

The decision of who would contribute the sample was complicated, for a number of reasons. Shane was predisposed to infertility, and also worried about passing on his neurodivergency and the struggles that came with it. Ilya, while having a better chance of conceiving, would also potentially pass on his family's history of depression and Alzheimer's disease. Ultimately, though, after numerous doctor's consultations, the decision was made for them: Shane simply wasn't fertile.

So, in the end, their son ended up looking remarkably like the both of them. Shane's features but with Ilya's coloring, straight, honey-blond hair and greenish hazel eyes with a straight, low nose and chubby cheeks. A little cherub. Baby Nikolai.

He's more of a toddler now, though. All two-and-half feet of the kid. "Toddler" only categorically, however, because he still hasn't done any toddling. None. He's sat up. He's stood on wobbly legs for almost a minute. And, because Shane is certain the kid can't get any better at scurrying around on all fours, he's been watching Niko round-the-clock for first steps.

Shane is standing in the kitchen, squinting at Niko in the living room while he absentmindedly pulses the NutriBullet in front of him. "Do you think he'll do it soon?" he asks without taking his eyes off the little boy, who's sucking on his fist and staring at the Discovery channel.

"Is what Dr. Levinson said," Ilya replies from the dining table over his mountain of bacon. "Kolya is very smart, he'll be Usain Bolt in no time."

“He’s just been hitting his milestones so early and now he’s a little late,” Shane says. The smoothie is finally to his liking, so he pours it in a glass and sits down heavily at the dining table beside his husband.

“Then maybe it’s burnout from being so exceptional,” Ilya quips, nudging Shane with his shoulder.

“I’m serious, Ilya.”

“I just don’t think you have any reason to worry, baby.”

A fear being unfounded has never stopped Shane before. “But—”

“Levinson would tell us if she thought we had any reason to worry about him. Deep breaths, hm? Eat with me. Or, uh, drink,” Ilya says, gesturing to Shane’s smoothie and grinning.

Shane smiles back, taking a sip and then pressing a kiss to Ilya’s stubbly jaw. “Shut up. Smoothies are good for you.”

“Gub for you,” Niko babbles in the living room. He’s an excellent mimic, which surprised everyone the first time it happened, since the first time it happened was during a family dinner party and Niko hadn’t said squat prior to that.

“Yes, baby, good job,” Shane says, exaggerating his expression so the baby can see from where he is fifteen feet away.

Ilya makes the same face at Niko, then continues undeterred from his smoothie tirade. “They must be to thank for your *inimitable* beauty. Thank you, smoothies, you keep my husband so sexy and we make everyone at daycare pickup so jealous—”

Shane, however, is still distracted. In the living room, Niko rolls onto his belly and pushes himself to his hands and knees. Shane squints at him. The little boy stands, hands out for balance.

Then he takes a step.

Shane feels his heart lurch. He smacks Ilya on the bicep, not looking away from their son. “Ilya—”

“And Mrs. Ruiz wants my husband *sooo* bad but he is *mine* and also super gay—” Ilya continues. His eyes are closed, hands raised as if perusing a topographical map of Shane’s ass.

Niko takes another step, tiny foot colliding with the hardwood floor, nearly falling out from under him when he skids a half-inch forward, socks slipping slightly. Shane feels his stomach twist, the urge to grab the little boy and guide him almost overwhelming. But Niko won’t ever learn if Shane does that. So he stays put.

Niko recovers, hawk-focused on the task at hand.

“*Ilya*—” Shane hisses again.

“We are the best hockey players and also the best at everything else, especially sex—”

“*Ilya*! Look!” Shane grabs Ilya’s gesticulating hands and physically turns him so Niko is in his line of sight.

Ilya opens his eyes, brain buffering for a moment before he blinks and jolts forward. “Holy shit—!”

“Language!”

“Holy *crap*, Shane, he will fall—”

“He won’t, don’t interrupt him!”

“Daddy,” Niko says from five feet away, giving his fathers a grin, displaying his new front teeth.

“Yeah, baby. Yeah, you’re doing good. C’mon, sweetheart. I’ll catch you,” Shane says, getting on the floor and kneeling, extending his arms to the baby on the other side of the dining room.

“Shane,” Ilya implores, doing the same. It’s a plea, kind of. Shane can hear it in his voice. *Shane. Shane. Are you here with me, are you seeing this? Can you believe we’re here? So much has happened. Shane.*

‘I know, I know,’ Shane says quietly, giving Ilya’s thigh a squeeze.

Niko toddles more, swaying frighteningly for a moment before regaining his balance and trudging onwards. He goes down a foot and half from his target, landing hard on his little butt.

Shane and Ilya scoot to cradle him, pulling him into their arms and pressing a million kisses to his head, his cheeks, his tiny ears.

“Wow, my love! You did so well, mishka. Wow. Wow,” Ilya says. “I thought you were so amazing before, and—” His eyes well up.

“You heard me, huh, baby?” Shane says to the boy, beaming from ear-to-ear as he strokes his hair. “Didn’t wanna keep me waiting, did you?”

“He’s so competitive,” Ilya practically wails, scooping the boy up and holding him tightly, making Niko giggle. “He is just like his daddy.”

Shane pivots to stroking Ilya’s hair, instead, keeping one hand on Niko’s back.

End Notes

this doesn't even make sense

love ya, find me on tumblr @spiralboundd

note about the final vignette: i'm not personally of the belief that if a child looks like their parents they belong to or are any more loved by them. i just think it's cute as a coincidence. also i know the appearance isn't realistic . fuck punnett squares i do what i want

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