corner of the world

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by berrycluv

Summary

Ilya doesn't even realize when Arthur slips from his thoughts. There's no sharp turn, no clear moment where the article stops being about a little boy who loves reptiles and starts being about the man lying beside him in bed. It just… happens. The way his mind always seems to find Shane eventually, like water finding its lowest point.

—

a character study on shane's undiagnosed autism

Notes

hello!!!

this monster of a fic is nothing but an exploration of shane as an undiagnosed autistic character. i tried not to make this too clinical (i am, after all, a psychologist), but more personal and introspective, as i myself am audhd with an accommodating partner :) so it might be self indulgent, but i hope you enjoy it nonetheless!!

See the end of the work for more notes

The Pike household is unusually quiet for a Friday night.

With Ruby and Jade gone for the weekend (off to a sleepover at their aunt's house, no doubt currently filling it with the same whirlwind of noise and glitter and opinions they usually reserve for the living room) it's just two kids under Shane and Ilya's care tonight.

Ilya rocks gently back and forth on the recliner, three-year-old Amber Pike warm and heavy in his arms. Her cheek is pressed to his chest, one small hand clutching a badly chewed-up plastic carrot with the kind of iron grip only toddlers are capable of. She smells faintly of baby powder, and every so often her eyelids flutter as she fights sleep, stubbornly refusing to let go just yet.

"Is okay," Ilya murmurs softly, then presses a kiss to the top of her curls. "I got you."

He adjusts his hold so her head can rest in the crook of his neck, patting slow, even beats over her back. Amber surrenders in less than a minute, the quiet sound of her snoring blessing his ears.

Another win for Ilya Rozanov.

Across the living room, Shane sits on the floor next to Arthur.

Arthur Pike is five, almost six, and currently very busy sorting Lego pieces into neat little piles by color. Red with red. Blue with blue. Dark green carefully separated from light green. He works in silence, hands moving with focused precision, like it's important work. Necessary work.

At his side, Shane mirrors him without thinking, legs folded the same way, hands moving at the same pace. He's got his own little handful of Legos to sort, and he does so diligently, adding them to the same colored piles as Arthur's. When a stray piece wanders too far, both of them frown and nudge it back into place at the same time.

It makes Ilya smile. They make such a good team.

It happens every time they come babysit. Arthur doesn't say it outright (he rarely asks for anything directly), but he feels more comfortable at Shane's side. He follows him around the house like a moon on Shane's orbit, sometimes a little too close, sometimes a little too incessantly.

Not that Shane minds. He always makes space for him, which Ilya's glad for because his own hands are almost always full—Arthur's sisters make sure of it.

Ilya loves them to death, all of them, but he won't lie and say the girls are as calm and sweet as their brother is. Amber alone is a safety hazard, always crawling over furniture or biting Ilya's ankles. And when the twins are home… Well, that's the real challenge. Ilya has to keep eyes on them at all times, especially since the brownie incident two months ago (to this day, he still apologizes to Jackie about nearly burning the house down).

Tonight, though, is different. Calm. Comfortable.

Almost domestic.

Shane and Arthur finish sorting the last Lego into the blue pile and lean back to admire their hard work.

"What are you making now?" Ilya asks, keeping his voice low. Not just for Amber's sake, but careful not to pop the quiet bubble that seems to have settled over Shane and Arthur.

Both shake their heads without looking up.

"I'm done," Arthur answers. Shane hums in agreement.

"Oh," Ilya blinks. "You're not going to, you know…" he gestures at all the Lego on the floor. "Build?"

Arthur doesn't answer. He simply raises a hand to point at the clock on the nightstand behind Ilya.

It reads 8:45 PM.

"It's bed time," Shane says. Arthur nods.

Ilya nods too, even if he doesn't quite understand why they spent so much time sorting instead of playing. Isn't the whole point of building blocks to build something? Houses, cars, animals, new creatures… The possibilities are endless.

He doesn't say any of that, though. He's learned, slowly, to be careful with Arthur in ways he's only ever been careful with Shane before.

Instead, Ilya simply adjusts Amber as she twitches in her sleep. "Okay, then. Uncle Shane will take you to bed now."

Arthur shakes his head. "Chompy needs to get ready first."

Shane is already standing up, nodding like it was obvious. "Yeah, let's do that."

Ilya watches them disappear down the hall. Amber snores softly against his chest.

"Well," he tells her. "Let's get *you* to bed, then."

He stands from the recliner carefully, heading towards Amber's bedroom to tuck her in the way Jackie showed him the first time. He smooths her hair once, soft and tender, and smiles to himself.

"Goodnight, *obez'yanka*."

When Ilya steps back into the hallway, he hears Shane's voice from the kitchen.

“Alright,” he says, calm and neutral, as always. “I’m going to take Chompy now, is that okay?”

Ilya walks closer, leaning against the doorframe as Arthur hands over a well-loved stuffed alligator, green fabric worn thin in some places. Shane takes him with both hands, cradling Chompy like he’s made of glass.

“Two minutes,” Shane narrates, opening the door to the microwave and carefully placing Chompy inside. “So he’s nice and warm.”

Arthur watches intently, hands flapping at his sides in excitement.

When the microwave beeps, Shane tests Chompy’s temperature carefully before handing him back.

“Good,” Arthur declares, hugging the alligator to his chest.

“Good,” Shane repeats. “Now pajamas, teeth, book, and lights, right?” He counts with his fingers, one step at a time.

Ilya doesn’t understand the order, or why it matters so much, but he understands that it does when Arthur’s eyes light up in agreement. He nods and launches himself into Shane, wrapping him into a bone-crushing hug that brings a small breath out of him. Arthur loves to hug him, and while Shane is used to it, he still gets caught up with surprise by the boy's strength.

Still, Shane smiles into it, one hand wrapping around Arthur, the other one rubbing soothing circles on his back.

“Gentle, now,” he reminds him, and Arthur relaxes into the hug, his grip loosening naturally. “Let’s go.”

Ilya has to physically restrain himself from following them into Arthur's room. He fears that witnessing any more of Shane's paternal side will make him want to do something drastic, like asking Shane to marry him again. Then a third wedding would have to take place.

So he heads back to the living room instead, and begins tidying up out of habit more than necessity.

He scoops up the carefully sorted Legos, feeling sorry as he pours them back into a box where they’ll inevitably mix again. Plastic food gets nudged back into a picnic basket, and he retrieves a soft rattle from under the couch. A set of three cardboard picture books about animals are scattered across the room, and Ilya looks around for a place to put them.

There’s a stack of books on the lower shelf of the coffee table, and he decides it’s a good enough spot to leave them.

As he slides the small books into their set box, Ilya’s eyes scan the bigger ones. They are thick, with colored book tabs peeking out from between the pages, likely marking important or interesting parts. They are most definitely Jackie’s (Ilya’s not sure Hayden Pike has ever

cracked open a book in his life, at least not out of his own free will). The titles seem complicated, with words Ilya isn't entirely sure he knows the meaning of.

Crap, maybe he should read more, too.

He places the children's books on the shelf, considering flipping through the pages of Jackie's dull volumes, when Shane comes back from putting Arthur to bed.

"He's finally asleep," Shane announces, dropping onto the couch with a soft sigh, sounding tired.

Ilya abandons all thoughts of books and reading in favor of his husband. He sinks down beside Shane and kisses him slow and warm and unapologetic. Shane startles, then melts, fingers curling into Ilya's shirt.

"Everything okay?" Ilya asks, brushing another kiss over Shane's mouth.

Shane sighs again, but nods. "Yeah. He wanted us to read this book about space, but we couldn't find it and he started to cry. I had to convince him to read the one about snakes."

Ilya nods, picturing the situation. He wonders if he would've been able to handle it as quickly as Shane probably did.

"You're very good with kids," Ilya tells him, because he thinks Shane should hear it more often.

The tips of Shane's ears turn that adorable red shade Ilya loves so much. "You're better."

"At being captain? Yes, I am better," Ilya shrugs, smiling when Shane rolls his eyes. "But with kids is different. Arthur is always looking for you. You are special to him."

"I'm sure you are, too," Shane answers, because he can't ever take a compliment. Ilya both loves and feels infuriated by this. "To all of them. The twins love you, and so does Amber." He nudges Ilya's shoulder. "If we ever have kids, you'll probably be the favorite dad."

Ilya can't help but smile at the idea. "The fun dad," he corrects, then reaches for Shane's chin to guide him into another kiss. "We should find out soon. If you want, I can put a baby in you right now."

"Shut up!" Shane gasps, mortified, blush traveling from his ears to his entire face. He laughs despite himself, trying and failing to push Ilya away as he steals another kiss. "That's not how biology works."

"I can try," Ilya moves down to press his lips to Shane's neck. "Challenge biology."

Shane hums. It's hard to concentrate when Ilya's tongue draws a line down his throat, but he manages to shake his head no."Even if you did, I don't think the Centaurs would like that. Not mid season, anyway."

"Ah, but you're not saying no."

Ilya bites down on Shane's neck. Shane has to cover his mouth to stop himself from laughing–or moaning, for that matter.

"*No*, Ilya. Now stop! The kids could wake up."

"You're right. You are too loud. Your screams could wake up whole street."

"Fuck you."

"When we go back home, *lyubímyy*," Ilya winks, pulling Shane's hand toward his lips to kiss his knuckles. "Now stop teasing me and let me choose a movie."

The front door clicks open just after the movie credits start rolling.

“We’re back!” Hayden announces at full volume, like he’s entering a locker room instead of his own home with sleeping children. Jackie walks right behind him, shushing him with a smile as she shrugs off her coat and hangs it by the door.

Hayden's definitely more than a little drunk, and Shane startles a little, shoulders tensing on instinct, before he catches himself and sits up.

“Hey,” he mumbles, hoping Hayden can match the tone of his voice. “How was…?”

"*Dude*," Hayden practically yells before Shane can finish the sentence. He rushes into the living room, squeezing himself between Ilya and Shane, definitely on purpose. “You won't believe who we saw at the restaurant."

"Who did you–?"

"You will never guess!"

"I'm–"

"Okay, okay, I'll tell you! It was–"

Annoyed, Ilya stands up to walk away before he gets caught up in a boring conversation about a boring left wing player Hayden used to look up to when he and Shane were kids. He thinks of hiding in the bathroom, in Amber's bedroom, or even standing in the cold outside. Anywhere far away from Hayden's boombox voice will do.

Jackie watches him struggle to plan his escape with amusement.

"I'm feeling like having coffee in the kitchen," she tells him after putting away the keys on the entryway table. "Join me?"

Ilya sighs in relief. "You are angel."

"I've got my moments."

He follows her into the kitchen, where he offers to set up the coffee maker as a thank you for the excuse to get away. Jackie lets him, and she takes a seat on one of the stools at the kitchen island, the sound of her shoes clattering against the floor as she slips them off.

"Sorry. My feet are killing me."

Ilya shakes his head. "Is your house, you can be comfortable now," he reassures her, looking through cupboards to pull out two white coffee mugs. "Anniversary dinner okay? Romantic?"

Jackie nods, smiling. "It was nice. Quiet. We sat down at the same time and I ate my food while it was still hot, for a change."

"A miracle," Ilya agrees, thinking about his mother as he pours coffee into the cups. How she used to sit and eat her meal last. Only after Ilya, his father, and brother were finished or nearly finished. How she never complained about it.

"Children okay?" Jackie's voice brings him back. "No trouble?"

"No, they were great," Ilya slides her a cup, happy to talk about something else. "Well, Shane said Arthur cried a little because they couldn't find space book."

"*Fuck*, the space book," Jackie groans, a hand to her forehead. "Amber tore a few pages off it by accident the other day, so I threw it away before Arthur could notice. I meant to replace it throughout the week, but I totally forgot."

Ilya shakes his head. "Is okay. Shane took care of it. They read different book."

Jackie wraps her hands around the mug in front of her, her eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"Yes. Snakes, I think. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just…" Jackie shrugs, blowing on her drink. "We always read about space on Fridays, so I'm surprised Arthur accepted something else." She takes a sip of coffee, smiling a little. "I'm glad Shane was here to talk him into it. I'm not sure I would've known how."

Ilya nods, drinking from his own cup. "Me too. Shane is very good with Arthur."

"He is," Jackie agrees. She seems to get lost in a train of thought for a moment, but she then shakes her head and smiles at Ilya. "You both are, with all our kids. I can't thank you enough."

"Nonsense. We love your family." As he speaks, Hayden's laughter roars into the kitchen. Ilya makes a face. "Well, most of them, anyway."

Jackie laughs.

They can hear Hayden still going on about… whatever. Ilya doesn't pay attention to what he's saying, but he can clearly hear Shane's monotone voice going "*Really*?" and "*Wow, that's crazy*" at carefully spaced intervals, which Ilya knows the meaning of–that Shane has completely stopped listening and is now reciting grocery lists or hockey stats in his head.

He bites back a smile.

"You think he's okay out there?" Jackie whispers, reading his mind.

Ilya sighs. "Are *you* okay in here? This was arranged marriage, is the only explanation I have," he fakes frustration, making Jackie snort into her cup. "Just say the word and we take you in. Shane does not like girls but he would treat you right anyway."

That pulls a big laugh out of her. Ilya loves when he gets a reaction like this out of people.

"I'm sure he would," Jackie covers her mouth with her hand, a habit she has when she can't stop smiling. "But contrary to popular belief, I did marry out of love."

Ilya makes a distressed sound. "If you say so," he takes one more sip from his cup and sets it over the counter. "But I should get Shane. It's late anyway."

"I won't hold you back any longer, I'm sure you're tired," Jackie jumps off the stool she sat at. Without her shoes, she's several inches shorter than Ilya, barely reaching his shoulder when she stands next to him. "And I can't wait to get out of this dress and into my reading-in-bed time. Unzip me?"

Ilya nods, his hands already reaching for the small zipper on the back of Jackie's neck. "Shane reads before bed every night, too. Same boring book about hockey, but… Is nice habit. I think I should read more."

"You should try! It helps me sleep better," Jackie smiles, reaching for the cups of coffee and placing them in the sink behind her. "I'd recommend something, but recently all I read is same boring book about parenting."

Ilya hums, as it makes sense, but then remembers something he saw earlier in the living room. "No stories? I saw some books on your table. Maybe scary? They said something about specters."

"Specters?"

"Yes. No? I think I heard the word in movies Troy and I watch between games."

Jackie hums, racking her brain for the kind of books she keeps at the living room. Then, realization seems to hit her, and her eyebrows raise and her expression falters, just for a second. She composes herself, but not fast enough for Ilya not to notice he's asked something with a difficult answer.

“Oh,” she says gently, leaning back against the counter. “No, honey. Not specters. *Spectrum*." Ilya's not sure he's heard this word before, but Jackie continues before he can ask about it. "It's a… Well, we haven't told anyone yet, but–"

"You don't have to tell me if it's private," Ilya hurries to stop her, hoping not to sound rude.

Jackie smiles at him, sincere. "No, it's okay! It's not a secret or anything, it's just that we're still in the evaluation process. We think Arthur might be autistic. Doctor said he'll give us results in about two weeks, but all signs point to yes."

Ilya frowns, concern bubbling in his chest."Doctor? Is he going to be okay?"

"Oh, yes, totally! Autism is not an illness or anything. It's just…" Jackie pauses, choosing her words. "It's just the way some people are. You know how we all have different needs?"

Ilya nods, thinking of subtitles on his TV screen, even after years in Canada. Of dim lights around their house that don't make Shane's head hurt.

"Arthur just has some very specific needs. He feels the world differently than other kids, so he reacts differently, too. Rules, routines… That's important to him."

Like having Chompy warmed up before bed. Like getting into his pajamas, then washing his teeth, then reading a book and, finally, turning off the lights—in that order. Ilya hadn't understood the importance of that ritual before, but Shane had. Shane always does.

It makes his heart feel warm.

"And these books," he remembers, still curious about them. "They show you how to help?"

Jackie nods. "The doctor told us we might have to start making some adjustments around here, so Hayden and I have been reading about it. But it's okay," she takes a deep breath, smiling to herself. "If changing a few things can make his little corner of the world feel safe, then that feels like an easy choice."

Something settles in Ilya's chest, a pressure of some sort.

He tells Jackie, "Yes. That makes sense," as he thinks of Shane with Arthur, of his care and attention. Ilya would like to be more like that. "I will read, too. About spectrum. I would like to help if I can."

Jackie gifts him a beautiful, touched smile. "Thank you, Ilya."

They hug.

"You're good parents, Jackie. Both of you," Ilya says gently, meaning it.

"We're trying," Jackie says back.

Behind them, they can hear the loud sound of the TV filling the halls, the familiar voice of a sports narrator talking about a game. Hayden's probably ready to submit Shane to one hour of YouTube videos about his favorite player.

Ilya won't stand for that.

"Okay," he blurts out, stepping out of the kitchen with Jackie behind him. The moment his eyes land on him, Shane sighs in relief. "This is enough, we are leaving. Before you bore my husband even more."

Hayden scoffs. "What?! We were just about to watch—"

"They want to go home, honey," Jackie interrupts him, a little more sweetly that Ilya would.

"But—"

Shane nods next to Hayden. "I want to go home, honey."

"Come on, just this one—"

"We are leaving," Ilya says, definite, reaching out to pull Shane up by the hand. "Before children wake up and before Shane loses will to live."

Hayden flips him off, but offers no more resistance to let them go.

Jackie thanks them again for taking care of the kids, asks them to text when they get home, and they're out door and into the cold December air in no time.

As they head for the car, Shane squeezes Ilya’s hand twice.

“Thank you for saving me,” he mumbles.

And Ilya kisses Shane's knuckles and lets him drive back home. In the passenger seat, his mind circles back to his conversation with Jackie.

He thinks of needs and wants and love, and of adjustments made out of attention rather than petitions.

He thinks of sticky notes reminding him to eat, written in Shane's neat, Russian handwriting. Of hands holding him when grief settles heavy in his chest. Of time, given freely and patiently, even when Ilya doesn't know how to ask for it. Of a foundation built in Irina’s name. Of his prescription refilled before it ever runs out.

He thinks of love, and how often it's just wanting the other person to feel better.

To feel safe.

Shane is already in bed when Ilya joins him, propped up against the headboard with the same hockey book he’s been re-reading for weeks now.

Ilya flops down beside him, the hand closest to Shane reaching out to give his left pec a light squeeze. Shane slaps his hand away.

"Stop."

"Sorry. No shirt, no control."

Shane shifts on the bed, pulling the bedsheets to cover his bare chest. "You're gross."

"That's not what you said last night when my tongue was in your–"

"Reading time, remember?" Shane interrupts him, raising his book, cheeks colored a pretty pink shade under his glasses.

Ilya smiles, but before he can say anything else, his phone dings thrice in a row.

He props himself up against the headboard and whips it out, tapping on the screen to read the messages on his home screen.

Jackie:

> Glad you're home safe!
>
> Btw, thank you for caring about Arthur :) It felt good to share and you were very kind. If you really want to learn more about autism, I recommend this article to begin with! Vocab is simple and easy to understand.
>
> http://www.momsupportmom.com/articles/someone-in-my-family-got-diagnosed-with-autism-what-is-that/

Ilya smiles, sending back a quick "*Thank you for sharing. Will read tonight.",* before clicking on the link attached on the last message.

A colorful website appears on his screen, clearly some sort of digital magazine for first time moms or moms who just need a place to ask if whatever their child is doing is considered normal or if they should call their family doctor.

Ilya laughs to himself at the idea.

"What are you doing?" Shane suddenly asks, though his eyes stay glued to his book.

Usually, while Shane reads, his husband relies on what their teammates call *doomscrolling* on social media–either watching videos of hockey players getting into fights on the ice, or (worse) fan edits of himself to ridiculously explicit songs that make the tips of Shane's ears burn.

Tonight, however, the lack of sound coming out of Ilya's phone confuses him.

Ilya taps on the screen to stop the phone from locking. "Reading."

The word gets him a side glance from Shane.

"Reading what?"

Ilya hesitates, thinking about Jackie's voice saying, *We haven't told anyone yet*. And even thought she said it was not a secret, Ilya still feels like this is not something for him to share. Maybe when they're done with evaluations, Hayden will tell Shane all about it.

So Ilya simply shrugs. "Fanfiction. About us."

Shane looks up at him so fast he almost cracks his neck. "*Seriously*?"

"Yes," Ilya says, solemn. "Is very good. They make you very whiny. How do they know?"

"Fuck off."

"Want me to read you a bit?"

"No!"

"You are very flexible in this one. We should try. Put that yoga to good use."

"Shut up!" Shane scoots away from him, holding the book closer to him as if it could shield him from whatever Ilya's thinking of doing next. "Stop distracting me."

The blush that colors his freckles is enough for Ilya to let it go, not before reaching once more to squeeze Shane's chest and getting himself another slap on the wrist.

Worth it. Anyway.

Ilya turns back to his phone.

Under the title of the article, there's a legend that reads *This article is written by Dr. Laura Wang, a child psychologist and a mom of three beautiful children–one of them autistic!* which probably means that Ilya is in good hands.

He scrolls down and begins to read.

> Autism is something people are born with. It simply means someone experiences the world differently. Autism is a spectrum–which means not two autistic people are the same–, but they all share differences from non-autistic people in how they think, feel and communicate.

Ilya remembers this is how Jackie explained it, and he remembers the word *spectrum* from the cover on one of her books. Just to be sure, he switches tabs on his phone and looks up the definition for it.

Once he's mostly convinced he understands the concept, he comes back to the article.

Autistic people often experience the world with a lot of sensory awareness. Sounds, lights, textures, and smells that seem neutral to others may feel overwhelming, painful, or distracting to them. When environments become too loud or unpredictable, children may withdraw, seek quiet spaces, or use familiar objects to self-soothe.

Ilya exhales slowly.

He remembers immediately the last time they were with all the Pike children. How Arthur had ran away and hid under his bed, Chompy held tight to his chest, after Ruby and Jade started arguing over a marker and Amber cried because she spilled her cup. The TV had been too loud with no one to mute it (Ilya was busy breaking the twin's fight, and Shane was cleaning up the milk on the floor), voices were overlapping, noise stacking on noise until Arthur's shoulders crept up around his ears. He hadn't said anything. He'd just disappeared.

Ilya had thought, *smart kid*. Finding peace where he could.

He scrolls down further.

Many autistic people find comfort in routines and predictability. Knowing what comes next (especially during transitions like bedtime) can help reduce anxiety and create a sense of safety. Changes to routine may be difficult, even if the activity itself is enjoyable.

Ilya smiles faintly.

Chompy. Pajamas. Teeth. Book. Lights.

The way Shane had followed the routine perfectly, like it wasn't a routine at all but simply the obvious order of things.

Ilya's thoughts drift before he can stop them, to Shane's own game-day habits.

Waking up at six. Going for a run. Eating the same breakfast every time (oatmeal, banana on the side—sliced, *not* mashed—, one spoon of peanut butter if he's feeling indulgent). Checking the weather, even though it doesn't affect the rink (he likes knowing). Taping his stick alone, always starting at the blade, wrapping upward, never the other way around. Pulling on left skate first, then right, because it's the only way that feels correct.

Ilya swallows and keeps reading.

Autistic people may engage deeply with specific interests or activities. This focus (sometimes called a "special interest") can bring joy, regulation, and a sense of competence. These interests are not obsessions to be discouraged, but meaningful ways they can connect with the world.

Ilya thinks of Arthur again.

Of the way his face lights up when someone mentions reptiles, how he can name every kind of lizard in his picture books, how carefully he lines up his plastic snakes and turtles, arranging them by size and color with quiet pride.

It makes sense, suddenly, the calm it brings him, the way his shoulders loosen when he talks about these animals, like the world sharpens into something manageable.

And then, without meaning to, Ilya's thoughts wander further.

To Shane, memorizing playbooks faster than anyone else. To the way Shane can talk about hockey for hours without repeating himself. To how he knows every former Montreal Voyageur and Ottawa Centaur by name, can recite seasons and scores and Cup runs like they're family history. Commentators call it the highest hockey IQ in the league, say it with awe in their voices, but Ilya has seen the quieter, most honest version of it too; the joy in Shane's eyes when he explains an offside call, the steadiness that comes from knowing exactly where he belongs.

Shane talking about hockey not like a job, but like a language he was born speaking.

The same strange feeling, the same unfinished thought from before clings at his chest.

Ilya shakes his head and keeps reading.

> *Some autistic people communicate differently. They may be more literal, prefer clarity over implied meaning, or find social small talk draining. This does not reflect a lack of empathy or care, but rather a different processing style.*

Ilya exhales softly through his nose.

He thinks of the Centaurs' locker room, loud with voices and overlapping playlists, jokes thrown back and forth so fast they barely land before another replaces them. Shane laughs too; always half a second late, just a beat off. Ilya can tell when it's real and when it isn't (the real laugh comes from his chest and makes his eyes crinkle. The fake one is careful. Polite. A performance.)

Ilya thinks of conversations that stretch on forever, Shane standing there with his shoulders tense and his face carefully pulled together, nodding along as people talk about nothing at all.

Sitting in front of Hayden at the living room, going *Really?* Pause. *That's crazy.*

His voice never sharp, never rude, even as his eyes slowly lose focus, like he's watching something far away through glass.

Clubs are the worst. Team dinners come close. Too many voices, too many expectations stacked on top of a long day already spent managing himself. Shane lasts as long as he can, then grows quiet, withdrawn. Not angry or bored, but emptied out. By the time they make it home, his words shrink to nods, hums, the press of his shoulder against Ilya's side as he kicks off his shoes. Communication reduced to the things that don't require translation.

Ilya doesn't even realize when Arthur slips from his thoughts. There's no sharp turn, no clear moment where the article stops being about a little boy who loves reptiles and starts being about the man lying beside him in bed. It just… happens. The way his mind always seems to find Shane eventually, like water finding its lowest point.

Shane shifts beside him, nudging Ilya's calf with his foot. "You're very quiet," he says.

"I'm learning," Ilya replies honestly.

Shane gives him a curious look but lets it go, turning back to his book. Ilya keeps reading, not searching for answers so much as understanding; letting the words settle, letting the connections exist without naming them.

Beside him, Shane turns a page.

Ilya smiles into the glow of his phone and keeps reading.

> *Many autistic adults learn to mask their traits over time—consciously or unconsciously adapting their behavior to fit social expectations. While masking can be useful, it can also be exhausting, especially in high-pressure or overstimulating environments.*

Ilya scrolls, heart oddly heavy, and glances sideways at Shane.

He looks calm, absorbed. Peaceful. Like he isn't trying to be something he's not.

Because the thing is… Here, in bed, in the quiet of their apartment, Shane is the most himself Ilya knows him to be.

His shoulders rest loose against the mattress. His breathing is slow, even. The hold he carries outside (the tension, the constant readiness), relaxes once the door is locked and the world is kept at a distance. Shane can be on edge in public, wound tight by noise and people and expectation, but not here. Never here.

Here, next to Ilya, he breathes like someone who knows he's okay.

Ilya locks his phone without thinking, and leans in to pull Shane into a kiss.

Shane gasps, startled, a quiet sound of surprise caught in his throat, but he doesn't pull away. He melts into it instead, instinctive and warm, his book slipping forgotten into his lap as his hands come up to bury themselves in Ilya's curls.

It's a good kiss. A great one. Slow and deep and loaded with everything Ilya doesn't yet have words for.

When Ilya finally pulls back, Shane blinks at him, glasses askew, cheeks pink.

"What was that about?"

Ilya shrugs. "I love you."

Shane ducks his head, smiling despite himself. "I love you too."

"Do you feel safe? Here? With me?"

The question catches Shane by surprise.

He looks at Ilya, eyes shining in that soft, open way that always makes Ilya think of a baby deer–gentle and trusting and unguarded. He doesn't answer out loud. He just nods.

Ilya nods back. "Good," he says, and leans down to press another kiss to Shane's lips.

He doesn't know the words for what he's learning yet, but Ilya knows this much, deep in his bones:

Whatever Shane is carrying out there in the world, he doesn't have to carry it here, in this little corner they've made for themselves.

And Ilya will make damn sure of that, because that's what you do when you love someone.

Shane has a bad feeling.

The thing is, he's had fewer of those recently, and that's what sends him circling back to square one. He's learned to trust the warning signs; the tightening of his chest, the hum under his skin, the sense that something is about to tip. Calm has never come without a cost. When it shows up unannounced, Shane waits for the bill.

He notices it first on game days.

Shane comes back from his run flushed and buzzing, muscles sore, brain already spinning ahead to the evening. He barely has time to toe off his shoes before he smells breakfast, and when he walks into the kitchen, Ilya is already handing him a bowl of oatmeal. A banana sliced (*not mashed, thank heavens)* on a different plate, arranged neatly next to a spoonful of peanut butter.

"It's going to rain later," Ilya says casually, handing Shane a cup of coffee. "Cold, too."

And Shane pauses, phone halfway out of his pocket. He puts it back without having to check the weather app.

At the rink, the locker room has changed shape around him.

It used to feel like a nightmare—music too loud, conversations overlapping, no clear place to rest his attention. Shane would cope the way he always has: shoulders tight, jaw clenched, pretending it wasn't drilling straight through him. Laughing when others did. Trying not to flinch when someone yelled across the room.

Now the noise settles faster.

One playlist. Lower volume. Ilya hovering near the speakers like it's coincidence, like he just happens to be there when someone reaches for the button. Shane tapes his stick without rushing. He breathes.

He notices that he no longer feels the need to escape, and that scares him a little.

Team dinners used to be worse, too.

Too many eyes, too much small talk, the slow burn of pretending until his smile started to ache. Shane could always tell when he was close to the edge, when his responses got shorter, his attention drifting away.

Lately, that's when Ilya appears.

A hand at Shane's lower back, a grin thrown at the table. "Let me steal my husband for a second." No explanations. No resistance.

Outside, the air is cool and quiet. Ilya doesn't say anything. Shane leans against the brick wall, breath evening out, defenses coming down.

When he's ready, they go back in. When he's not, they don't.

At home, the changes are quieter still. Subtle.

The lights are dimmer in the evenings, only lamps turned on, without him having to explain that ceiling lights make his head feel like it will crack open. The TV doesn't feel loud anymore, and even the sound on Ilya's phone always seems controlled. When Shane stalls between tasks—halfway to the bedroom, stuck in the doorway—Ilya nudges him gently, gives him a direction without making it a thing.

Some nights, Shane talks.

About hockey, about the same book he's been reading for weeks, about plays and statistics and minute details no one else ever asks for. Ilya listens like it matters. Lets Shane talk until his throat goes dry, then presses a bottle of water into his hand like he's been waiting for that exact moment. "Drink," he says, fond and firm. Shane does.

And when things threaten to tip, when Shane feels too much, too fast, he notices that he doesn't spiral the way he used to. He snaps less. Withdraws less. Or maybe he still does, but it doesn't turn into something ugly afterward. Ilya gives him space without leaving. Touch without pressure. No questions when Shane can't find words yet.

Later, when Shane apologizes out of habit, Ilya reaches out so Shane can give him his hand, and he kisses Shane's knuckles.

"You're okay," he says. "We are okay."

That's the part that makes Shane's chest tighten.

Ilya has always been observant. Always patient. Always good at loving him in ways Shane didn't know how to ask for.

But this feels different.

This feels like being anticipated. Like someone noticed the cracks before Shane even felt them forming. Like every time the world threatens to spill him over the edges, there are already hands there.

Steady, sure, keeping everything contained.

Shane doesn't know when it started. He only knows that lately, when things should fall apart, they don't.

And he can't decide whether that means something is about to be taken from him, or whether he's been quietly, impossibly, held all along.

Shane has been in a mood all day, and he knows exactly why.

The new skates felt wrong the second he stepped onto the ice. Not painful, something worse. Tight in a way that wouldn't fade, pressure uneven along the top of his foot, a constant reminder with every stride that something wasn't sitting right. He told himself he could push through it. He always does. By the end of practice, though, his patience was worn thin, his thoughts buzzing too loud, irritation sitting just under his skin.

Ilya noticed. Of course he did.

He offered a foot massage when they got home, soft-voiced, casual, like it wasn't a thing. Shane snapped at him before he could stop himself. Said *no* too fast, too sharp. Ilya had blinked, surprised, then nodded once and dropped it immediately. He wasn't offended, he didn't sulk or complain.

All he did was give his husband space.

Now they're in bed, the room dim and quiet. Shane lies on his back, book propped against his chest, reading the same paragraph for the third time without absorbing a word. Ilya is beside him, scrolling on his phone at first in silence. The TV isn't loud in the background like usual, no hockey highlights being mumbled by sports commentators. There isn't even the sound of stupid videos or explicit music coming out of Ilya's phone.

There's only silence, and it presses in on Shane's ears.

He waits for Ilya to say something, to tease him, to poke at him, to break the tension the way he usually does. But he doesn't. He lets Shane read. Lets him stew. Lets the quiet exist.

The feeling crawls up Shane's throat, sharp and panicky. It feels like drowning.

Then Ilya shifts and slips out of bed without a word.

Shane stares at the ceiling, heart thudding. His brain fills the gap instantly, catastrophically. He counts his breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

The bedroom door opens again. Footsteps. Ilya's shape moves through the dark.

"Shane," Ilya says, low and careful.

And something in Shane snaps clean in half.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

The words tumble out unfiltered, loud in the quiet room. Shane sits up halfway, book sliding uselessly onto the sheets. Ilya freezes mid-step, a bottle of water in his hand.

"…*What*?" Ilya 's eyebrows shoot up so high they almost disappear into his hairline. He looks genuinely alarmed. "What are you talking about?!"

"You said my name like… *Shane,*" Shane mimics Ilya's voice, immediately aware of how stupid he sounds and unable to stop anyway. "All serious. Like… Like you were about to say something."

"Say something like what, *I'm breaking up with you*?" Ilya demands, incredulous now. "First of all, we are *married*."

"That doesn't mean—"

"Second of all," Ilya barrels on, waving the bottle slightly, water sloshing. "I was bringing you this because you refused to drink anything today at practice. I try to keep you hydrated and suddenly I am, what, evil mastermind?"

Shane winces. "I know I'm jumping to conclusions but—"

"Hollander," Ilya says slowly, carefully, but the ghost of a smile tugs at his lips and it makes Shane think that not all is lost. "You jumped off the fucking *cliff*."

And yeah, okay, maybe he's right.

Ilya takes his place back on the bed, scooting closer to Shane, their knees bumping. He hands him over the bottle of water and says, "Drink."

Shane does. His hands shake a little.

Ilya watches him carefully. Not like he's evaluating him, not like he's about to say something rehearsed, but just there, present and waiting.

"What's going on, *moya lyubov*?" he asks once Shane has drank enough water and taken enough breaths. "How did we get here?"

His tone is so soft and so sincere, Shane feels like crying.

“It's just… You’ve been…” he gestures helplessly. “Extra nice. Like… *considerate* considerate. You keep fixing things before I even realize they’re wrong. And people don’t do that unless they’re either—” he makes air quotes. “—working through something. Or feeling guilty. Or about to drop bad news.”

Ilya stares at him for a beat. Then his face softens, confusion melting into something gentler.

“No,” he says quietly. “No, no. That’s not… Come here.”

Shane lets himself be pulled in, forehead pressing into Ilya’s shoulder, heart still thudding like it’s waiting for impact.

“I am not breaking up with you,” Ilya says after a moment, one hand warm and steady at the back of Shane’s neck. “I am not preparing you for bad news. I am not going anywhere. I’m just… paying attention.”

Shane’s voice comes out small. “It feels like you know things about me I don’t.”

Ilya hums thoughtfully. “Maybe. But that’s okay. Sometimes it’s easier to see from outside.” He tilts Shane’s chin up gently, forcing eye contact. “You spent whole life adjusting to others, yes? Let me adjust to you now.”

Shane’s breath catches.

Something in him cracks, not enough to spill, but enough to feel it.

He thinks of all the ways he’s spent his life feeling slightly out of place. Too quiet or too much. Never quite fitting into one box or another; too Asian for some rooms, too white for others, always explaining, always pretending. Always that faint sense that something about him was… off. Like everyone else got a manual he never received.

And then there’s Ilya.

Who adjusts without being asked. Who makes space without making it a favor. Who never treats Shane like he’s a problem to be solved… Just someone worth knowing well.

"Is okay if you want to cry," Ilya suddenly says, and *fuck.*

Shane hadn't even noticed his eyes were welled up, tears ready to spill.

When Ilya says that, it feels like permission, like he's saying *you don't have to hold back,* like Shane's allowed to feel and break and let his walls down. He cries into Ilya's shoulder and feels everything–the warmth on his cheeks, Ilya's hand rubbing circles on his back, the plastic on the water bottle still in his hands.

“I’ve never—” Shane starts, then stops. His throat tightens. “No one’s ever done this for me. Not like this. I'm sorry it overwhelmed me.”

Ilya’s heart sinks into his chest. He reaches out, thumbs brushing Shane’s tears away, grounding and warm.

“Don't say sorry. I just want you to feel okay. Not tense all the time. Not wearing mask with me,” he says quietly. Then, he smiles softly before adding, “If changing some things can make your corner of the world feel safe, then that feels like easy choice.”

That’s it.

Shane surges forward before he can think better of it, kissing Ilya hard and a little desperate, like he’s been holding that in for years. Ilya makes a surprised sound into his mouth, then laughs and kisses him back just as fiercely, hands firm at Shane’s waist.

“God,” Shane murmurs against his lips, breathless. “I love you.”

Ilya grins. “I know.”

Shane snorts, but doesn't mind not hearing it back. After all, Ilya technically said it first, with everything he's done up until now.

After a long moment, Shane lets out a shaky breath. “You don’t have to be… Super careful with me all the time,” he says, tracing his finger on Ilya's shoulder. “I love that you’re loud. And annoying. And that you interrupt me and make jokes at the worst possible times.” His mouth quirks. “Sometimes I need that, too.”

Ilya smiles. “Okay,” he says. “I make you angry again, but you let me know when you need anything. Fair?”

Shane laughs, warmth spreading through him, chasing the last of the panic away. “Fair.”

And then he kisses him. Soft at first, then desperate, then relieved. Ilya kisses him back like he’s always been there. Like he’s not going anywhere.

Like Shane has never, ever been too much.

The Pike house is exactly what Shane knows it to be: loud, bright, alive.

The twins tear through the living room with a plastic shark, shrieking with laughter as Amber toddles after them, determined to be included despite the clear size disadvantage. The TV is turned up louder than necessary, a hockey game blaring over overlapping conversations as the guys sprawl across the couch, beers in hand, shouting commentary at the screen like it

can hear them. At the dining table, the WAGs are halfway through a bottle of wine, leaning in close, catching up on lives that never seem to slow down.

Ilya usually belongs there.

He’s normally perched at the edge of the table, glass in hand, delighting the women by humoring them and, when sufficiently bribed, casually exposing other players with locker room anecdotes that make everyone shriek. He loves an audience, and the WAGs love him right back.

Today he's somewhere different, though.

Instead, Shane spots him on the far corner of the living room floor, legs folded awkwardly beneath him, entirely absorbed in something much quieter. Arthur sits cross-legged across from him, oversized headphones snug over his ears, the chaos of the room reduced to something distant and manageable. Between them, a sheet of paper rests on the floor. Ilya is drawing (if that’s the right word) what can only be generously described as a turtle—misshapen shell, legs going in questionable directions. Arthur laughs openly, delighted, pointing at it like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever seen.

Ilya grins back, entirely unbothered by his lack of artistic talent, adding another crooked line just to make Arthur laugh again.

Something in Shane’s chest softens, warm and almost painful in its fullness.

He slips outside before the noise and the feeling can press too hard against his ribs, and his lungs fill up with air the moment he steps into the backyard.

Out here, it's quieter.

Hayden stands over the grill with the seriousness of a man who has decided this is his singular purpose for the evening, tongs in one hand, beer in the other. Max Riley lingers for a bit, then excuses himself to go check on Leah, leaving Shane and Hayden alone in the quiet rhythm of turning burgers.

Hayden follows Shane’s gaze back toward the house. “Ilya’s not with the girls today,” he says, casual, observational.

Shane nods. He hesitates, wonders if Hayden is looking for a conversation, then offers: "He's been meaning to spend more time with Arthur. Looks like he figured out how.”

Hayden smiles at that, something fond and grateful flickering across his face that he never in a million years would dare show in front of Ilya Rozanov.

He sets the tongs down after a moment, clearing his throat.

“You know how we’ve been taking Arthur to the doctor a lot recently?” he asks.

Shane turns fully toward him. “Yeah. You mentioned it. Is he okay?”

“Yeah,” Hayden nods quickly, like he wants to make that part clear first. “Yeah, he’s great.” He scratches the back of his neck, eyes briefly dropping to the grill. “School suggested we see a neuropediatrician. Just… to check some things. They recommended testing him for autism. We got the results back a few days ago.”

“Oh,” Shane says. The word settles somewhere familiar. He's heard it before, read about it somewhere once. Why, he doesn't exactly remember. He nods once. “And?"

“And,” Hayden continues, quieter now, “yeah. Arthur is autistic."

Shane nods again. There’s no rush to respond. Nothing urgent to fill the space.

“Anyway, that’s why the cool headphones.” Hayden adds, lighter now, relief sneaking into his voice as he jerks his chin toward the sliding door. “I wanted to get matching ones for myself, but Jackie wouldn’t let me.” He huffs a small laugh.

"Because you don't need them."

Hayden stares at Shane for a second before nodding. "Exactly." He smiles awkwardly, then clears his throat. "Well, he's been doing really well since we got the diagnosis. I was scared for a second because we had to make all these changes but then I realized… He's my boy. I'd do anything for that little guy to be okay."

Shane hums in agreement.

They fall into silence after that, the kind that stretches but doesn’t strain. Hayden shifts, like there’s something else sitting on the tip of his tongue. He looks at Shane—*really* looks at him—and for a brief, suspended moment, Shane feels like he wants to ask something. Exactly what, he's not sure. He holds his breath anyway.

But Hayden just exhales, nods to himself, and lets it go.

Arthur is Arthur. Shane is Shane. And that’s enough.

The glass door slides open behind them and Ilya leans halfway outside, sunlight catching in his hair. “Hey,” he says towards Shane, “We’re putting together fruit cups for the kids. You want some?”

Shane nods. “Oh, sure. Just make sure mine has—”

“No raspberries, because they feel funny,” Ilya finishes his sentence easily. “I know, *milyy*.”

Hayden smiles without thinking. Ilya notices and squints at him. “No fruit for you,” he adds. “You keep making burgers, burger man.”

Hayden flips him off, and Shane laughs, shaking his head.

When the door slides shut again, Shane says quietly, “Arthur’s gonna be fine.”

Hayden nods, eyes lingering on the house. “Yeah,” he says softly. “As long as he’s got people who love him in his corner, I know he’ll be fine.”

Shane smiles to himself, slow and private, something in his chest finally loosening.

Hayden’s right.

Maybe love isn’t about fixing the world, or learning how to withstand it. Maybe it’s about choosing, again and again, to make one small part of it gentler. Quieter. Safe enough to breathe in.

And standing there, watching Ilya’s silhouette disappear back into the warm noise of the house, Shane knows with sudden, unwavering clarity: he’s already found his corner.

End Notes

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