

Articles of Affection

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Articles of Affection

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Summary

Shane has a system. It includes a forgotten sweater.

Sometimes, confrontation was a soft gray sweater, puddled next to a bed.

Shane had spent the better part of his life only confronting people on the ice. It was so much easier to be pulled along the rest of the time, nodding at the right times and smiling faintly when he wasn't sure if something was meant to be funny or not. Sometimes, he pushed back a little with his parents because he knew they'd still love him, even if his rare shows of mild defiance bemused them, but otherwise, he found it best to keep his opinions to himself.

Head down, watch the puck, tune the rest of it out.

Until Rozanov.

"You like this," Rozanov challenged. "You want this?"

Shane did.

Fuck, but he wanted it. He wanted Rozanov's jackal grin and cackle. He wanted his bite and his shove. Rozanov, who had never backed down from a fight, who liked to instigate them whenever he could. Shane wanted to devour that fire and have it for himself. It was so much easier to tell Rozanov to fuck off when they were in bed than it was anyone else in much more sensible situations.

"What happened to nice polite boy?" Rozanov mocked as Shane arched underneath him, cursing and clawing at him.

"Fuck you," Shane breathed out. "Harder."

"Please," Rozanov nipped at Shane's bottom lip. "Say it."

"No," Shane grinned at him, too wide and wild.

"Rude," Rozanov declared and laughed, adjusting his position minutely, before going harder.

And then Rozanov left with an obscenely filthy kiss, licking the envelope on the promise of another time. Both of them were still tacky with sweat and come. A shower would be smarter, but there was a flight to catch. Traces of Shane would be stuck to Rozanov for hours, lingering under his tank top and painted on under his pants. The thought was enervating and Shane got up to shower alone, touching all the slightly sore places where Rozanov had been like following a hiking trail deep into the woods.

Damp and exhausted, Shane shuffled back into the room and spotted the sweater. For a moment, he froze. Would Rozanov still be close enough to return it? Surely not. The race for the red eye would've already begun. Had he left it here on purpose? If so, for what? A taunt? A question? Or had he discarded it entirely by accident in his rush?

Shane picked it up and ran his hands over the material. It was probably cashmere, if only because Rozanov would like something expensive like that. Shane started folding it automatically until it was a neat rectangle in his hands. Then Shane was stuck. Did he pack it

in with his things? Carry it with him for months until he might see Rozanov again? And do what?

Return it?

Was that a thing he could do?

Oh, sorry, you left this on the floor last time you fucked my brains out. I didn't know if it needed to be dry cleaned, so I didn't wash it.

What was the protocol on that?

Shane stood mostly naked in front of a bed that was drenched in their hit and run passions, dithering over returning a sweater.

"Fuck you, Rozanov," he said tiredly to no one at all.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Shane hung his head low, rolling it from side to side, trying to undo the sudden tension in his neck. His fingers dug too hard into the sweater. There was a stray hair caught at the neckline, a tiny vein of gold in gray stone. Shane plucked at it, pulling it out. As soon as it was free, it curled up again, clinging around his finger.

There was no one here to watch. No one to see. Nothing to hear.

Shane still hesitated.

Then very slowly, he lifted the sweater to his nose and sniffed. Cigarette smoke, a hint of sweat, and all too familiar cologne. That's what Rozanov's hair smelled like too, the brush of curls over Shane's face almost like another hand caressing him sometimes.

Fuck.

Shane never fully unpacked after away games. There wasn't a point. Instead, he had a careful system with a laundry bag and neatly stacked clean clothes beneath. The sweater should go in with the dirty laundry.

Instead, he folded it between his clean hoodies, pressed there like a flower caught between pages of a book.

If there had really been a confrontation with the sweater, Shane was almost positive he'd lost.

When he finally got home, the sweater should've gone to live in a drawer in his apartment until he was sure he had a chance of seeing Rozanov again. But Shane didn't usually unpack the clean clothes from his suitcase. It was part of the system. He only had to assess what was still there and add things back in before leaving. Even his little bathroom bag had had the same refillable containers since rookie season. Top off as needed.

So, the sweater stayed in his luggage. Shane didn't think about it. Much.

The next time he had Rozanov alone, it was in Rozanov's hotel room. Shane wasn't going to carry a sweater across the hotel. What would he say if anyone asked? That it was his? No one would believe that.

He braced himself for Rozanov to ask for it, but that had been an insane thing to worry about. Rozanov no more cared about a lost sweater than he cared about what Shane had had for lunch yesterday. Instead, he carried Shane several feet to the bed like he weighed nothing and tossed him down into a sprawl.

"Hollander," he purred and then covered him completely, eclipsing the dim lamp light. "Hungry for it?"

"No," Shane said with a smirk. "I just ate."

"You think you're very smart. It's sad."

"What's sadder? That I think that or that you're still going to fuck me even though you think I'm dumb?"

"Nothing sad about that," Rozanov said with delight. "You don't have to be smart for this."

"Tell me about it," Shane muttered and Rozanov laughed.

Rozanov liked when Shane played with him, Shane realized all at once. Maybe he should've clocked that years ago. They were, somehow, still playing in these moments. It was a game that left them both winners. Mostly. Sometimes.

At least they weren't keeping score here. Were they? Maybe Rozanov had some secret tally of orgasms and insults that Shane was falling behind on.

"No." Rozanov gave Shane's chest a light slap. Not nearly enough to hurt, only enough to catch his attention. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Shane huffed.

"Don't go away. There's not enough time for that."

There wasn't. They had an hour. Two, if they wanted to really push it. But how did Rozanov know that Shane had gone anywhere?

"Whatever," Shane said because that word had been his saving grace a thousand times. And then he kissed Rozanov like he was starving because that worked wonders too.

They made each other crazy for an hour. Sweat-soaked, jelly-legged, and chafed end to end. Shane stumbled into the shower and out again, trembling a little around the edges. A lazy finger wave from Rozanov and Shane ejected himself from their tiny oasis of pleasure.

Out into the stark hallway with its hideous carpet, the only remnant of the night was in stinging remnants of a few kisses with the right amount of teeth.

Hayden was asleep when Shane got back to the room, the TV still on and the remote in his hand. Should Shane tease him about that in the morning? Hayden might tease him back about being gone for so long, playing the line of curfew.

Those were the worst conversations. Shane hated that he stumbled every time, never finding his footing with one of the few people he felt even a little close to. But if he never teased Hayden at all then were they even friends or was he just another colleague that Shane had to negotiate around? No. Hayden was his friend. Shane knew that. The teasing was normal and fine and they were friends.

It was fine. Shane was fine. Everything was so fucking fine.

Why did this always happen right after a good fuck? Shane was sick of himself already. It was like the heights he got to when he was with Rozanov meant he had to crash down hard to earth right after.

For now, Shane took the remote from Hayden's limp hand, turned everything off and shucked off his clothes into his laundry bag. When he reached for his pajama pants, he dug a little further, touching the edge of the sweater. He clung to it for a moment, a flash memory of Ilya kissing his neck afterwards, their breathing slowing together. For a moment, Shane was able to match that, slow and easy.

By the end of every season, Shane had enough airline points to send his parents to any destination they wanted. It was his anniversary gift to them, even though they always said they didn't need anything. He'd pay for their hotel and cover the flight, so they could criss-cross around the world. A small repayment for a lifetime they had spent sitting in arenas for endless practices and games. It took nothing mostly, except for Shane to do his job. To travel and travel and travel.

Flights across the continent, over and over, the sweater tucked in his bag for every one of them. He spent more time with it than he ever had with its owner.

The first time Shane went to Rozanov's place, he'd had the sweater for years. He left it in the hotel room, even though it would be the perfect time to return it. By now, Shane had made peace with the fact that he'd stolen it. It was his now. Not that he used it for its intended purpose.

It was a good luck charm. That was all. He'd probably had some good games with it in his bag. At least more than he'd had bad.

It was only a piece of clothing, just like Rozanov's sudden turn to hosting was only practical. Of course Shane could stay the night. That meant more time to recover and go again. Practical as a tuna melt.

"Shane," Rozanov said. Just once.

A confrontation. The word dropped between them like an atom bomb.

And Shane took off running, back to his hotel, back to his boring, non-confrontational life. Back to planes and buses and arenas.

The sweater traveled with him.

All through the long silence, Shane meant to donate it. Someone might like it. Someone could use it. It was no good in a suitcase, dragged from place to place like a security blanket.

It stayed right where it was.

It stayed there until Rozanov became Ilya.

That night, alone again, Shane took it out fully from the suitcase for the first time and pressed his face to it. It scratched a little, still wool despite the high quality and usually that would make Shane crazy, but it was perfect right now. It was exactly like Ilya who was soft and still fucking irritating all the time and sweet and good and horrible.

There was somehow still a trace of cigarette smoke around the color, the faintest whiff of cologne. It was nothing like holding Ilya, comforting him, but it was the closest thing Shane had in the moment.

He had cause to clutch that talisman again and again. A reminder, a punishment, a comfort.

Then summer came and with it came Ilya to the cottage. He brought a hundred other things that would forever diminish the need for a single, long ago discarded, remnant. What did Shane need a sweater for when there were douchebag sunglasses on the table by the door, wet swim trunks dripping into the bathtub, a glass of water with a thumb print smeared in sunscreen on the kitchen counter and Ilya himself sprawled over his lap?

Having Ilya under his hands at every hour of the day was a miracle of sensation. There was the unexpected silk of Ilya's inner thighs, the rough woolen catch of his callouses, the worn

flannel warmth of his back, and the tempting satin of his lips.

If Shane had said any of that out loud to Ilya, he was almost certain Ilya would laugh. And then ask him what fabric he thought Ilya's cock felt like (none, some things were perfect as is and needed no metaphor).

Still, even with all those riches, Shane might've held on to the sweater indefinitely.

If Ilya hadn't gotten bored and started poking around.

"Why don't you unpack this?" He demanded.

Shane had been attempting to read. It was, in fairness, sliding into a nap as the sun came in at just the right angle for lethal lulling warmth.

"Unpack what?"

"This bag. I've seen it before," Ilya announced.

Shane rolled onto this side reluctantly. Ilya was tapping on Shane's open suitcase where it sat in the closet.

"Leave that alone," Shane yawned.

"But you have laundry in it."

"Only clean stuff. I have a system."

"No," Ilya said, mouth agape in mock surprise. "A system! Who could've guessed?"

"Fuck you," Shane laughed, eyelids still at half-mast. "I hate unpacking just to start packing again. So I leave everything in and add what I need, wash the stuff I used. It's fine."

"It's disgusting," Ilya pronounces. "You haven't played in a month. It will get dusty."

"They're in a suitcase."

"That you left open."

"I was looking for my glasses."

"Mm, never mind, I approve now."

"Thank god, I was really fucking worried you didn't approve."

There was quiet for a blissful minute and Shane sunk a little deeper down, closer to sleep.

"I lost this," Ilya said. "A long time ago."

All at once, Shane was very much awake. How had he let himself forget for even a second? How could Ilya have recognized it? Shane sat up. Ilya was crouched over the suitcase, the

sweater in his hands. His head was bent so Shane couldn't see his expression.

"You left it behind. A while back," Shane said, his face warming up. "I kept meaning to give it back to you."

"No, you did not." How Ilya could be so certain of things like that made Shane want to shake him for answers. How did he know? Why did he know Shane so well and with such confidence? "You pack it in this suitcase that you take everywhere, even though you could afford a much nicer one, and keep it for years. You would remember to give it to me if you wanted."

"Fine!" Shane groaned. "I did start off meaning to give it to you and then I kept it. It was nice. To have. When I didn't have you."

"So I could take it back now?" Ilya asked that teasing lilt that Shane adored and loathed in turns in his voice.

"I think it's been with me long enough to be mine," Shane declared.

"This is a thief's thinking."

"Maybe I am a thief."

"I think you would throw up if you accidentally didn't pay for a ginger ale."

"That's not true," Shane lied.

"It is," Ilya smoothed the sweater back into Shane's precise folds. "I brought this with me from Russia."

"Shit, sorry," Shane winced. "I didn't even think of that."

"It's fine. Everything I had when I came was from Russia. I have plenty. You can have this back."

"I-" Shane started then stopped. But they were being honest. Open. They loved each other. He could ask for this, couldn't he? So far, he hadn't been too much, too weird, too...something, for Ilya. It was like the more of himself that Shane let Ilya see, the more Ilya wanted. He ate up all the odd little details of Shane like they were candy.

"What is it?" Ilya finally looked up at him. He was smiling, not his jackal smile at all. The soft one that Shane got to see all the time now.

"I want one you've been wearing. Not like super sweaty or anything, but something you wore while you were here and didn't get washed."

The smile grew by several degrees. Ilya dropped the sweater into the open bag and stalked across the room, getting one knee on the bed. He dipped down and brushed a kiss over Shane's shoulder.

"You're obsessed with me," Ilya said.

Shane gave him a look. "Yes."

"Oh," Ilya stopped, processed that, then kissed Shane again. "Good."

"Only as much as you're obsessed with me."

"That is a lot," Ilya said and shoved Shane onto his back, covering him like a horny weighted blanket.

"I know," Shane said and ran his hands up under Ilya's tank top, digging his thumbs in along his spine. "Maybe I should've been worried that you'll murder me all this time."

"Too much evidence now," Ilya said pragmatically. "You will just have to live with me."

"I think I can do that."

Their departure from the cottage was painful, but Shane found it easier to move through a world where Ilya loved him.

Especially when he opened his suitcase and found a black tank top without a trace of cigarette smoke laced into it, but a strong enough spritz of Ilya's cologne to scent everything else Shane traveled with.

They weren't the exact same size, but the tank top was much softer than the sweater. Wearing it under his own sweater in the autumn chill, Shane thought it fit perfectly.

Leaving the cottage was what Ilya imagined being born was like: messy, painful and full of tears. He saved the last bit until he was back in his place in Boston at least. Shane had already seen him cry more than enough. More than Ilya really wanted to think about.

Alone and gutted, he allowed himself a single minute of tears from the sheer amount of bullshit he was feeling, before getting on with things.

Being back in his own space was too much reality. Ilya wanted to leave as soon as he arrived. A quick assessment showed his fridge empty. Cap and sunglasses on, he walked right back out again. The grocery store was not one of his usual haunts. Delivery was more practical for the few times he was in long enough to bother with cooking.

Hamburgers were on sale. An eight pack.

Fuck his entire fucking life.

Lily: *I hate you.*

Jane: *No.*

Ilya glared at the single word reply and started typing fervently.

Lily: *How am I going to be normal now? About anything. Ever.*

Jane: *I wasn't aware you were normal about anything before.*

Lily: *Everything is different and everything is the same.*

The response to that took far longer. Ilya threw things in his cart without thinking much about them. Later, he would try to make sense of what he'd been planning to do with disparate ingredients and wind up with some strange combinations.

For now, he used the self-check, the beeping and computer chatting only slightly more acceptable than actual chatting with a cashier at the moment.

He did have to bring the groceries back to where he started which seemed like another poor decision. Loading his fridge and pantry were stark reminders that he was planning for one person. Frozen meat so nothing went bad while it waited for a single mouth to eat it. Sealed packets so nothing went stale.

Shane finally texted back when Ilya reluctantly retrieved his bag, dragging it into his bedroom, contemplating a shower.

Jane: *That's exactly how it feels. I want it to be different. I want there to be signs. But it's good that there aren't.*

Ilya threw himself on the bed. He'd spent a lot of nights in this bed, staring up at the ceiling and cursing the name Shane Hollander, often with his dick in his hand. What was one more?

Lily: *There are some.*

Jane: *Your dick being hard isn't a sign.*

Lily: *Do you have a camera in my house?*

Jane: *I don't need one. I can smell your erection jokes coming now.*

Lily: *You smell my come? Pervert.*

Jane: *I love you. Please jerk off and take a nap. You'll feel better.*

Lily: *I love you too. Maybe I want company.*

Jane: *I'm in a brand meeting, remember?*

Lily: *Are you texting under the table?*

Jane: *The main guy got called away and Mom is trying to schmooze with his assistant or something.*

Lily: *Boring. You should go to the bathroom and help me instead.*

Jane: *I wish I could. Mom is worrying over me, keeps checking in.*

Lily: *Why is she worried?*

Jane: *Maybe because I look like someone took my heart with them when they left.*

Fuck. Ilya's hand flattened out onto his thigh and his eyes slammed closed in momentary denial. Where had his adorable wordless, bewildered, jaw-clenched Hollander gone? How had he gotten this devastatingly articulate Shane, who asked for what he wanted and brooked no argument about it? It was so fucking hot that Ilya wanted to scream and his stomach hurt with longing. That was supposed to go away when you got what you wanted, wasn't it?

Lily: *I left you mine. It's bigger, it should do a better job.*

Jane: *Do you think everyone in love talks a little like a serial killer? This is gross.*

Lily: *Love is a little like murder.*

Jane: *It absolutely isn't. You're a maniac. Got to go, they're back. I love you. Jerk off and take a nap.* ❤️

Taking direction was not Ilya's best skill. He decided to unpack instead. If for no other reason than he was haunted by Shane's precise suitcase with its untouched starched shirts, everything stacked in neat outfits still paired together from his stylist. It was adorable and sad all at once. It wasn't that Ilya didn't have his own packing system. You had to when you traveled so much, but there was at least a little chaos around the edges to make things interesting.

More so than usual this time, he could admit as he opened things up. He might've pushed packing to the very last possible second to deny that it had to happen at all. As a result, things had gone in almost at random, more crammed than folded. It all needed to be washed anyway. He'd worn everything several times. Shane had run everything through the wash midway through and it had come out scentless and clean because of course, Shane didn't use scented detergent.

But he did use minty shampoo and that was the smell that Ilya caught as he pulled out a single perfectly folded item from the chaos of his suitcase. How had Shane done it without getting caught? He hadn't even been in the room as Ilya flung things in, trying to fly through it so they could share a last breakfast outside.

That night, the fire crackling, Shane had shrugged off his flannel and bullied Ilya into it with his puppy dog eyes as if they both didn't have warmer things inside that would take only a minute to grab. Except that would mean getting up, ending the near relentless contact they had started.

They were in the realm of the same size, but their builds were different. Shane's flannel stayed open over Ilya's chest, buttoning it impractical. He hadn't thought much of it, beyond how it carried Shane's warmth.

Except that maybe he'd liked having a piece of Shane. For years, there had only been the digital evidence, scattered messages left like bottled messages on each other's shores. Shane was far too careful to leave anything behind. So meticulous. So careful. Except when he wasn't.

The flannel was soft. It had been worn, for hours. It smelled like Shane's shampoo. With a resigned huff, Ilya pulled it on.

Lily: *You are a thief. But opposite.*

No reply because Shane had probably silenced his phone. Maybe even turned it off. That was fine. A shower seemed less appealing now. So did his laundry.

Ilya crawled back on his bed and took himself in hand. Minty shampoo, the well-washed, warm fabric in counterpoint to the crisply decorated cottage. Shane, who under money and fame, was still the guy that mostly wanted to wear comfortable soft things. Who thought, maybe, that Ilya was a comfortable soft thing.

It wasn't hard to jerk off to the melange of new memories they'd made. Ilya wiped off his hand and his stomach, careful not to stain the flannel. Despite himself, he fell asleep in it.

He felt fucking better when he woke up.

Lily: *Stop that.*

Jane: *Stop what? I'm having dinner. A reverse thief is just a gift giver, by the way. Say thank you.*

Lily: *Absolutely not. This is mine now.*

Jane: *That is how gifts work.*

Lily: *Are you eating with your mother?*

Jane: *No, she's meeting some friends. She invited me, but it was too sad to get a pity invite from my mom.*

Lily: *Call. I'll eat with you.*

The flannel was not Ilya's style. He knew what made him look good (almost everything, but nothing was better) and what he liked (dark, tight, flashy sometimes). The flannel was purely Shane in its garish neutrals and utility.

It stayed in his closet in Boston, worn only when he was home. When he cooked and when he watched television or scrolled mindlessly on his phone. When he texted and called and bothered Shane at all hours, or better, when Shane texted and called and bothered him.

In an interview once, Shane leaned forward a little, his fussy little button down not quite buttoned all the way and Ilya caught a glimpse of a black edge. A tank top. He grinned to himself and rubbed the wrist of the flannel over his lips.

The next time they met, Ilya pulled off his shirt and dropped it straight into Shane's suitcase. When they parted, Ilya had Shane's in return, pulled over his head while Shane watched without protest.

Maybe they'd have to wait long years for what they really wanted, but for now at least, they could have these parts of each other. Sips of water for the long walk in the desert.

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