

The puzzle I can solve

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The puzzle I can solve

by [spiltinksky](#)

Summary

Shane invites Ilya to his puzzle tournament. However, the only puzzle Ilya knows how to solve is Shane.

Notes

the way I locked in to write a hollanov fic the second my finals were over TT

100% inspired by the fact that I learned about the national puzzlers' league and this is so fun to me so im making my fav nerd be a part of it

It was early in the morning when Shane woke him up with an excited shake of his shoulder. Ilya rolled over, eyes protesting as he tried to open them.

“What?” he mumbled.

“Come on! We’ve got to get ready.”

“Ready?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “It’s the NPL convention today. I reminded you yesterday?”

“Ah, yes. Was just so boring I forgot.”

“Asshole.” Shane gave him a little shove as Ilya smirked, though there was undeniable fondness behind his annoyance. “I’m going to shower, if you get up now you can join me.”

Ilya laughed brightly despite his dry throat. “How can I refuse?”

“Do you really need all that?” Ilya asked as he watched Shane packed a bright blue insulated bag with all sorts of food and drinks.

They’d already had a hearty breakfast as Shane claimed he needed to nourish his brain for the big day. Ilya couldn’t image that he’d be hungry enough to eat any of this.

“Of course. It’s a day long convention *and* I don’t want to have to waste time getting food in the middle of the day. I could miss some cool puzzles or presentations.”

“Right.” Ilya nodded but he really didn’t understand the appeal of the whole thing.

Shane had first attended one of the puzzle conventions when the two of them had traveled to Florida for a week in the summer a couple years ago. Ilya had been stuck in their room with a terrible sun burn because, as Shane loves to tell, he refused to listen to Shane’s insistence on reapplying sunscreen after going in the water. With his boyfriend fast asleep, Shane had decided to go around and see if there was anything he could do for fun; this was when he’d stumbled upon the evening games that were happening. Like the little nerd he is, he gushed to Ilya about it in the morning and was signed up to the National Puzzlers’ League within the day.

It was rare for the NPL to come to Canada for their conventions so until this year, Shane had just been doing their puzzles online and at smaller meet ups that members of the League put on within their towns. That’s how Shane had met Rose and Miles who were puzzle fiends in their own right. Ilya hadn’t been a fan of them at first because no one who was so into

puzzles was normal—Shane included. But they'd grown on him, especially Rose who actually got Shane to leave the house.

Ilya sighed, running his hands through his hair. "So, do I just sit there, quiet?"

"No, no, you can join in and have fun, too. Trust me, everyone is super fun and nice. I'm sure you'll find some of the puzzles fun, too."

"Hm, maybe."

Ilya didn't like puzzles, at least, not the kind that Shane did. He could sit and do picture puzzles—jigsaw was it called?—for hours, losing himself in the rhythm of it. But why take something calming and turn it into a stressful competition? Ilya should be the last person to think that but, so what, he was bias.

What he really couldn't handle were the word puzzles, Shane's favorite. They made him feel like an idiot and reminded him of his lack of proficiency in English.

Shane had tried to convince him this if he kept doing it he would get better and better and eventually feel the pride of completing them, but Ilya didn't want to. He also doubted Shane's claim. He always felt like those puzzles were trying to trick him, like it was all a joke and he was the punchline.

Still, he felt a deep warmth in his chest as he watched Shane's nose scrunch up in effort as he tightened the seal on one of his strange green smoothies.

If Shane enjoyed it, he could sit through days of these competitions.

—

The room was big with a bunch of round tables placed about in what was probably an orderly fashion if you looked at it from above.

With white walls and tiled floor, it felt like a hospital except for the hundreds of busy bodies and loud, cheerful voices.

Shane's was one of them.

"Oh my God, Ilya, look at all this. There's like... 500 people."

There was no way there was 500 people but Ilya just nodded.

"Way less than sports game."

Shane gave him look with his brows furrowed cutely. "Well, this is better than a sports game."

“Sure.”

“Ugh. Whatever, Rose said she’s showing up at lunch time. She’s at an escape room right now with some other members.”

“Oh, wow, she does fancy puzzles.”

Shane snorted. “Whatever, the crossword competition starts in thirty minutes so I’m going to sign up.”

“And me?” Looking around, half of the attendants looked like they were on their death bed and the other half looked like they would push their glasses up with their middle fingered. Ilya wasn’t too keen on starting a conversation with any of them because he could tell no one in this room stopped talking once they started.

“You can do your own puzzles, or you can just sit with me.”

“Wow, what am I, your dog?”

Shane didn’t dignify him with a response and headed over to the plastic foldable table in the corner of the room where two kind-looking women held papers upon papers of names and times.

He smiled sweetly at them and they started chatting.

It was strange, it wasn’t often that Ilya was the one out of his depth while Shane fit right in. He wondered if this was how Shane felt when he dragged him to clubs and parties.

He sighed, Shane looked like he was going to take a while.

Glancing around, he noticed some older folks trying to set up some folding tables for the upcoming competition.

He scratched the back of his head. Well, he might as well make use of himself.

—

“There you are!” Shane found him just as he was centering the digital clocks on each of the tables, trying to make sure that there was one every four people.

“Oh, hey, how was the signing up?”

“Good, I’m in.” He looked around at the set up. “Did you help them put this all together?”

“Yes, I figured they would not be able to talk my ear off if they were confused with building directions.”

Shane crossed his arms as though he were disappointed with Ilya's line of thinking but there was still a smile on his face.

"Put your phone in this box. We're collecting them."

Shane nodded with slight humor. "Well, alright, Mr. Helper."

He took one of the name tags that Ilya offered him and stuck it to his phone after writing his name on it in his stupid curly writing.

He placed his phone in the box and then patted Ilya's shoulder. "Come sit by me when your done. Or you can keep helping around."

"Alright."

He said that but he would never miss a single second of Shane wearing his glasses *or* having that cute concentrated look on his face where his freckles crinkled up and his tongue peaked out between his teeth.

—

There were seven puzzles to do. If he finished them all within a certain time, he got to move on to the next round that took place after the lunch break.

At least, that's what Ilya understood. It was all very confusing since there were multiple games and competitions going on the same time.

He was sitting next to Shane as the clock was racking up time. He wasn't allowed to talk or communicate with Sane but that didn't matter, Shane would do amazing without any help and Ilya just wanted to watch him anyway.

The room filled with the scratching of pencils and the squeak of erasers. Shane's own pencil was gnawed at the bit from his concentrated chewing.

Had it been anyone else, Ilya would have given them a look of disgust, but since it was Shane, it was endearing. He was a fool for love, and he wouldn't deny it.

The way his glasses perched on his nose was both cute and sexy.

Would Shane keep them on tonight for him? Maybe, if he asked nicely. Or maybe more likely if he didn't.

He had a lazy grin on his face, but it was fine because Shane wasn't looking at him so he could do whatever he wanted.

At one point, Ilya could tell Shane was writing faster and faster and then, suddenly, he flipped the last page over and his hand shot up into the air.

A young man who had been standing at the head of their table quickly jotted down a number onto the clipboard in his hand. There was a smile on his face.

Shane was grinning, too.

Seeing Ilya's blank look, he leaned over and whispered: "I finished first."

And then Ilya was smiling as well.

"That's my Shane."

—

"See I told you. You eat so much in the morning and now you have no need for all this food."

After finishing with an astonishingly fast time, the two of them had managed to squeeze their way out of the room to eat their lunch. Rose had joined them, bringing with her a nice blanket for them to sit on. Shane, however, was poking at his salad with no appetite.

"Okay, maybe I had a little too much to eat this morning—"

"You ate a whole feast."

"You're exaggerating. Anyway, it'll be fine. I'm not hungry right now, so I'll just eat this after the second round."

Ilya rolled his eyes as he stuck another spoonful of his clam chowder into his mouth. "At least drink water. It is hot today."

"Swallow your food," Shane reprimand, but he still pulled out his bottle of water.

It was hot. It was early July and the sun had no mercy on the little park a couple blocks from where the convention was being held.

Rose chuckled. "You guys are always so much fun."

"Do you like watching couples argue?"

Rose just laughed brightly at his question.

"So, Shane, I heard you got the fastest time? Have you been practicing?"

"Every night before bed," Ilya supplied unhelpfully.

Shane just shoved the bottle of water in his face as both an invitation for him to drink and a plea for him to shut up.

“I did not. Well, not every night. I prepared a normal amount.”

“There is nothing normal about you.”

“Oh my God.” Shane gave him a little glare that made Ilya internally want to squeeze him like an overly cute animal.

Rose nodded safely. “He’s right about that.”

“You, too?”

“Rose, you go to these things, too,” Ilya pointed out.

“Yes, but I’m not insane.”

“Fair point, carry on.”

“Guys!”

Ilya and Rose bursted into laughter as Shane’s face started to grow red.

“I love you, don’t worry, even if you are crazy.”

“Whatever, you and Rose can hang out during the second round, I don’t care.”

“No, no, I will sit with you, my love.”

Shane let out a huff but when Ilya kissed him, he still kissed him back.

—

Rose left them for the Rubik’s cube challenge a little after lunch though she made them promise to come to charades that evening. Apparently that was her specialty.

Ilya stopped talking once Shane sat down back in his spot, but he still gave his hand a reassuring squeeze to let him know that he was rooting for him without breaking his concentration.

The first half of the competition was relatively similar, though there were way less people in this round; only five folding tables were used rather than fifteen.

However, around maybe ten minute in, Shane’s hand started to slow. It slowed so much to the point that it stopped.

Ilya wanted to call out to him but kept quiet. Instead, he scooched his seat forward slightly so that he could make eye contact with him.

Shane's eyes were slightly out of focus behind his lenses and his bottom lip was caught between his teeth.

There was a mini opera playing across his face as he glanced between his paper and their insulated bag of food that sat at Ilya's feet.

Ah.

Ilya reached a hand down and, as quietly as possible, unzipped the bag.

With a slightly shocked look on his face, Shane quickly reached into the bag and pulled out the gooey green shake he had packed that morning. As he unscrewed it, he mouthed a quick "thank you" to Ilya that he responded to with a small smile and by leaning back in his chair, happy that he could fix the problem.

But then, a small shocked noise slipped from Shane's lips.

Ilya instantly sat up straight again.

Oh no.

What Ilya could only describe as milky white yogurt juice was sitting atop the smoothie, locked in a staring contest with Shane who's face was filled with conflict.

He'd already wasted a lot of time even just getting to food out but now the seconds counted up as Shane glared pitifully at the yogurt juice atop his equally gross drink.

Usually, Ilya would have taken this as a moment to pick at the fact that this most definitely proved that Greek yogurt was the worst yogurt, but he knew Shane didn't need that right now.

He knew Shane hadn't suddenly gotten hungry in the last ten minutes which meant that his blood sugar had crashed and when Shane's blood sugar crashed, there was no way he would be able to complete this crosswords. He probably felt like he was going to pass out.

Ilya quickly rummaged through their bag only to find everything gone or eaten.

Right, they'd given Shane's salad to Rose since she'd been starving.

Ilya glanced around. If Ilya ran to go buy something for Shane, he wouldn't be able to come back into the room until the competition was over and Shane couldn't get up to grab the food from him because he'd be disqualified.

It was a split second decision as the bright red numbers continued to count up.

Ilya looked between Shane and the smoothie and, without a second to spare, he grabbed the yogurt and downed the yogurt water in one gulp.

It wasn't terrible in taste but the constancy almost make him gag.

He didn't, though, and he placed the bottle back in front of Shane with a light thud.

Usually, Shane would have looked at him like he was a madman who should be studied, however, today, his face melting into a look of pure gratefulness and love. It made Ilya's heart flutter.

Quickly, Shane gulped down the drink and picked up his pencil with a newfound passion.

—

“Second place, that is not bad.”

“It's not first.”

“You are first in my heart.”

Ilya wrapped Shane in his arms as everyone started folding up the tables again around them.

Shane looked at the ground.

“Thanks for what you did, by the way. That was really gross but I appreciate it.”

“I am a problem solver.”

Shane laughed, leaning into Ilya's touch.

“Yes, you are. Though, you could have just gone and poured it out in the trash.”

“Hm?”

“The trash. You could have gotten up and done that since I couldn't.”

Ilya looked over and indeed there was a trash can in the corner of the room. Had he seen that? No. Was he going to tell Shane that? No way in hell.

Ilya shook his head solemnly. “That would have wanted time. You may have gotten third! Second is already hard.”

“Hey, I thought I was first in your heart?”

Ilya shrugged.

Shane rolled his eyes but never lost his smile

“I love you,” he whispered.

“And I you.”

Shane tilted his head up and Ilya gave him a kiss.

“Okay, lovebirds, wrap it up,” Rose’s voice echoed throughout the room. “We can make the sports trivia before charades if we leave now.”

“Sports?” Ilya instantly perked up causing both Rose and Shane to chuckle.

“Alright, I guess we’re doing that. Come on, babes.”

Hand in hand, they followed Rose out.

Ilya decided that this whole puzzle thing might not be so bad after all.

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