spectrum

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spectrum

by Adrenochrome

Summary

A study on how Shane Hollander exhibits signs of autism.

or;

Five times Ilya didn't pick up on the signs and one time he did.

Notes

Holy fuck, lads, I can't believe my lil autistic Shane drabble got 1400+ kudos, that's actually insane. I am a simple woman. I must give the people what they want, have more autistic shenanigans.

pls do not pay close attention to the timeline. I live in a fantasy land over here. Not beta'd, I'm firming it

Chapter 1: The five times he missed the signs

November 2017

If Shane could murder inanimate objects with the power of his mind, then right now in this moment, he had killed the small, offensive bowl next to his lunch a million times over.

Because in front of his lunch, the carefully selected dish that he had reviewed on the menu and had been planning to order since he found out that Ilya was going to pick up food while on the way to Shane's Montreal apartment, was the enemy. Something he did not anticipate, a change in his methodically selected and carefully controlled routine that he was not prepared for.

Olives.

Who the *fuck* put olives inside a Caesar salad?

Croutons? Acceptable, most places added them or even had them on the side, and they added a nice level of crunch to an otherwise homogenous salad. Chicken? Also a welcome addition, but *olives?*

He was not prepared, and it made him feel uncomfortable.

Ilya was tucking into his food with gusto, clearly hungry after an early-morning gym session that stretched til noon; he had worked up an appetite. Shane, however, was so stuck on the fact that one of his safe foods had been invaded. Corrupted. *Sullied.* He gingerly poked around the offensive addition, hoping to find some leaves that had not been in direct contact with them.

Shane absolutely hated wasting food. This wasn't a choice, you know? But to be stuck between a rock and a hard place in this manner, where the options were to eat and feel sick or not eat and feel morally bankrupt for wasting perfectly good food in a world where people

were starving. But he couldn't help it; it's just the way his brain worked. There were certain things he couldn't stomach, and olives were one of them. The texture? Far too slimy. The flavour? Something about it he couldn't describe made his mouth water in a bad way. He just couldn't do it.

He felt uncomfortable, squirming slightly as if that would give him some relief, but it never came. The feeling inside him was heavy, and he had a hunch it was guilt.

Guilt that he couldn't eat it.

Guilt that he looked ungrateful.

Guilt that he couldn't be *normal* for Ilya.

He realized that when Ilya moved on to the second half of his sandwich, he should probably start eating. The issue with his salad had sent him on a slight downward spiral of self-hate, and he had been distracted for so long that there was no way Ilya hadn't noticed. When he glanced up, he could see the other man taking a rather impressive bite of his sandwich, nodding slightly in approval. The Italian Deli where he had been was a really good one, Shane knew that, and that's why he was okay to have food from there, so he knew Ilya was really enjoying his meal.

He just wished he could do the same.

His own sandwich, a pesto, mozzarella, sundried tomato and chicken on soft white bread, was also delicious. It was funny how he could tolerate the sundried tomatoes, especially when he knew how much he hated regular, raw tomatoes. But in his little autistic mind, sun-dried tomatoes were fine. So was mozzarella, actually. He really enjoyed the texture and the mild, creamy flavour. Pesto, he was neutral about; it didn't really do much for him, but he didn't mind the thin layer being added for extra aromatic flavour. As he took his second bite, Ilya was getting close to the crust.

Shane had noticed that Ilya had not touched his side salad either. To be honest, Ilya didn't really eat many things that were considered "healthy". He ate what he wanted, no calories

counted, no macro goals to hit; he just chose what he enjoyed or what sounded good in that moment. Shane longed to have that degree of free will, with the options to choose from. But the way his mind worked meant he needed the structure and the organization. He needed the routine and the safe options. Pushing himself out of his comfort zone required preparation and fair warning.

To signal that he had finished, Ilya scrunched up the wax paper from his sandwich and tidied away the stray crumbs. He eyed Shane's sandwich, clearly waiting for him to give up and let him have the leftovers, because that man was a bottomless pit with a matching appetite.

"It is good?" He asked, watching as Shane chewed. He liked to chew bread, especially soft bread.

"Mmhm," he hummed, briefly making eye contact.

Ilya groaned a little. "Fucking wish that we had a place like this near my apartment. I would go there every day. You are so lucky."

Shane was lucky, really. There were a lot of great places to eat in the area, with lots of mom-and-pop family-run businesses selling homemade foods made with family recipes. There were a couple he would eat at, but a lot of them he was still unsure about. "Yeah, they always have such soft bread, and the cheese is always fresh," he noted after swallowing.

"What about the salad?" Ilya gestured to his bowl, his tone curious.

Shane's brain short-circuited for a second, and he glanced off to the side, unable to bring his eyes level with Ilya's.

Did he notice? Did he think he was ungrateful? Was he going to be offended?

"Um, yeah. I didn't try it, I really don't like olives. I'm sorry," he hoped that his tone of voice was correct for the apology. He didn't want Ilya to think he didn't appreciate the food, plus a

lot of people disliked olives, right?

Right?

“Oh, they put olives on? You want mine instead? I think it is a kale version,” Ilya pulled the lid off to inspect. “Yeah, no olives, want to try?”

Shane blinked. He also had not anticipated this response.

Was Ilya offering a solution instead of judging?

“Shane?”

He knew his expression had gone blank, mask briefly slipping as he thought about his next steps. When he looked up at Ilya, his expression was relatively neutral. He wasn’t mad at Shane, and his eyebrows weren’t furrowed like they did when Ilya would be feeling worried or anxious. Shane wasn’t really able to tell what Ilya was feeling, but he had spent enough time with the Russian to know a few of his unconscious giveaways. From the pattern of his voice, the way he pronounced Shane’s name, he could conclude that it was positive.

Kale was safe for him.

“Yes, please. Thank you,” he said, carefully switching the paper bowls around.

Ilya gave him a small smile. “No problem, wasn’t going to eat it anyway. Is rabbit food,” he said, quickly reaching over to grab a stray piece of sun-dried tomato that was threatening to spill out of the edge of Shane’s sandwich. “These are so good, where can I buy them? I want to eat a whole jar.”

Shane could feel himself smile at the comment, enjoying how quickly Ilya moved onto the next topic. Shane was no longer worried that Ilya would perceive him as ungrateful. He just

acknowledged that Shane didn't like something, fixed the issue and moved on. He didn't make Shane feel like a problem or that he was picky, not even for a second.

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July 2018

It was summertime, and like every summer, Shane was spending time in his fortress of solitude, his cottage.

This time, Ilya was there for the whole duration.

Ever since his father's passing, Ilya had spent his summers in either the US or Canada. Despite the amount of time Ilya spent complaining or making jokes at the expense of North Americans ("is stupid country, why are you adding tax after? The number you see is what you should be paying, no?"), he was always there, with Shane.

They were currently experiencing unusually heavy rain, the first part of a summer storm passing over. The thick heat of the summer, coupled with the moisture in the air, made the humidity so high that just stepping outside was enough to make you break a sweat. So they were taking refuge inside, with the AC blowing and the TV playing. They had watched some random shows, flipping between channels, before settling on a romance movie, minus the first twenty-five minutes that they missed.

From what Shane could understand, the main character was a woman with specific requirements for a man, and she had found that man but somehow ended up leaving him.

He just couldn't understand why.

As the movie drew to a conclusion, Shane felt frustrated. There was no explanation as to why she did what she did, ending back up with her ex, why it was supposed to be romantic and profound that she had gone back to him. He knew he was missing a key component of the story here.

Shane was lying on Ilya's chest, a light blanket draped over the two of them. Ilya was using his arm as a headrest, lifting his shirt ever so slightly, revealing a sliver of skin that Shane wanted to touch so badly. Instead, he reached for his phone and opened the internet browser.

After furiously typing, he scanned the Wikipedia page for the movie, focusing on the plot subsection. Ilya shifted slightly to see what he was looking at. "You are reading the Wikipedia page?"

"Yeah, I don't know if I enjoyed that movie. I think we must have missed something important at the start, so I wanted to see what it was. But I can't see it…" Shane trailed off, scrolling up and down again to see if the information he wanted would reveal itself to him.

"Well, what didn't you like?" Ilya asked, tone playful.

Shane signed, giving up on his phone. "I just don't get why she broke up with the first guy. She said she wanted someone rich and that treated her well, right? He kind of checked both of those boxes."

Ilya hummed. "He was rich, yeah, she did say she wanted someone rich, but he wasn't right for her, you could tell."

No, Shane couldn't tell. Had they watched the same thing?

"How? She even said to him that he was everything she wanted."

Ilya chuckled at that. "On paper, sure, but real life? She wanted something else; that's why she went back to the ex."

Shane still wasn't getting it. "But she broke up with the ex because he didn't provide much, and he shouted at her. Why would she go back? She had already broken up with him for a

reason."

Ilya nodded a little, acknowledging Shane's point. "I think what happened is she *thought* she wanted rich man who will give her good life, but when she finally got it, she realized that there was something that was missing."

Hmm. Okay. That made some sense. "I just think that going back to the ex was not the right choice. He still acted the same. It wasn't very logical. "Shane said, almost to conclude his point.

Half shrugging, Ilya hummed. "People do very weird things for love, don't they? There is no logic."

Shane had heard that before. *Oh, the things people do when they are in love.* But still, Shane couldn't really understand. Perhaps this was one of those things that he never would understand, since he liked to draw his own logical conclusions. Clearly, the ex had hurt her before; how would getting her predetermined goal of dating a rich man make her want him back? What was so good about him?

Shane didn't want to protest anymore; he accepted it was just one of those things. Ilya decided that this was the moment to start playing with Shane's hair; the sensation of his fingers gently tugging on some Individual hairs was enough to give him pleasant tingles, and he unconsciously stimmed, toes wiggling as he audibly moaned. "Mmm. Yeah, you're right," he said gently, mind occupied with the sensation of Ilya's fingers in his hair, conversation already forgotten.

Another movie started playing, but this time Shane did not pay attention to the plot. He just focused on the sensation of waves of light, skin-deep pleasure that he was getting from Ilya's touch.

"Wow, you are like a cat. Practically purring when I pet you." Ilya commented, a little laugh tacked onto the end of his statement.

Shane didn’t really reply, but the noise he let out was akin to a purr, he supposed. The sensation was so good that he couldn’t help but stim with his free hand, a quick shake, almost like he was doing jazz hands with the one hand out from under the blanket. He stopped when he could, realizing it was a very visible stim, so he chose instead to dig his fingers into the gaps in the knitted fabric.

Ilya may have seen, but he didn’t say anything; he just continued with his touching until Shane ended up drifting off into a comfortable sleep.

—

March 2015

Even though Shane was an absolute pro at masking, there was one thing that he still hadn’t been able to conquer.

Bright. Lights.

It was everyone’s weakness, it seemed, or at least everyone in the community (sometimes Shane would turn to the internet or Reddit threads for support or just to vent so he wouldn’t feel so alone). There was just something about bright light that made everything seem that much more *heightened.* It was like he became super sensitive to absolutely everything. Normal touches, passing comments, things that generally made him feel a little bit uncomfortable, suddenly became absolutely unbearable, almost painful.

When he was in the comfort of his own home, it was never an issue. He had meticulously designed his house to be his safe space, and that included almost no overhead lighting, but lots of soft, warm ambient light from lamps and string lights strategically placed around the rooms to maximize coverage. Hotels were fine too, because almost none of them had leading lights, just dimly lit lamps and spotlights. His parents' house was also okay, since they had experienced firsthand how Shane felt in the bright lights and had accommodated him accordingly.

But, unfortunately, public events were not accommodating. They were bold and bright, full of loud noise and forced social interaction. It was an autistic nightmare.

So when his mom told him she had confirmed his attendance at a charity event organized by the provincial health authority of Ontario for mental health awareness, he wanted to scream into a pillow and cry his eyes out.

When he went pro, he understood, to a degree, that he would be confronted with a lot of things that made him uncomfortable. Interviews, spectators, and intense scrutiny came hand in hand with stardom. He was prepared to sacrifice his comfort for his dream of playing. But this was not something he had adequately prepared for, and despite telling his mother that he didn't want to do these kinds of things anymore, she did not mince her words when she told him: This is part of the job, and you can't pick and choose.

He wanted to pick and choose. He certainly wouldn't choose to be spending his Thursday evening wearing a suit made of textures that made him nauseous, drinking drinks he didn't like, and forcing conversation with people he didn't know.

Fortunately, it was all for a good cause. The league had been trying to make steps to advocate for men's mental health in the last few years, after a few retired players made it known publicly that they struggled during their time. Shane wasn't sure whether they were just doing damage control or if it was a sign of the times changing, but he was here regardless. The talks by experts had been interesting; they mentioned many figures and statistics, which helped Shane understand the true scale of the issue.

Which was why it was so ironic that his mental health was tanking because *someone* in the room was taking hundreds of photos with flash.

Flash was awful. Every time he ended up looking startled and feeling stupid, he was inching toward a meltdown that he desperately wanted to avoid. The photographer was mingling amongst the attendees, some famous faces and lots of healthcare professionals. Shane had successfully avoided being confronted by tactfully moving from one group to another, under the guise of rotating the crowd. He was desperately trying to keep himself grounded, one hand firmly in his pocket, with his fingers connecting. *Thumb to index finger, thumb to middle finger, thumb to ring finger, thumb to pinkie, then back again…*

“Shane! Photo with the MHL boys?”

Ah, fuck.

The photographer, curse him and his inane ability to find everyone in the crowd, had gathered all the attending MHL players for a group photo, probably so the MHL could post it on social media. He knew he had to do this one; there was no avoiding it this time.

“Don’t forget to smile, Hollander,” A voice purred just behind him, and he knew instantly who it belonged to thanks to the silky Russian accent.

Shane felt himself freeze up as so many things were happening at once, people shuffling around him to organize the best they could, the photographer guiding them into good positions for the shot, and Ilya was *so close* to him he could feel his hand grazing his back. It was not sexual, simply friendly, and what someone would do in a group photo, but the simple touch lit Shane’s skin on fire. Coupled with the digital camera's grating flash, Shane was *beyond* overstimulated.

When the photographer gave a thumbs up and scurried off to the next group, Shane swallowed heavily. The players dispersed slightly, forming smaller groups, but Ilya was still ever so close to him, and Shane could almost feel the ghost of Ilya’s touch on his back, like he had left a permanent mark branded into his suit jacket. His skin felt so uncomfortable, his heart pounding in his chest as his mind struggled to form a coherent thought.

“Excuse me, I just have to go to the washroom.” He said quietly, to no one in particular. His mom had told him that walking off without saying anything was rude, so he always made sure to announce his departure.

In the sanctity of the men’s washroom two floors down, Shane let out a pained sound. He felt so *wrong, wrong, wrong*. Why did they have to get so close to him like that? Why did the photographer have to take a million shots? Why was the group next to them talking so loudly that you could barely hear yourself think?

Why did Ilya touch him like *that?*

It was all just too much.

Shane hummed to himself, a monotone note, nice and even. The sensation of his throat vibrating and the noise echoing in his head was comforting. He touched his fingers together just like before; *thumb to index, thumb to middle, thumb to ring, thumb to pinkie…*

When he got overstimulated like this, it was hard to pretend to be normal. He needed repetitive movement, he needed sound he could control, and he needed to be alone.

So of course, Ilya walked in when Shane's eyes had closed, and he was imagining himself far away from this uncomfortable place.

"Everything alright?"

Shane stopped humming immediately, whirling around to face the man who interrupted his regulatory stimming. He cleared his throat awkwardly, "Uh, yeah, thanks." There was absolutely no way he could maintain eye contact right now, so he settled on pretending to rub his neck and staring at the floor.

Ilya didn't seem convinced. "You don't seem like a party person; these things must be like torture to you."

God, more than Ilya would ever know. Shane felt like he was in a real-life autistic version of *Saw*.

"It's okay, just needed to take a breather," Shane tried a friendly smile, but he was pretty sure it came off as awkward. Damnit.

Ilya decided to take a couple of steps further, closing the distance between them. Shane felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle as he tried to maintain his composure. Shane

couldn't help but lift his gaze to meet Ilya's, maintaining some eye contact. *One… two… three… four?* He counted the number of Ilya's gorgeous curls that had fallen from his slicked-back hairstyle. Anything to distract him from the intense look that Ilya was giving him, like he was getting ready to swallow him whole.

Ilya broke the contact, and a slight smirk spread across his lips. Shane liked the way it curved up at a thirty-degree angle; it made Ilya's face even more appealing to him. "Well, take care, who knows, maybe I will text you later."

Letting out a shaky breath, Shane tried to mirror the smirk. "Maybe I will text you back."

The response must have delighted Ilya, as it looked as if a light had switched on behind his gorgeous blue eyes. "Later, Hollander."

With that, Ilya exited the washroom, the door softly closing behind him.

"Fuck."

—

August 2017

Shane was in absolute sensory bliss, totally fucked out, being pressed into shapes he couldn't believe he could physically do as Ilya pounded into him; sloppy and desperately chasing his own orgasm.

"Ah, *fuck,* Shane, look what you do to me?" he breathed out, head ducking down to trail gentle kisses along Shane's neck before capturing his lips in a heated kiss that took what little breath Shane had away.

They'd been fucking for over an hour. It started sensually, with Ilya massaging Shane's tense shoulders, quickly devolving into debauchery, sweat soaking the two of them as they touched each other like horny teenagers, desperate and eager. Shane had finished twice, once from Ilya's mouth and once untouched as Ilya whispered filthy words to him in English and Russian, hips snapping forward and hitting Shane in all of the right places.

Ilya had not let up despite Shane reaching his peak, relentless with his movements, and oh, Shane was in another realm. The intensity of his orgasm was being deliciously dragged out as Ilya clamoured to his own. All Shane could focus on was the way the light of the room framed Ilya's head from this angle, giving him a halo, hiding his features in his silhouette. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes, relishing in the feeling of being weightless, control snatched away from him, being subjected to pleasures he knew only Ilya could give him.

His quick trip to cloud nine was interrupted by Ilya stopping for a moment, grasping at Shane's left leg and hoisting it up to rest on his shoulder, spreading him open even wider. Ilya's smirk was visible now, and *oh god*, he looked like Shane's destroyer and saviour all in one. He could feel the sweat dripping off him, fusing them as their skin was pressed together. Ilya started his thrusts again, head tilting back ever so slightly as he listened to Shane's low moans.

"You feel so *fucking* good, you know that?" he states, matter-of-factly. Shane has no way to answer; coherence fails him in this moment. The only noises he can make are moans, accentuated by random pleading words, begging Ilya not to stop.

There was no way he could get hard again so fast, but the sensations he was feeling felt like he was on the very edge once more. The tightness in his stomach, the unflinching desire for more, the desperation to see his lover come undone, was all so overwhelming, but in the best kind of way.

"Ilya…" he started, mind trailing off as Ilya switched up his tempo, Shane knew he was getting closer from the way his strong hands were gripping at Shane's body, leaning just that bit closer so that he could see the way Shane's face was awash with pleasure, blissed out.

The way Ilya looked at him felt like he was prey about to be caught. "Tak krasivo, *so beautiful*," he muttered, and Shane loved it when he got like this, sweet words tumbling from his mouth, unable to stop himself, unashamed.

Shane wanted to make him feel good all the time; he wanted to see him at the brink.

“Are you gonna cum for me?” he practically purred.

If Ilya was at the brink, then those words sent him careening over the edge. He came hard, a broken moan and stuttering thrusts as he rode the wave. Shane thought he had never seen someone so beautiful in his whole life.

After his grip relaxed, Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya’s waist, still full from him, pulling the man into his embrace. The full weight of the other was resting on Shane’s chest for a moment as Ilya caught his breath before his warm hands were grabbing Shane’s face to pull him in for a deep and slow kiss, the desperation gone, leaving softness in its wake. They were both drenched, the humid summer weather making it just that much worse. Usually, Shane would be uncomfortable, but right now all he wanted to do was savour the feeling of closeness, vulnerability and pleasure.

Or at least, that was the case until Ilya shifted to pull off the condom, then Shane realized just how wet they had gotten. Cooler air seemed to finally be reaching them, accentuating the sensation of damp fabric from the sheets, as Ilya took steps towards the other side of the room, Shane suddenly became hyperaware of the feeling of sweat, cum and lube cooling rapidly, sending a shiver down his spine and giving him goosebumps.

He needed to get in the shower immediately, or he was gonna freak out. The sheets needed to be changed before he could so much as touch the bed again.

A newfound energy bloomed within him as he rushed towards the closet, grabbing the pre-organized, matching sheet set with gusto. Ilya watched him with a look that Shane recognized as confusion.

“The sheets are wet, I need to change them,” he said, half to himself, half to Ilya.

Ilya hummed, returning to the bed to help Shane, who was yanking the sheets off with more force than necessary. “You know, if we shower, it would probably be dry by the time we finish…”

Shane froze, duvet cover in his grasp. “What? No, we should change them, that’s gross.”

“You’ve swallowed my load before, but this is too much?” Ilya fixed him with a weird look.

The comment made Shane blush, despite what they were doing only a few minutes before. “That’s different…”

Ilya looked him up and down for a moment before shrugging and continuing with the task at hand. “Okay, how about you go get the shower warm for us while I finish this?” emphasizing his point by zipping the pillowcase closed.

Shane looked at him for a moment, trying to read his expression and see if this was some kind of trick. At this point in their relationship, he doubted Ilya would do that to him, but his lifetime of being cautious made it hard to break the habit.

“Okay,” Shane said, maybe a little too plainly, before heading off to the bathroom.

The water of the shower did not take too long to warm up, despite them being so far away from most civilization, luckily for Shane. The water felt so good on his skin, washing away the sensation of clamminess. He took the moment to stretch out his lower back and hips, which had been well and truly put to the test.

Ilya made quick work of the sheets, coming in to join Shane quietly. This was the ritual they typically had: sex, shower, and cuddling. It was a routine that Shane well and truly enjoyed as it gave him a chance to come down from his high in his lover's embrace, where he felt safe.

Ilya pulled him close, fingers running through Shane’s wet hair, gentle, just the way he liked it. Shane closed his eyes to savour the feeling, being pleasantly surprised when Ilya pressed a

soft kiss to his temple.

The rest of the shower continued as usual. They washed each other's hair, and Ilya obviously took the chance to rub his hands all over Shane's body, acting as if he hadn't just been balls deep in him half an hour ago. It was gentle, sensual, but not lustful. They truly just savoured each other's company, enjoying being in the other's presence.

When they had finished, dried off, and their teeth brushed, they headed back to bed, Shane noticing that the bed had not only been changed, but made up in the way he liked, extra pillows stacked nearly on the reading chair in the corner. Love and admiration swell in his heart for Ilya.

As Ilya spooned him from behind, legs tangled, arm resting gently on Shane's naked torso, the sweet smell of his oat milk and honey shampoo clouded Shane's senses, reminding him that he was *safe*.

"Thank you for changing the sheets," he said softly, eyes closed.

Ilya just stroked his side affectionately with his hand. "Of course, my love," halfway to being asleep himself. "Anything you want, I'll do it."

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August 2018

"Shane… are you sure you want me to do that?" Ilya asked, carefully, laundry bunched in his hands.

Shane blinked. What a weird question… "Yes? It's how I've always done it." he turned to fully face Ilya, dishes in the sink abandoned for the moment.

When it came to laundry, there was a specific order that it needed to be completed in, and Shane's reasoning was entirely logical, especially with the summer sun at its peak; it was the perfect time to get the laundry done. The order was important: heavier-duty fabrics would be first to give them the longest chance to dry, then dark clothes, and finally light clothes—three loads of laundry, done with plenty of time to dry.

Ilya adjusted his stance. "Well, it's just that you wanted to use this hoodie later, no? Shouldn't you wash the dark clothes first?"

It's true: Shane was washing his most comfortable hoodie, and he really wanted to minimize the time he didn't have access to it. The tags were all gone, and the seam was so small it was barely noticeable, the fabric a soft blend of cotton and nylon that didn't itch or cause any discomfort. He wore it more than he probably should, but it was hard to come across a hoodie that ticked all of his boxes.

And Ilya had noticed that… hopefully, he didn't pry as to why. The idea of Ilya clocking him for his hoodie made him a little nervous.

"I know, but I just like to do it in this order. It makes sense to me," he said, turning back to continue with his dishwashing. He'd finished all of the cutlery; now it was time for the glasses…

Ilya didn't question him further, just did as directed. Shane knew he was particular; that was just one of the hallmarks of autism that hadn't escaped him. A part of him worried that it would cause Ilya to feel resentful or like he was being micromanaged, but Ilya had not said anything so far. He'd like to believe that Ilya would say something, especially now that they had promised to be more honest with each other after a decade of pining.

When the chores were done, they decided to sit outside, Ilya with his black coffee and Shane with his ginger ale (poured into his favourite glass, of course). The weather was warm, but not uncomfortably so, and the sky was so beautifully clear, not a single cloud out. From the patio chairs, they could see the dock that extended from the property, and the lake surrounding it shimmered in the sunlight.

Shane felt calm; he felt at *home*.

When he glanced over at Ilya, he noticed that he had his mug securely in his grasp, fingers lightly tapping at the handle. His expression was unreadable to Shane.

Was he upset?

“Are you mad at me?” Shane blurted out, before he could stop himself.

Ilya turned to him, head tilted ever so slightly like a confused puppy, his stray curls shifting. “What? No, not at all, why do you think that?” he laughed nervously, inching a little closer to Shane so that he could wrap his arm across his shoulders, pulling him in.

Well, now Shane felt a little bit stupid. “I don’t know, you were quiet. Also, I made you do the laundry all weird.”

Ilya hummed in disagreement. “Um, no, there is no right way to do laundry. Unless you were telling me to wash it with piss water or something like that, then I would probably draw the line.”

“Why would I ever ask you to wash the laundry in piss water?” Shane asked, and it was a genuine question.

“My love, is a joke. I know you wouldn’t make me wash our clothes with piss water. I’m just trying to say that your request is not weird.”

Oh, Shane thought. Another joke that he hadn’t picked up on, *drat*.

Shane sighed. “I just don’t want you to think I’m like, bossing you around or something.”

Because it was true, Shane really did worry about that. One of the big things with autism is that you have to be direct; you don't understand the nuances and hidden meanings, so you feel like no one else does. The reality, however, is that everyone else understood, and he was the one left looking like an idiot, forever not in on the joke.

"You can boss me about whenever you like; it is sexy," Ilya says low, turning his head to sneak a kiss on Shane's cheek, close to his ear, sending tingles down his spine.

"I mean it, Ilya. You'd tell me if you were annoyed by me, right?" Shane replied, trying to be serious but struggling in the aftermath of Ilya's kiss.

"The only thing that annoys me about you is how much clothing you are wearing," and Shane could feel Ilya's breath on his neck; he could hear the smirk on his lips as he teased him once more.

He felt like this was Ilya's perverted way of saying '*you don't annoy me'*, but he couldn't be sure. As he had said before, he needed to be told directly; otherwise, it was a guessing game that he would always lose.

But for now, he would let Ilya off, especially since the other man's hands were snaking around Shane's hips, pulling him to be sat on his lap, and Shane let him do it; an invitation to continue.

"Well, I can fix that," he whispered, closing the distance between the two of them with a kiss while he braced himself on Ilya's firm chest. Hidden from his boyfriend's view, Shane's toes wiggled uncontrollably, unable to contain his joy.

Ilya's grip on his waist tightened, his touch electrifying. He kissed him back eagerly, like he was drowning and Shane was his only source of air, breaking only to mutter the words "I love you. Inside?"

Shane nodded quickly, mind clouding with lust. "Inside," he would clarify Ilya's words later.

Chapter 2: the one time he didn't

Chapter Notes

It's a big, gay Christmas miracle!

No beta, just vibing out here, at 1am. Fluff for the soul, because my neurodivergent homies deserve to be happy, too.

I think my next hollanov work is gonna be spicy tho hehe

After Shane's early morning confession, Ilya had been spending some time putting together the pieces.

When he looked around Shane's apartment, he couldn't believe that he had missed the signs for so long. It was blatantly obvious, from the decor to the fixtures, the contents of his fridge, his wardrobes and bookshelves, that everything here had been tailored to him to relieve the stress and protect his peace.

Shane had been constantly reiterating that he wanted Ilya to keep treating him the same, but how could he? He wanted to make things easier for him if he could, then his mind wandered back, wondering if he had ever accidentally made Shane feel uncomfortable or overstimulated.

He tapped furiously on his phone, scrolling across pages to find what he wanted, a health article.

'Signs of Autism in Adults'

Common signs of autism in adults include:

Finding it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling

Oh yeah, this one was big, Ilya thought. He had lost count of how many times Shane would ask him if he was alright. Did he like what he was doing? Was he happy? Ilya thought it was obvious, of course, he was happy. He was playing the sport that he loved, he was with the man he loved, and he was safe in North America. Sometimes, yes, he would feel down when the homesickness crept into his chest, the longing for a home that no longer existed. But in the grand scheme of things, he was the happiest he had ever been in his whole life. He thought Shane was just a little neurotic for asking him multiple times, but now he could see it was because his boyfriend simply could not understand Ilya's emotions.

Ilya… well, he struggled with emotions, too. That was the consequence of growing up as a man in a Slavic family, coupled with his father's talent for making him push down every feeling until there was nothing visible on the surface. *Boys don't cry, Ilya. Don't you dare cry in front of me again*, his father's harsh words echoed in his head.

But now he was free and able to live his own life, and he was trying his best just to *feel*. To acknowledge the things that had happened to him, to ride the wave of whatever the fuck his brain told him to feel. It hurt, but it needed to be done. He couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to navigate this world, not being able to understand the people who surround you. It must feel so foreign.

He could understand that feeling, just a little bit.

getting very anxious about social situations

Despite his hockey prowess, Shane had often been painted as an introvert, shying away from interviews when possible and steering clear of social media and broadcasts. He did what he had to do as the captain of his team, but he never went out of his way to do more. Ilya remembered the time Shane's mom had brokered a deal between Shane and a drinks brand, the flurry of angry texts that Shane had sent, frustration etched into every word as his resentment spilled over. *I hate this; I hate them looking at me; I hate that I have to do this just to play at this level; it makes me feel like a doll with no autonomy*. After a quick Google of the last word, Ilya understood. When Russia lost in the Olympics, in Sochi no less, his father paraded him around like a fool, ridiculing him constantly. He understood, truly.

He remembered the way Shane would stumble over some words, using a tone of voice that was either flat or over the top, like he was auditioning in a theatre production. There was never any in between. Was he masking in that moment?

finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on your own

Shane Hollander, the guy who read hockey books instead of hanging around with his real-life hockey friends? Check.

seeming blunt, rude or not interested in others without meaning to

Ilya had vivid memories of Shane telling him that his Versace shirt was *"Really fucking ugly,"* with the most blank expression he had ever seen. That one stung a little…

Finding it hard to say how you feel

Ilya scoffed. Shane was a closeted gay man in an incredibly white and bigoted sport; of course, he would struggle with how to say how he felt.

Taking things very literally – for example, you may not understand sarcasm or phrases like "break a leg."

Yep, that time that Ilya said, in the heat of the moment, mind you, that he was going to split Shane's ass in half, only to see the other turn back to look at him with fear in his eyes he had never seen before.

Having the same routine every day and getting very anxious if it changes

Ilya chewed his bottom lip. This one… There were so many times that he had seen this. On rare occasions where Shane had fallen asleep without setting an alarm, he woke up in an immediate panic, even when he didn't have anywhere to be. Shane, seeing the coffee pot's handle turned to the left, immediately pushed it to the right with a scowl on his face. Shane, seeing his favourite coffee shop unexpectedly closed for maintenance during its regular operating hours, declared that his day was *totally ruined.*

Ilya thought he just really wanted to have one of their lattes. Now he understood.

God, this must be *so exhausting*.

Ilya felt a harsh pang in his chest at the thought of Shane having to navigate this alone for all these years. His job and his *passion* for hockey forced him into the spotlight, exposing him to everyone's scrutiny. Surrounded by people who did not understand him, in a place where everything overwhelmed him, he was propped in front of cameras like some performing monkey. *For all this time, he just took it?*

Ilya's head fell back against the top of the sofa, phone abandoned to the side. The room was illuminated by a soft, warm white light that was comfortable for his eyes. After a beat, he realized that all of the rooms in the house were like this. Large windows to let in ambient light, and lamps dotted around the room. The blanket covering the sofa arm was unbelievably soft; it was some kind of fleece. *Of course it is*.

Was he an idiot? How did he not see how the man whom he adored was a little different?

He practically worshiped the ground that Shane walked on, doted on him whenever he could, held him so tight in his grasp, and whispered sweet nothings to him. He studied every detail of his face from the deep oaky brown of his eyes to the dusting of freckles on his nose and cheeks. He had mapped out every inch of his flesh, visually and intimately. Shane's voice sometimes echoed in his head with words of affirmation, or sometimes just his laugh. He knew Shane didn't like certain foods; he saw him fiddle with his fingers nervously when he was anxious, and he knew Shane could not maintain eye contact for a long time, breaking it off as a blush spread across his gorgeous cheeks. But he just thought that was Shane. All Shane.

And all this time, it was happening right in front of him, but he loved Shane *so much* that he took it all, because this was all a part of him. The delightful quirks and mannerisms that captured Ilya's heart in the first place were all wrapped up into a beautiful package with soft hair and freckles. He had loved him from the start, truly.

Ilya would never make Shane feel different or excluded. He knew what it was like to be on the other side, alone and unwanted. He wanted to treat him like he deserved, like a prince who had him wrapped around his little finger. He wanted to lighten the unnecessary burden that had been placed on Shane's shoulders, make his life easier and remind him that with Ilya, he could be himself, no facade, no mask.

So, he glanced at his phone's calendar, and he still had time.

Christmas, 2018. Ottawa.

This was, officially, Ilya's first Christmas spent with Shane.

Well, Western Christmas. In Russia, it was celebrated on January 7th, but he was doing what he could to assimilate into his new life.

Because of this, Shane wanted to make it really special. This time of year would often make him nostalgic for his childhood, the overwhelming innocent joy that filled the room, opening presents and being able to express his happiness openly, *no mask*. If he could bottle up that essence and give it to Ilya, he would; he knew the other had different experiences that were not jovial.

So, because he couldn't handle the idea of Ilya being sad on this day, he had planned it all out.

They had woken up to each other in a loving embrace, the sunlight, dampened slightly by the snow-filled clouds of Ottawa, seeping into the room. Shane was reminded once again just how gorgeous Ilya was, seeing the other stir from his slumber and kiss the top of Shane's head, still half asleep.

"S Rozhdestvom," he mumbled into Shane's hair, pulling him in even closer.

Shane smiled, tucking his face into Ilya's chest. "Merry Christmas to you, too."

The day was spent slowly getting ready for the planned festivities. Ilya made them a breakfast fit for champions, treating them both to freshly squeezed orange juice (no pulp for Shane, of course) and eggs Benedict. Shane even noticed that Ilya plated his food just to his liking; the sauce stayed separate, making him smile to himself.

The snowfall had been heavy this year, but luckily, the city had gotten its act together to clear most of the main streets. They had been invited to Shane's parents' house for Christmas lunch, which they, of course, accepted. Ilya was a big fan of Shane's dad's cooking; he always watched closely to see what David was doing so he could incorporate his techniques into his own cooking. So Shane wasn't surprised to see Ilya hovering over his dad's shoulder as he prepped the meats.

He busied himself with his mom, flipping between channels on the television and making light conversation about a whole host of topics. He tried to keep up, really, he did, but somehow they ended up on hockey, which made things a bit easier for Shane. He knew his mom didn't mind; she just enjoyed spending time with him and seeing him happy. If they had to rehash conversations they had had a million times, she would do it for him.

The dinner was delicious, of course, a whole spread of dishes that his dad had spent the last two days prepping. There was way more food than they could eat as a group of four, but his dad never did anything half-heartedly; if he was going to put on a spread, he was going to make sure every guest left with enough leftovers for the rest of the week. Ilya, being the glutton he is, made the most of what he could, a whole selection of meats and sides covering his plate. David just clapped him on the back of his shoulder, lovingly, of course. "This boy really knows how to eat!"

As if to emphasize his point, David ruffled Ilya's hair, curls falling in random patterns. Ilya was entering his food coma, leaning back on his chair to rub his stomach. "I think I am stuffed. Like a stuffed pig."

Shane smiled at him. "Stuffed to the point where you can't eat more?"

Shane heard the rattle of the fridge door opening. “You'd better have saved some room, Rozanov! You haven’t even got to dessert yet!” his dad called.

Ilya’s eyes went wide. “Do not worry, dessert goes to separate stomach!”

The dessert was, of course, lovely, and Ilya had polished off his piece like it was nothing. Shane wasn’t sure where it even went, but he was a little bit impressed. Shane was usually cautious about what he ate, trying to reach only about 80% full, but big family dinners like this one were always a bit of an exception. His dad loved to cook and host; this was where he truly shone. He wondered sometimes how someone who was such a social butterfly could produce such an awkward child. Regardless, he was grateful that Ilya could socialize with some normal people for once.

After dinner wound down, they shuffled to the living room to exchange some gifts. Shane knew that Ilya had something hidden up his sleeve from the way he rushed out to the car while Shane was getting ready. There was no way he could have missed the giant reusable bag filled with colourfully wrapped items, but he pretended to just for Ilya.

Shane’s mom and dad had exchanged gifts in the morning, so they were using the time to spoil the two of them. Yuna Hollander was the ultimate gift giver, one of her many talents, Ilya commented as he unwrapped a gift to reveal a chunky knit Nordic sweater, with traditional patterns and colours. Ilya’s eyes lit up as he took in the sight, complimenting it over and over while Yuna looked smug with her cup of Christmas-spiced tea.

Shane himself received a similar sweater, except the wool texture was different. His version was an acrylic blend; softer, no itch. The tag on the inside was carefully cut out, leaving behind no evidence. His mom knew him so well that it was scary sometimes. He carefully folded it back, placing it neatly on top of the equally neatly folded wrapping paper (Shane would *never* rip open a gift).

When it came time for Ilya and Shane to exchange gifts, Shane felt something in his chest. Was it nervousness? He was not sure. He thrust his gift into Ilya’s hands, failing to look him in the eyes and instead focusing on looking at his fingers move to take hold of the box.

Ilya scrutinized the package, gently shaking it, probably to gauge its weight. “I hope is not a bomb.”

Shane looked at him, a little puzzled. “Why would I give you a bomb here? I wouldn’t want to blow up my parents’ house…”

Ilya stifled a laugh, clearing his throat. “A joke, a small one. I know you would give me a bomb elsewhere.”

“Just open the present, you asshole.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his parents glance at each other. He wasn’t sure what they were thinking, though.

Ilya shredded the paper, with no care for the effort Shane put into wrapping it neatly. He tried his best to hide his slight frown at the other’s actions, instead focusing on Ilya’s expression. He didn’t want to miss it.

When Ilya reached the box, he opened it to pull out a sleek black bracelet. He inspected it in the air, noticing a small notch in the middle. “Oh?” he said, curious.

Shane cleared his throat slightly. “Okay, let me explain a little…” he tugged down at the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a matching bracelet, except in ivory. “They’re for long-distance couples… when you tap it here, it makes the other one vibrate slightly. It’s so you can, you know, remind them that you’re there, thinking of them, no matter how far away you are.”

As he studied his face, Shane saw Ilya’s shoulders relax, like he was releasing unconscious tension. His gaze was soft as he maintained eye contact for a fleeting moment before putting his own bracelet on. “I know with us travelling so much, I just thought it would be a nice little reminder…” he continued, feeling the need to explain his rationale.

Ilya stroked at the smooth, coated metal as if it were delicate. With his middle finger, he lightly tapped at the notch, and with virtually no delay, Shane felt his own bracelet vibrate gently. Shane returned the favour, seeing a slight smile on Ilya’s face as he felt the sensation.

You feel it too, don't you?

"Aww, Shane, what a thoughtful gift," Yuna noted, a soft expression on her face.

Ilya looked at everyone, almost as if he had forgotten that they were not alone. "It is wonderful, thank you so much, my love."

After Shane explained to his dad how it worked, because the man had a thousand questions, it was his turn to open his gift. It was significantly heavier than Ilya's, so he was really unsure of what was inside.

Peeling at the tape was easy, carefully sliding his fingertips under to separate the paper without tearing it. When he reached inside, he felt plush fabric at his fingertips, making him tingle in all the right ways. Ilya was grinning so hard that almost all of his teeth were on display.

"Is this a weighted blanket?" He asked, studying the fabric.

Ilya practically shook with excitement. "Yes! I read that it can, you know, help you feel like you are getting a warm hug. Perfect for when you need one, and I'm not there."

Shane tugged the ribbon that was binding the fabric together, letting it unfurl. The blanket certainly had enough weight to feel secure. Ilya took the bottom half of the blanket, unfolding it neatly to its full extent to display its size. It was a gorgeous navy blue colour, Shane's favourite, and it was delightfully soft.

Tugging it over his shoulders, Shane felt the weight add pressure to his body, and *oh*, this was lovely. For a moment, he felt himself be briefly transported back to his home in Montreal, in his bed with Ilya at his side, encompassed in his arms in an embrace so strong he felt like nothing could ever go wrong. Immediately, he felt himself calm down, like someone had pressed 'reset' on his brain.

“Well? How does it feel? Good?” Ilya asked him, giddiness in his voice.

Shane didn’t even want to answer; he just wanted to savour the moment. But this was his blanket now, and he really could use it whenever he wanted. “Ilya… it feels great, thank you so much.”

To that, Ilya nodded to himself, proud. *Success.*

When all of the festivities were over, hugs and kisses exchanged, they packed up everything and headed out on the road with the promise to call when they reached home safely. The forecast was correct in predicting another dusting of snow, but this time it was so light and powdery it almost felt like dust, the air so cold it felt biting. Shane, being the sober one, drove home, the radio playing at a nice, quiet volume for some background noise.

In his peripheral vision, he could see Ilya fiddling with his new bracelet, a smile never leaving his lips.

As he drove, he took the time to think about his gift. Ilya had gotten him something to make him feel better, in a way he knew how. The heavy burden of being hidden was falling away from him. For the first time in many years, Shane felt *seen*. To be loved in this way was something he never thought he would experience, not in this lifetime at least. Even though Ilya would never be able to understand living on the spectrum, he was making every effort to be with Shane for every step of the way, not leading him, but just behind, like a parent letting go of their child as they take their first steps.

Shane felt something, a feeling he understood. He felt hopeful.

“I love you, Ilya. You know that, right?” Shane couldn’t help but let the words spill from his mouth, despite remaining focused on the road.

“I love you, too, Shane,” he replied, a softness in his voice reserved only for his lover.

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