

underneath my skin is all you see

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underneath my skin is all you see

by [sapphicblight](#)

Summary

Shane stuck his hand out. “Shane Hollander.”

He waited for... well, he didn't know what. A flicker of recognition. Possibly surprise? Delight was perhaps a bit much to hope for, but maybe *some* kind of excitement about meeting one's soulmate, the same giddy feeling that was swirling in Shane's stomach just from standing face to face.

Ilya Rozanov gave him nothing. Just glanced between Shane's face and his hand like Shane had offended him somehow, before finally taking it—

—and promptly turning back around to light his cigarette.

In which Ilya Rozanov is the name on Shane's wrist, but Shane Hollander is not on Ilya's.

Notes

This was inspired by a [prompt list](#) my best friend (and incredible author) [Gin](#)! The February prompt I chose was **soulmate au**.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta reader [Jules](#) who always takes time to read my stuff even though they have like NO fuckin free time <3

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

Shane doesn't know when it happened, but some time over the last seven years, his greatest fear shifted.

Being outed, losing his job and reputation, his sponsorships, being shamed and rejected by his peers and the public, disappointing everyone who looked up to him, never getting to play hockey again — his greatest passion, the only thing that still makes his world go round even when he's so scared and overwhelmed that he feels like he's dying — it's still *there*. Still ever present. Still makes his chest go so tight he can't breathe, his heart beating so violently he thinks it might actually crack open his ribcage and rip its way out.

But it doesn't grab him by the throat. Doesn't scratch at his skin until he bleeds. Doesn't stab him where he's softest and *twist*, gutting him and letting all the most vulnerable, tender parts of him spill to the ground for anyone to see.

Not in the way Ilya does.

The guys on Shane's team joke about it sometimes, how protective Shane is of his soulmark. How he doesn't just wear a wristband, he both tapes *over* and *under* the band. then covers himself with long sleeves for good measure. Multiple layers of protection just in case something shifts, or gets wet and starts to peel.

When he risks it all to meet up with Ilya, he compensates for all the other layers he'll shed and stains his skin with permanent marker too.

He's not entirely alone in his need for privacy. Most people are fairly protective of the names on their left wrists. Their *soulmarks*. It's partially cultural, partially personal choice. And in certain circumstances it's for personal safety, too.

Hiding his mark used to be more motivated by *shyness* back when Shane was younger. He didn't like being teased, especially not about this. He didn't know how to talk to girls, or make friends with the other boys for that matter, and he found it difficult to imagine loving anyone more than he loved hockey. And now there was this girl on his wrist who was meant to be the love of his life, *if* he ever even got to meet her. Fate ran on ideals rather than inevitabilities after all, and Shane has never had a good relationship with uncertainty.

So when the mark appeared a few days after Shane had turned twelve, he'd put on one of his mom's old wristbands floating around in the back of her closet and hid his soulmate's name. Not even his parents were allowed to see, and when Shane could help it, he himself wouldn't be seeing it either.

Hockey already consumed Shane's every waking moment by then. Shane threw himself into it head first. There was no time to think about his soulmark, and even less desire to. He didn't pay special attention when learning girls' names, he didn't ask if any of his peers happened to know the name, didn't even bother trying to look her up online.

The name on his wrist was meaningless to him, and he barely spared it a thought.

Not until the final weeks leading up to the International Prospect Cup.

Shane was sitting between his parents on their couch, paying rapt attention and feeling a little nervous as the anchors on their TV screen discussed the most promising recruits coming into this year's draft — *Shane's* draft.

He tried not to feel embarrassed as his picture and stats were displayed, while his mother's carefully worded pitch of *Shane Hollander the hockey prodigy* was parroted back at them live on air.

Next, they showed off an American prospect who was giving some of the Canadian hopefuls a run for their money, though both the anchors and Shane's mother emphasized that he had nothing on Shane.

They went over some of the European potentials, two guys from Finland and one terrifyingly tall dude from the Netherlands.

And then came the Russian recruits.

"Now this guy," the first anchor said, "He might be the only real threat to Shane Hollander's number one spot, I think."

"That's right," responded the second anchor. "Russia's *Ilya Rozanov* is fast, he's creative, and he's... well, aggressive is probably the best word to describe him, wouldn't you say?"

A picture of the Russian skater was overlaid onto the screen, an action shot taken mid-game, showing off a sharp jaw and even sharper eyes that promised trouble.

He was beautiful, masculine, and dangerous.

"Rozanov's a beast on the ice, that's for sure—"

Shane's ears were ringing. His head was pounding. His mark, dutifully covered with a simple black band, was *burning*.

In the back of his head, smothered by the rush of blood in his ears and the rising fog of panic, he figured that, surely, there were other Ilya Rozanovs out there in this big wide world of theirs. But a much deeper part of him, one Shane always tried to bury but never quite managed to drown, knew exactly who his soulmate was.

Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya.

Ilya.

Shane always thought it was a girl's name. It ended in an 'A', and Shane felt such discomfort at the very idea of her that he pushed any thought of her away, staunchly pretending she didn't even exist.

Which, clearly, *she* didn't.

He did.

Shane's soulmate was a man. Shane's soulmate was a fucking *man*.

Shane was—

That made him—

That meant Shane had to be—

Shane's soulmate was a man and Shane's soulmate was a hockey player and Shane's soulmate was Russian and Shane's soulmate was gorgeous and Shane's soulmate was apparently his only significant rival for the most important fucking moment in Shane's life and Shane's soulmate was a fucking *man* because Shane was *gay* and Shane *couldn't fucking breathe*.

Thinking back on it, his mom's vitriolic hatred towards Ilya Rozanov might have stemmed from the fact that his veritable threat to Shane's first place spot had seemingly given Shane his worst panic attack to date.

If only she knew the constant, pressing baseline of fear Ilya Rozanov instills in him these days.

"Fuck, Rozanov."

The sheets are soaked through beneath Shane's back, and it should feel disgusting and uncomfortable, but it only makes him burn hotter, his skin overheated and sensitive as Ilya's hands and lips slide through the sheen of sweat on his chest.

Ilya fucks into him with an easy rhythm, neither slow nor punishing, but with this twist to his hips that makes Shane see fucking stars. He relishes in the drag of Ilya's hard cock against his rim, in the brief moments of loss as Ilya pulls back, followed by something that feels a little like *homecoming* every time he bottoms out.

Shane feels empty without Ilya, in every sense of the word. It makes him all kinds of desperate, needing Ilya as close as he can get him for as long as he's allowed.

Which is never very long at all.

"Hmm, Hollander."

Ilya's palms trail up Shane's arms where he'd thrown them above his head, squeezing biceps that strain from bracing against the headboard; Ilya isn't fucking him fast, but he's still fucking him *hard*.

Shane doesn't think anything of it as those hands continue along their path — until, suddenly, they clamp around Shane's wrists.

He sucks in a hissing breath, high and reedy, the kind that hurts going down his throat. All that sweet, sticky warmth leaves him in an instant, freezing him from the inside out.

Ilya freezes too.

“Hollander? What’s wrong?”

“Get off me.”

Ilya’s visibly confused, but the words are barely out of Shane’s mouth before Ilya’s scrambling off him.

That yawning emptiness returns, settling back into Shane’s bones.

It’s instinctive, the way he cradles his wrists to his chest like that’ll protect them, protect *him*. His left wrist is kept pinned beneath his right, fingers already reaching to check the band.

It’s still in place. As is the tape over top. And the tape underneath. And the marker ink he’d applied just before sneaking out of his and Hayden’s shared hotel room.

It’s fine. He’s fine. Ilya didn’t see.

Ilya, who’s kneeling on the bed beside Shane, unashamed of his nudity as he hovers, visibly concerned.

Ilya Rozanov is an asshole in a lot of ways, but not to the degree the media makes him seem. The degree Shane’s teammates think gives them the right to utter threats and call him slurs post match.

When it comes to this, to sex and to Shane freaking out and especially to Shane freaking out *during sex*, he’s actually very attentive, even sweet when he thinks that’s what Shane needs. It only serves to make Shane ache for him that much harder.

“Hollander?” he tries again, voice tight. Shane’s probably scaring him.

“Sorry,” he says as a reflex. He takes a deep breath. Ilya waits, lets Shane take his time to gather his thoughts, his words, even though Ilya looks this close to joining Shane in his state of sheer panic. “I just... please don’t touch my wrist.”

Ilya’s jaw works, his eyes snapping down. Shane swears he feels his stare burn through all those layers, like he can see right through them. Like he knows exactly why Shane can’t help always coming back for more.

Shane’s own eyes glance down at Ilya’s uncovered wrist. He doesn’t mean to look; hates the way the vivid scar tissue fills Shane’s stomach with lead.

Some people get lucky and meet their soulmates. Some seek love outside of fate. Some get unlucky and never cross paths.

Others suffer loss, lose their chance at a life together, and are left with visible scars as a cruel reminder of what should have been. Of a soul that can never meet its match. A half that will never be whole.

In his darkest, most selfish moments, Shane wonders what's really worse. A soulmate that's dead and gone before you've even learned their name, or a soulmate whose heart was never yours to begin with.

It's rare for one to be perfect for another, but the other not to be perfect in return. As someone whose entire life rests on perceived perfection, Shane has been handling it somewhat poorly.

Letting Ilya fuck him like he's just another easy slut Ilya scores on his travels is probably one of Shane's more damaging coping mechanisms.

"Okay. I won't," Ilya acquiesces.

Carefully, like Shane's a spooked animal who might bolt at the first sudden move, he slides up the bed to sit next to Shane, his back against the headboard and his hip close enough to Shane's shoulder for the warmth of his body to seep into the scant space between them.

In his peripheral, he sees Ilya quietly remove the condom, his erection having flagged considerably thanks to Shane's freak out. Shane's in a similar state.

Shane's also actively resisting the urge to cover himself up with their soiled sheets, not wanting Ilya to feel even worse. As if Ilya's in any way to blame for Shane's stupid fears and hurt feelings.

"Sorry," Shane says again. Ilya tries to swallow back a sigh, but Shane still hears it.

"I should be the one saying sorry, Hollander."

Shane traces the edges of the top layer of tape with his thumb, presses down on the edges as if he can make it attach itself permanently if he just pushes hard enough. Hide that God forsaken name from prying eyes, from his *own* eyes, for the rest of time.

The one time he tried having it tattooed over, NDA's that he'd snuck from his mom's filing cabinet in hand, he couldn't even make himself pass the the parlor's threshold. Something inside of him screamed and screeched, protested the thought of erasing Ilya even while Shane wished Ilya had never stained his soul to begin with, the very idea making him physically ill.

If Shane's wrist had been scarred, he would have hidden that too. But Ilya always maintains leaving his wrist uncovered makes his life easier. Makes people question him less for flirting, sleeping around and staying single; no one questions 'what would your soulmate think?' or 'what will happen to your lifestyle if you meet her?'. And no one reaches out with false promises of forever, fake names scribbled over marks caked over with make up.

"You are... embarrassed?" Ilya breaks through Shane's reverie. Shane glares up at him, cheeks burning with shame.

"I mean, yeah. Obviously."

“No— shit, am saying it wrong. I don’t mean *this*.” Ilya gestured vaguely at the picture they made; rumpled, cooling sheets and flaccid dicks, frustration and an air of awkwardness they haven’t suffered since their first time. “I mean your mark.”

“Oh.”

There are so many things Shane could say. *Wants* to say, but is far too afraid to.

“No,” Shane finally says. “Not of my mark, or of — my soulmate.”

He nearly slips and says *not of you*.

Ilya studies him for a moment. His attention always feels a little like a physical touch.

Shane continues, “I’m ashamed of myself.”

That earns him a deep frown and flaring nostrils. Ilya’s mouth twists like he’s tasting something sour. “Why?”

“Didn’t know you quit hockey to become a fucking detective,” Shane deflects. It doesn’t work, of course. Never does with Ilya. “Let’s just say we’re not meant to be.”

Shane didn’t think Ilya could grow even more tense, until he does, all his muscles locking and bulging, like he’s bracing for impact.

“You have met your soulmate?” His voice is pinched.

Fuck, this must be bringing up old hurts. Yet another stark reminder that Ilya will never meet his other half.

Shane turns onto his side, facing Ilya. Shifts around until his forehead is resting against the jut of Ilya’s hip, one arm sliding behind his sweaty back and the other sneaking over and around his abdomen. The damp skin of Shane’s forearm ends up snug against Ilya’s soft cock, but it doesn’t feel weird or inappropriate, or even remotely sexual. It’s almost nice. Intimate in an entirely different way.

“Trust me,” Shane says, hoping to lighten the mood a bit. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Ilya’s fingers card through Shane’s hair, slow and soft at first, then with more confidence. Shane fights the urge to stretch like a cat in the sun lest he start purring.

Ilya takes a deep, steadying breath. Shane pretends not to feel him tremble. “Maybe he just needs time.”

He supposes having just had Ilya’s dick up his ass made the gender of Shane’s soulmate pretty obvious, but he’s still a little annoyed by the callout.

“He’s had plenty,” Shane grumbles, desperately needing Ilya to stop fucking talking about it.

The hand in his hair stills for a moment, then resumes its rhythm.

“Do *I* know him?” The H in *him* is hit sharply, sounding more like a guttural G, Ilya’s accent almost as thick as when they first met.

“No,” Shane scoffs. The hand in his hair tightens. Shane gasps, a little too wantonly given the situation.

“You are lying.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes. You are.”

“What’s it to you?”

“He another player? On your team? On *mine*?”

“Just drop it already, Rozanov.” Shane pinches Ilya’s side for good measure, nails biting into his skin. The fucker doesn’t even twitch.

“Who is it.”

“Not fucking telling you.”

“How can he—”

Shane extracts himself, even though he immediately regrets the loss of contact, cool air rushing in. Ilya’s hand stays hovered mid-air, where Shane’s head had just been, somehow surprised Shane’s getting upset.

“I have an early flight,” Shane grits out, turning away from Ilya’s hurt expression.

“No you don’t.”

“Well then I’ll fucking switch to an earlier one! *God.*”

But Shane is weak. So, so fucking weak and stupid and an apparent glutton for punishment, because he doesn’t get up and dressed. He doesn’t even give into the need to wash the sweat off his skin, the lube from between his thighs and the sticky film of his own pre-come off his stomach. He just sits on the edge of the bed, his back to Ilya and his elbows digging into his thighs as he drops his head into his hands.

He can’t believe he’s even having this fucking conversation, and with *Ilya* of all fucking people. Except for how *of course* this would happen to him. He practically orchestrated it from the moment he shook Rozanov’s hand to the moment he let Ilya into his bed and his body, cementing it through years of clamoring for Ilya’s attention and begging for scraps of affection.

The bed dips behind him, and then there’s those warm, steady hands again. The ones Shane always feels so good beneath, feels so safe being held in.

Ilya slowly rubs Shane's back, goosebumps chasing his fingertips up and down Shane's spine. Comforting him, not knowing he's the unintentional cause of Shane's turmoil in the first place.

A kiss on Shane's shoulder has a lump rising in Shane's throat. He's going to fucking cry in front of his unreciprocated soulmate and *still* he can't regret tonight, or any of the stolen moments leading up to it. No matter how much it hurts.

"I'm sorry," Ilya whispers into Shane's skin. His lips brush Shane's shoulder, leaving goosebumps in their wake, before they're replaced by Ilya's forehead.

"Why do you want to know so bad, anyway?"

Ilya's eyelashes tickle Shane's skin as he blinks. "He makes you sad. I don't like you being sad, Hollander. You should be happy, horny, making pretty sex noises. Not *this*."

Despite his best intentions, Shane does laugh at that, his shoulders hitching beneath Ilya's cheek. "Yeah well. I guess I'm just too good at pining."

Ilya shuffles closer, his chest now lined up with Shane's back, strong legs bracketing Shane's hips. Ilya's face leans into view, his chin hooked over Shane's shoulder.

It's so fucking endearing, Shane feels like crying all over again.

"Pine? Like the tree?"

"No, like, uh. Wanting from afar. Or just wanting in secret. Unspoken desire. Yearning. Love you can't seem to get over even though you know it's hopeless."

Ilya is silent for a while, then: "He really doesn't want you?"

Shane had been terrified the day of the competition, freezing on his way inside as he spotted *him*, the bane of Shane's existence and source of the constant buzz under his skin.

Ilya Rozanov. The name on Shane's wrist. A name he'd wished wasn't there from the moment it appeared, but now that the real Ilya Rozanov was right in front of him, on his own and looking lonely and cold, something drew Shane closer despite the fear coursing through his veins or the gnawing sense of dread warning him away.

He'd breathed out his soulmate's name before he could stop himself, catching Ilya Rozanov's attention. He was even more intimidatingly beautiful in person, and Shane couldn't wait to see what he'd be like on the ice.

That intense stare prompted him into action, his heart thundering in his chest as he stuck out an unsteady hand.

"Shane Hollander."

He waited for... well, he didn't know what. A flicker of recognition. Possibly surprise? Delight was perhaps a bit much to hope for, but maybe *some* kind of excitement about

meeting one's soulmate, the same giddy feeling that was swirling in Shane's stomach just from standing face to face.

Ilya Rozanov gave him nothing. Just glanced between Shane's face and his hand like Shane had offended him somehow, before finally taking it—

—and promptly turning back around to light his cigarette.

Shane had stuck around a little longer, scrambling to get a conversation going, any kind of excuse to see if Ilya would finally say something, *anything* about the names they shared on their wrists, wanting for the first time in his life to shed his wristband with the same gravity as jumping off a goddamn cliff. But Ilya didn't show any indication that he recognized Shane's name, nevermind had it inscribed in his skin.

And then they shook again hands after the match Shane lost to him, and Shane saw the scarred skin of Ilya's wrist where he'd shed his gloves and pushed up his sleeves.

Shane's soulmate was Ilya Rozanov, but Ilya's soulmate wasn't Shane.

"Yeah," Shane finally says, leaning back against Ilya, taking comfort in his firm presence even as tears well in his eyes.

It's not entirely the truth. Ilya obviously *wants* Shane. Just not in the way that actually matters. The way Shane needs Ilya just to breathe.

"I'm sure. I'm not the name on his wrist."

Ilya's legs tighten and his arms wrap around Shane, pulling him as close as humanly possible. Shane really, really likes it here in Ilya's arms. Wishes it could last forever. "*Fuck.*"

"Could be worse, right?"

Maybe it makes him a hypocrite, so soon after having a complete meltdown over his own wrist being touched, but Shane finds himself reaching for Ilya's.

To his utter surprise, Ilya lets him.

Shane's felt the texture of it against his skin before. Ilya loves touching Shane, especially his chest, the scar tissue often tucked up against the underside of Shane's peck as Ilya gropes him. And he's seen it too many times to count — but he's never really *looked* at it, always feeling like he shouldn't, like it'd be akin to staring at a prosthetic limb. Turning another's struggle into a spectacle.

He's definitely never seen it up close like this, taken his time, *studied* it. Traced it with his fingertips, exploring the rough bumps and surprisingly soft patch down the center of it. Following the mottled pattern where discolored white intersperses with angry shades of pink and red.

Shane doesn't know if he's ever seen scarring quite like it before. It's not like the cut of a blade or the textured aftermath of a bad scrape. It's more like the letters once adorning his

wrist peeled themselves right off his skin, tearing through the epidermis on their way out.

“Since when?”

The moment the words leave Shane’s mouth, he regrets them. As many boundaries as they’ve crossed tonight, as they cross every time they shed their clothes and attempt to consume each other whole, this feels like a step too far.

But Ilya doesn’t pull his wrist away. “Since always.”

Shane twists in Ilya’s hold. “You never got to see her name?”

Ilya shakes his head. Shane can’t read the look on his face to save his life. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say Ilya’s numb to the whole thing. But he *does* know better. This is what Ilya does when things get heavy. When they get real. He shuts down and dons a mask of indifference.

Except for how he’s still talking, indulging Shane in a way Shane barely tolerated when the tables were turned. It makes Shane feel a little insane, actually, to have Ilya opening up to him like that. Trusting Shane with the softest parts of him.

“Not a her,” Ilya says, sounding... not sad, exactly. Bitter, maybe. Maybe a little angry. “But no. My—”

Ilya chokes on his words. The mask cracks.

Shane’s completely turned around and scrambling into Ilya’s lap before he’s fully aware he’s even doing it, doesn’t care about how they’re both still naked. Not when the source of vulnerability lays elsewhere entirely.

“Hey, hey,” he soothes. Cups Ilya’s face in the hand not still holding his scarred wrist, keeping Ilya from hiding his expression.

His mouth is twisted as if in pain, fighting to contain a sob threatening to break free, even as the tears breach containment. Shane’s thumb wipes them away, only for more to follow suit.

“I’m sorry,” Shane breathes. He pulls Ilya’s face into his neck, but doesn’t expect how easily Ilya lets himself be led, almost collapsing into Shane. “You don’t have to say anything else, okay? We’ll drop it. It’s okay. I’m sorry.”

Ilya shakes his head against Shane’s skin, but doesn’t say anything more for a while. Just holds Shane and lets himself be held, rocking minutely to the beat of Ilya’s heart pounding against Shane’s chest.

“No,” Ilya finally says. “You told me about yours. I want to tell you.”

When Ilya lifts his head, Shane can’t resist kissing his reddened, tearstained cheek. Tastes the salt of his sorrow.

“I was twelve. Maybe three months after my birthday. I was in bed, woke up from the pain. It burned, like touching hot metal, pan straight from oven.”

Ilya’s accent wavers, grammar faltering. Not for the first time, Shane wishes he’d learned Russian, not even so he could understand Ilya, but just to make life so far from home a little easier.

“My mother was already next to me,” Ilya continues. He rarely talks about her with Shane. Shane suspects he talks about her outside of Shane even less. “She was holding my arm on bed, down on mattress, pinning it. Put wet towel on wrist, where it hurt. She was crying, I remember. Crying almost harder than me. I was bleeding a lot, and already had these...”

Ilya traces the outlines of his scar, and Shane thinks about the words Ilya used. Sees the almost rounded discoloration around the edges.

“Blisters,” Shane says, processing out loud. Ilya’s smile is wobbly, but it’s there, a clear and wordless *thank you*.

“Yes, blisters. There was this awful smell of cooking meat. She... she had put knife over the fire. She used it to burn me.”

Shane freezes. The hair on his arms, legs, back of his neck, all raise with unfiltered terror.

Ilya might not have remembered the word *blister* in a moment of heightened emotion, dropped a few articles here and there, but his English is still impeccable. He especially hasn’t messed up a *pronoun* in... well, not since before Shane met him, actually, since Shane’s never heard him make that kind of mistake.

“Your mother *burned* you?”

“Я убила его, чтобы твой отец не смог этого сделать,” Ilya recites, almost lifelessly, even as his expression twists with emotion.

Ya ubila yego, chtoby tvoy otets ne smog etogo sdelat.

He takes a deep breath, then looks up into Shane’s eyes. The anguish, the grief, the *horror* he sees in them sends shivers down Shane’s spine.

“I had to kill him before your father could.”

Shane sucks in a shocked breath, and it stings his lungs like cold wind during a frost. “You... *she*—”

“Yes.” Ilya’s lip quivers. He looks so young in this moment, and yet also like he’s suffered a thousand lifetimes. “She saw the name of a man, so she burned away my soulmate to save us from my father.”

I had to kill him before your father could.

He thinks he might be drowning on dry land. “Oh my God, Ilya.”

Ilya swallows thickly, pulling Shane's eyes to the crucifix between his collarbones. The one that had belonged to his mother.

Shane knows Russia is the biggest reason Ilya isn't out. There's hockey, there's the public, there's even *Shane* and his own need for secrecy holding Ilya back, but none are an actual veritable *threat* the way Russia is.

He hadn't even stopped to consider what it would mean to have another boy's name on one's wrist, growing up in a country or culture that doesn't just judge or reject it, but that actively *persecutes* it.

Shane thinks if Ilya's mother hadn't done what she did, Ilya might have resolved to doing so himself. Doing what Shane was too scared to do with ink and needle, because for Ilya it didn't just spell heartbreak, it spelled danger. And not just to himself.

It's awful. It's horrific. It throws Shane's selfish, petty fears into stark and damning contrast.

It also means that—

"Your soulmate is alive." *Could it be?* "Someone still has your name on their wrist."

Ilya shrugs, as if it doesn't matter. Except for how Shane knows Ilya, and knows it actually matters a lot.

He looks exhausted, the last ten minutes of conversation having taken ten years off his life. Off both their lives.

"I just have to hope he will tell me, someday," Ilya says. "If he's not too disappointed by me."

It's like someone's taken a spoon scooped out Shane's insides, scraped him hollow and hung him out to dry.

"Put your clothes on."

Ilya's head snaps up, his face painted with complete bewilderment. It's a welcome sign of life compared to what came before, so if nothing else, at least Shane will have accomplished this much with the absolute train wreck he's about to court. "What?"

Shane scrambles off Ilya's lap, nearly falling onto the questionable hotel carpet. His foot gets tangled in Ilya's sweats on his way to retrieve his own neatly folded stack of clothes on the desk, flinging it into Ilya's face once he's freed.

"I need to be dressed for this. I need *you* to be dressed for this. I can't—"

Shane can't be naked when he sheds his final layers. He just can't. And if — *when* — this ends poorly, Shane needs to be able to make his cowardly escape.

If Ilya doesn't fucking kill him first. Shane kept this from him for *years*. Nearly a fucking *decade*, Jesus fucking Christ. He just sat there and let Ilya stew in his pain without an answer,

might have let him think his soulmate didn't want him for the rest of his life.

Shane knows intimately the excruciating agony of it. He can't let Ilya suffer by his hand for another second, even if it means Shane finally loses what little he had of him.

"What is happening right now?"

Underwear and a single sock are enough to bolster Shane to say, "I'm gonna show you my mark."

Ilya glances at Shane's wrist. He's clearly still confused, but he does start shimmying into his sweats. Shane loves him so fucking much. "You are not having another panic attack?"

"Oh, no, I definitely am, I just — just get dressed, okay?"

Fraught conversation is momentarily replaced with the sound of shifting fabrics and arrhythmic breathing. Shane can also hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, the dull rush and woosh of his blood being forced through his veins like the stress-inducing antithesis to white noise, but he soldiers on. His meltdown can wait until *after* Ilya kicks him out of his hotel room and *life* for being a total piece of shit.

And then, they're done. Clothed, stood at a safe distance in the open floorspace between the bed, desk and bathroom door, waiting for Shane to make his move.

Ilya's clearly taking his cues from Shane, not moving to close the uncharacteristic distance or prompt Shane before he's ready, but Shane can still see a nervous energy in his posture. The way his shoulders square and his fingertips twitch and his eyes can't decide where on Shane to settle; Shane's face or his covered wrist.

Picking at the edge of the outer layer of tape feels akin to pulling the pin on a grenade.

Shane sucks in a deep, steadying breath. Holds the faint scent of Ilya and the strong scent of sex in his lungs, tries to memorize its intricacies in case it's the last time.

He rips off one layer, two layers, three, revealing the simple black sweatband that has been Shane's lifeline for over a decade.

The now useless bundle of tape is deposited on the desk. The band, warm and damp, follows suit.

Already, his wrist feels naked, even with another layer of tape left, this one applied directly to his skin.

He chances a look at Ilya, who looks like he's holding his breath. There's something else there, too. If Shane didn't know any better, he'd say Ilya looks *scared*.

Like he knows the outcome is going to affect him, he's just not sure how yet.

Does he suspect why Shane's doing all this? Does he hope, or does he *dread* seeing his name on Shane's skin?

He can almost *feel* the tension amping up as Shane finds an opening and starts peeling back the final barrier. One layer, two, and the skin of Shane's left wrist is revealed — with a hand drawn pitch black rectangle covering the name.

At the sight, Ilya huffs out a laugh, though he sounds a little like he's choking. "Never do things halfway, do you, Hollander?"

"Shut up," Shane replies, though there's no heat behind it. "I think I can—"

Despite the marker he used being touted as permanent, Shane's spent hours sweating beneath the unforgiving tape since its application, followed by significant physical exertion. Shane still licks his thumb on reflex, and as it rubs through the mess of ink and perspiration, Ilya takes a careful step closer. With each swipe of Shane's finger, ink spreading around and fading from the middle, Ilya takes another step.

Ilya's right there, curls brushing Shane's forehead where their heads are bent over Shane's wrist, when the name on his skin begins to take shape. Breathing in the open air for another to see for the very first time.

Shane drops his stained fingers, letting his soulmark speak for itself.

ya Rozan is clearly legible, completely uncovered, while the first and last few letters are muddled by thinned black ink, but definitely not invisible. The picture is clear enough to be damning. There is no room left for doubt or speculation.

Shane's wrist reads *Ilya Rozanov*, and the man in question is just... standing there. Staring at Shane's wrist.

He says nothing. He doesn't even twitch. Actually, Shane thinks he might not even be breathing. Maybe they really *are* perfect for each other, because Shane isn't either.

Shane's throat clicks as he swallows, desperately trying not to cry or puke or scream or fucking drop dead right where he stands.

"Please say something," Shane finally pleads.

Ilya doesn't. Instead, his left hand lifts, scar facing upwards, a harrowing contrast with Shane's smooth, ink-stained skin and healthy soulmark.

Ilya's palm finds the back of Shane's wrist and his fingers slowly, one by one, wrap around him.

As Ilya's grip tightens and contact is made with Shane's mark, Shane feels a jolt run up his arm, rushing through his veins and down into his bones, resonating in his heart and fizzing beneath his skin.

By the sharp intake of breath, Shane thinks Ilya might have felt it too.

They've touched each other so often, in so many places, in so many ways. But the soulmark on Ilya's wrist is no more, and Shane's has always been covered from scrutiny. This is the

first time a touch between them has reached this deep — the first time they've touched one another's *soul*.

Ilya looks up at Shane then, *finally*, his eyes big and watery and his thumb digging into Shane's wrist in a way that's bound to bruise.

The second mark he'll leave on Shane's soul.

"You're... mine?"

He sounds so small. So *hopeful*. So utterly devastating. Shane's heart cracks right down the middle.

"I've always been yours," he manages, even as his throat closes with the need to cry and scream. "I just didn't think you could be mine."

He's shaking. He thinks Ilya might be too.

"Fuck," Ilya breathes out. It sounds like he's releasing far more than just air. "*Fuck*, Shane."

He might as well have shot Shane in the chest, saying his name like that. "*Ilya*."

And then he's pulled into Ilya's body, mindless of their left arms getting crushed between them, Ilya's death grip on Shane's soulmark not letting up any time soon. And Ilya — Ilya is shaking, he's *sobbing*, and Shane is absolutely losing it.

"I *do* want you," Ilya gasps out. It sounds painful, like his lungs can barely manage the oxygen needed to breathe and cry, nevermind speak. He heaves out the words like he'll die if he doesn't say them. "Of course I want you, *любовь*, *fuck*."

Lyubov. Shane doesn't know what it means, but he knows it sounds right.

Ilya wants him. Ilya really *wants him*.

Wants him with Ilya's name on his wrist. With Shane's own burned off Ilya's skin but still carved into his soul.

"You don't hate me?" Shane manages between heaving. Oh, he's having that panic attack, now, the room not just blurry but spinning over Ilya's shoulder. But he's also being soothed at the same time, Ilya's hold tight and secure, the fingers around his wrist pressing so hard Shane feels it down in his bones.

"Never. Never, Shane. *My Shane*."

Ilya's always been so careful with his words and his emotions around Shane until tonight, but even describing the loss of his mark didn't have him breaking down like *this*.

That, in the end, is what tells Shane this is real. That he can really have this.

Abruptly, Ilya pulls back. He yanks Shane's wrist up between their faces. Bloodshot eyes rove over the mark like he's afraid it disappeared in the time he wasn't looking, shaky exhales fanning over the skin.

Slowly, oh so softly, Ilya presses a kiss on the mark. It genuinely feels like his lips touched Shane right down in his core.

"Thinking you belonged to someone else — it killed me, Shane," Ilya confesses.

"Oh," Shane breathes. Tears are still actively rolling down his face, and his throat feels pinched with those left to shed.

That sounds a lot like being soulmates doesn't actually change anything for Ilya; like he already wanted Shane, in more ways than just fucking when the stars align.

"You really...?"

"Yes." Ilya pulls his gaze from Shane's mark to look him in the eyes. Even before Ilya says it, his feelings are plain to read, now that Shane knows what he's looking for. "For years."

"We're idiots," Shane tries to joke, tries to force a laugh, but even with the uncontainable joy of the moment, there's also so much grief and sadness all releasing at once. For himself, and for Ilya too. "All these years, loving you, thinking you—"

Ilya kisses him, though it's less of a kiss and more an act of consumption, a valiant attempt to swallow Shane whole.

There's pain there, in the harsh slant to Ilya's lips, the knocking of teeth and bruising grip on Shane's hair. Years and years of it, building up inside each of them, tossed onto a pyre by the realization the other suffered just as keenly.

Harsh breaths puff against Shane's skin where Ilya's nose is crushed against his cheek as Ilya tries to suck Shane's soul out through his tongue. It's both the worst and best kiss they've ever shared. It means fucking *everything*.

Shane is so madly, deeply in love with this man. His fucking soulmate.

Russian words Shane can't even pretend to parse into romanized Cyrillic are murmured into his mouth, into the sensitive skin beneath his ear, into the rabbiting pulse in his neck.

The next kiss on his lips is slower, deep and sweet, undercut with the slight tremble in Ilya's jaw.

"I love you," Ilya pants into the corner of Shane's mouth, the perfect spot to catch the tears slipping from Shane's eyes as the words hook straight into his heart.

So long, he thought he was alone in this. Felt crushed under the weight of unrequited devotion. A soulmate who could never truly be *his* and the blinding fear that he'd lose what little he could get.

The knife twisted and his insides were bared, but Ilya didn't scoff, didn't step on them or leave Shane to pull himself back together. He gathered him up and loved him back, mess and all.

Here, safe in Ilya's arms where he's loved and whole, Shane wonders what he was so afraid of.

End Notes

My first attempt at a soulmate au! Not as pleased with it as I was with my last (and first) work for this pairing, but I spent 6k words on it, so I figured I might as well put it up (:

I'm not super active but you can find me on [tumblr](#) as well, and I hope to write a hollanov fic every single month this year, off that prompt list I linked in the beginning note!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!