i care, i care, i care

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by amongtheshadows

Summary

> “If it ever gets bad,” he’d said quietly, eyes serious in a way that made Ilya’s chest ache, “you call me. Or you call my parents. You don’t get to drown by yourself anymore. They love you. I love you and that’s not conditional.”
>
> Ilya had brushed it off at first. He always did. “I am not drowning.”
>
> Shane had just tilted his head. “Promise me anyway.”
>
> And because it was Shane, because the word promise meant something sacred to him, Ilya had nodded.
>
> “I promise.”
>
> (ie. ilya gets sent a photo of irina while shane is in montreal and does the right thing and reaches out for help)

Notes

> absolutely banged this out today so much faster than i expected to; but i am sad and writing makes me feel better so here's some sticky sweet hurt/comfort of the hollanders loving ilya so much it hurts.

See the end of the work for more notes

Ilya is in Ottawa when the picture comes through.

He's alone in the kitchen, practice bag dumped by the door, dishes still in the sink, the quiet of the place stretching too wide without Shane in it. His phone buzzes once. Then again.

It's from his sister-in-law in Russia. No caption. Just a photo. He doesn't even know how she got his number, let alone the photo of a worn and tattered film print that was crisp and clear in the image, making his heart stop when he takes it in and realizes what it is.

His mother is standing in the small kitchen back home, the familiar yellow wallpaper behind her, flour dusting her hands like it always used to when she baked. She looks younger than he remembers, she must have been about his age now when the picture was taken. But her smile is the same, gentle and private and entirely for whoever is behind the camera.

For a second, Ilya forgets how to breathe.

He sits down hard in one of the kitchen chairs and stares at the image until it blurs. He hasn't seen her in years. Not properly. He had a few photos upstairs in a box that has traveled to every new home and every residence he'd ever lived in. One of her watching him skate, one of her holding him as a baby, and one of her smiling, bright and unguarded, in a lopsided picture Ilya had taken on a film camera when he was small.

Here though, she looks normal, like she'd look in the kitchen after Ilya would come in from the cold after skating outside for too long. Like he'd just walked in and. . . there she was.

He presses the heel of his hands to his eyes.

He hates how much it hurts. He hates even more that there's no one here to see it.

Shane is in Montreal and Ilya could call him; he almost does. His thumb hovers over his boyfriend's name where he still holds his phone.

The promise had been made months ago, on a night that felt smaller than this one.

They'd been in their place in Ottawa, the lights low, Shane stretched out on the couch with his head in Ilya's lap. It had been after one of the harder conversations, about Russia, about distance, about what it costs to live honestly in one country and carefully in another.

Shane had reached out and hooked his fingers into Ilya's chain.

"If it ever gets bad," he'd said quietly, eyes serious in a way that made Ilya's chest ache, "you call me. Or you call my parents. You don't get to drown by yourself anymore. They love you. I love you and that's not conditional."

Ilya had brushed it off at first. He always did. "I am not drowning."

Shane had just tilted his head. "Promise me anyway."

And because it was Shane, because the word promise meant something sacred to him, Ilya had nodded.

"I promise."

When the picture of his mother came through, the grief hit like a body check he hadn't braced for. It knocked the air out of him. It hollowed him. He sat there in the quiet kitchen, phone glowing in his hand, and felt the old, familiar instinct rise up: *swallow it. Be strong. Don't make it anyone else's problem.*

That was the way he'd survived for years.

But then the promise surfaced.

If it ever gets bad. . .

It was bad. Not loud-bad. Not dramatic-bad. Just the heavy, sinking kind where his house feels too empty and the future feels too fragile and the past feels like something sharp he can't put down.

He'd stared at Shane's name on his phone, looking at him smiling and blushing bright in his contact photo.

That thought of letting him down had terrified him more than the sadness.

Because this, Shane, David, Yuna; this open-door, warm-kitchen, leave-the-light-on kind of love, this was something he hadn't grown up believing he could have. It felt like they were a family from an American movie he'd watch when he was a child, like it was too good to be true. It felt borrowed sometimes. Temporary, like if he handled it wrong, it would disappear.

Calling felt like weakness.

Breaking a promise to Shane felt worse.

But there's something humiliating about this grief. Something that feels too tangled and ugly to lay at Shane's feet while he's trying to focus on hockey and interviews and being the bright, golden boy everyone expects him to be. Instead, in a moment of quiet desperation, Ilya scrolls further down.

He presses call on David. It rings twice.

"Hello?"

Ilya swallows. “Hello. It’s me.” he answers, suddenly not knowing what to say or what to do.

There’s immediate warmth on the other end. “Ilya, hey bud. Everything okay?”

The question cracks something open.

He doesn’t cry, not exactly. His voice just. . . thins. “Can I come over?”

There’s no hesitation. “Of course you can,” David says, sounding like he’s already moving. “We’re home and Yuna’s making dinner. Come on down.”

—

The house smells like garlic and soy and something sweet when he steps inside. It’s the same house Shane grew up in, the same hallway with the framed school pictures, the same worn runner rug. It shouldn’t feel like a refuge to Ilya, he hadn’t grown up here, but it does all the same.

Yuna pulls him into a hug before he can even get his shoes off. She’s small but fierce, and she presses her hand to his cheek, reaching up like she can sense the fracture in him. “You look tired,” she murmurs.

He almost laughs at that. Tired. That’s one word for it. He just smiles and nods, thanking her only somewhat sarcastically and patting David on the back when he comes to greet him in the door.

They sit him at the kitchen table like it’s a mission. David pours them water and Yuna sets food in front of him he doesn’t remember asking for. For a while, they don’t push. They ask about practice, the new house, the foundation work he’d started doing in Ottawa. He answers politely and thanks Yuna profusely when she adds more food to his plate after he’d inhaled it, realizing that the photo and thrown him so off kilter he’d forgotten to eat after practice.

They are trying. Gently. Carefully. Giving him normalcy instead of interrogation.

And all Ilya can think is: *I am ruining their evening.*

When his plate is cleared it feels like he can breathe a little better and that he made it through dinner without being a burden, but then David asks gently, “What happened, son?”

Ilya sighs, unlocks his phone and slides it across the table.

Yuna’s hand flies to her mouth and her eyes go gentle when she sees the photo. “Irina?”

He nods.

“She’s so beautiful,” Yuna sighs, her eyes glassy. “You look just like your mama.” she smiles, so warmly it makes his bones ache.

And that’s it. The word, *mama*, undoes him.

“From my brother’s wife today. I’ve never seen, I don’t know how she got my. . .” He can feel his eyes watering and he clears his throat to try to make the lump in it go away, but can’t think of anything else to say so he tosses a hand up and shakes his head and shrugs, shaking his head and feeling a stubborn tear leak out and onto his cheek.

He leans back in the chair and presses both hands over his face. His shoulders shake once. Twice. He hasn’t cried like this since he was a teenager.

“I miss her,” he says hoarsely. The admission tastes like blood. “I miss her so much.”

Yuna moves immediately, coming around the table to sit in the chair that's normally occupied by Shane when he's home. She runs her hand over his shoulder and kisses the side of his head gently. "Of course you do," she whispers.

"It's stupid," he mutters. "She doesn't even know me. Not really. Not. . . all of me."

The words spill out before he can stop them.

"She doesn't know about Shane. About this life. About you. I have this," his voice breaks, ",this whole family here. And I can't tell her, I can't show her. I feel like I am lying all the time."

David's jaw tightens, not in anger at Ilya, but at the situation, at the world that makes this necessary.

"I have two lives," Ilya says, sniffing hard and wiping at his face. "And in one of them, I have no mother. And in the other, I have to pretend I have no boyfriend, no Shane; not in a real way." He laughs, hollow. "And I feel so alone in both."

The silence that follows isn't empty. It's heavy with understanding.

Yuna squeezes his hand. "You are not alone here," she says firmly. "Not in this house."

David nods. "You are our son too. That's not conditional."

The word son lands somewhere deep in Ilya's chest and aches.

"I don't want to be too much." he says quickly, almost panicked.

"You're not," Yuna replies. "No one can take her place, but love isn't limited. You can miss her and still belong here. We know you, Ilya. We see you for all that you are, and we love

you. And it's more than okay to miss her."

That's when the depression part of it creeps in, the shame, the heaviness, the sense that he is greedy for wanting both worlds to accept him fully. Ilya doesn't realize he's spiraling until he's already halfway through it. And there it is again, that twist in Ilya's chest. The instinct to downplay. To make himself smaller.

He hears Shane's voice in his head, clear as if he's sitting right there at the table.

If you need something, you call. You don't drown alone anymore.

He called. He came over. But sitting here now, watching them hover, he wonders if he made a mistake.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out.

Yuna frowns. "For what?"

"For coming over like this." He gestures vaguely at himself. "I know you were having a normal night. I just," His throat tightens. "I don't want to be a bother."

The word hangs there.

Yuna sighs sadly but nods as she listens to him. David leans forward in his chair as if to make his voice less loud, less disruptive to the little bubble they were all in together.

"A bother?" David repeats.

Ilya shrugs, staring at the table. “I promised Shane that I would call if I needed help. And I did. But maybe I should’ve just. . . handled it. It’s not your problem that I miss my mother.”

Yuna’s expression shifts, softens into something almost fierce. “Of course it’s our problem,” she says.

He looks up, startled.

“When you came into our family, with Shane,” David says calmly, “you didn’t sign a contract to only show up when you’re easy.”

Ilya lets out a quiet, humorless breath. “I’m not very easy tonight.”

Yuna reaches out and takes his hand without hesitation. “Good,” she says.

He blinks. “Good?”

“Yes. Because if you only ever came here smiling and polite and perfect, I would know you didn’t trust us.”

That lands hard. “I do trust you,” he says quickly.

“Then let us see you when you’re sad,” she replies. “That’s not being a bother. That’s being family.”

Family. The word still feels fragile in his chest, like glass he’s afraid to grip too tightly.

“I just. . .” He swallows. “I am usually alone when I am sad. It feels. . . scary.”

David nods slowly, like that makes perfect sense. “It probably is,” he says. “When you’re not used to it.”

The honesty disarms him. “But scary doesn’t always mean wrong,” David continues. “It just means it matters.”

Ilya’s eyes sting. He hadn’t realized how tightly he was holding himself together until now.

“I don’t want to let this chance down,” he admits. “Having you. Having Shane. I don’t want to mess it up by being too much.”

Yuna squeezes his hand harder. “You cannot lose us by needing us,” she says firmly. “The only way you lose family is by not showing up at all.”

Silence settles again, but this time it isn’t heavy with shame. It’s steady. Ilya inhales slowly. The grief is still there. The picture still hurts. He still misses his mother so much it feels like an open wound.

But he also remembers the promise.

He said he would call.

He did.

And they are still sitting here. Not irritated. Not burdened. Just. . . here with him, laboring through the sadness that’s washed over him that he can’t shake on his own.

“You are not a guest,” he says quietly. “And you are not a problem to solve. You’re our son too now. That means you sit at the table when you’re happy and when you’re wrecked.”

Yuna smiles at him through shining eyes. “Especially when you’re wrecked.”

For the first time since the picture came through, Ilya lets himself lean back in his chair instead of bracing to leave. Maybe the fear won’t disappear overnight. Maybe he’ll still worry that he’s a bother.

But he made a promise.

And tonight, instead of running, he’s staying at the table.

He stares down at his hands and cries. “I just want my mom,” he whispers. “And I want my boyfriend. And I don’t want to hide anymore, and I’ve just been really tired of not being so good for a while now.”

“Oh sweetheart.” Yuna coos, and pulls him in for a hug, her arms making their way around his broad shoulders as she squeezes him, grounding him. “You don’t have to be good here; but know, that you are *good*. You don’t have to be perfect, we just want you.” she nods, holding his eyes and making him nod back at her so he understood what she was saying.

“You’re staying here tonight.” She decides when she pulls away and messes with the curls at the front of his head until they are back in place. Ilya opens his mouth to argue but she gives him an intense look, one that he’d seen on Shane as well, and doesn’t have it in him to argue with her.

“Okay.” he sighs, defeated and still sad, but a little better hearing how much they loved him.

He looks at David, who’s sad, but smiling like he actually likes the idea of Ilya being over. “Come on, son. You can use Shane’s stuff and we’ll watch the Raiders game, how’s that sound?”

“Oh!” Yuna stands and pats his shoulder, “,and I have the ice cream that you like in the freezer. We’ll take it easy, but you’re not going back to that empty house, not without Shane.” She kisses his cheek, standing and going to the kitchen, and it’s kind but with the classic Yuna Hollander undercurrent of *disagree with me and you’ll find out where Shane got his backhand from* that made Ilya smile.

The fact alone that they offered to let him stay, that they included him so easily in their evening plans like they actually wanted him to be there, that Yuna remembered his favorite ice cream and kept it in the house in case he came over and wanted some; he couldn’t have imagined he would have something like this in all his life.

David motions for Ilya to follow him so they clear the table and take the dishes into the kitchen. Yuna is typing furiously on her laptop at the bar and has ice cream bowls already out and ready for them on the kitchen island. They fall into an easy routine, one that Ilya is used to. He puts things back into the refrigerator while David washes dishes. When they’re clean, he dries them and puts them away carefully, reaching up to the taller shelves with ease.

Something settles in him and feeling helpful, useful, part of a routine that existed before today, before things felt terrible. He’s still sad, still feels sick with grief, but David starts talking about a trip he’s taking Yuna on over the summer, and she’s chiming in with planning details and little jokes, and Ilya is glad to just listen and be part of the warmth that emanated from their home.

When they’re done, Yuna all but forces him upstairs to change into a spare pair of Shane’s pajamas, so he listens, and comes back downstairs moments later in an old Centaurs sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants that are just a little too short on him.

David is seated in his armchair with the remote, turning up the volume on the game, while Yuna pats the spot next to her on the couch, making Ilya sit an immediately tossing one blanket over his lap, and another over his shoulders, pulling it tight around him so that he’s bundled on the soft seat.

“Warm enough?” she asks, and technically he’s a little too warm, but it feels too good to be cared for under her gentle stare, so he just nods and thanks her. She’s happy with his answer and trots away to the kitchen, only to return with ice cream for the three of them.

They settle in after that. He'd been over before to watch hockey with them while Shane was away, so they had a good routine. They called the same things when the refs called things they both knew they shouldn't, and talked during breaks about everything and nothing at all. Yuna and David tell stories about baby Shane, pointing to pictures on the wall and the mantle (also seeing that there was now one of Shane *and* Ilya from Christmas tucked among them), making his heart feel like it's going to explode from cuteness and from the gentle pain of just missing Shane as he usually does.

Ilya quiets as they the look at the TV and the camera pans over to where Kip, Scott's boyfriend, sits in the stands with a group of people and an older man he assumes is his dad. When Scott skates by he sees him give two thumbs up and mouths *I love you*. Scott mouths it back and blows him a kiss and the commentators say something about love on the ice that's cheesy and cute.

It's adorable and it makes Ilya feel like he's getting shot in the chest.

Yuna must sense it, because she reaches a hand out to pat his knee and look at him with gentle eyes. "Someday." She whispers, knowing.

Ilya just nods, the lump in his throat returning. "Someday." he nods back and she kisses the side of his head again before bringing her gaze back to the TV.

They make it through the game without much fanfare, New York beat Vancouver, just like Yuna said they would, and David yawns loudly as he starts on his newest crossword puzzle.

Ilya isn't ready for bed, not yet ready for the enveloping quiet that comes with laying there in the dark, so when he's passed the remote to pick something else he chooses a reality show that he knows Shane and Yuna like to have the noise on in the background. She's happy with his choice and sits back with a glass of wine, calm and content.

The front door opens not much longer, while Yuna is up and making tea in the kitchen.

It's late enough that the sound feels out of place.

Ilya looks up automatically at David, heart jumping into his throat. For one wild second he thinks something's wrong, an emergency, a mistake. David's face is soft and he sighs with a small smile.

Then he hears it.

Footsteps and the sound of shoes being kicked off. Fast. Familiar.

His stomach drops.

Shane steps into the living room like he belongs there, because he does, hoodie half-zipped, hair wind-tossed from travel, eyes already scanning the room.

He didn't text. He didn't call.

He's just. . . here.

"Ilya."

The way he says his name, soft but urgent, makes something inside him collapse. Relief hits first, sudden and dizzying like oxygen after being underwater too long.

And right on its heels comes guilt.

"You," Ilya stands so quickly he drops the blanket that's on his lap. "What are you doing here?"

Shane shrugs like it's obvious. "Hi to you too."

Yuna and David exchange a look Ilya doesn't catch in time.

"You had practice," Ilya says immediately. "You're supposed to be in,"

"I know where I'm supposed to be," Shane cuts in gently, stepping closer. "But I'm where I *want* to be."

The guilt twists sharper.

"They called you," Ilya says quietly, realization settling in. Not accusing, just tired.

Shane doesn't deny it, just nods softly and scans his face. "Yeah."

Ilya presses his lips together. "You didn't have to come. I'm sorry, I know it's late, you have practice, and,"

There it is again. The instinct to minimize. To smooth it over.

Shane crosses the remaining distance and stops right in front of him. Close enough that Ilya can see the faint crease between his brows, the one that shows up when he's worried.

"I wanted to," Shane says.

"I stressed you out," Ilya insists, voice low. "You're tired. You drove too late. I didn't mean to make it a whole thing."

Behind him, Yuna makes a quiet disapproving sound, but she doesn't interrupt. Shane's expression shifts, not annoyed, not frustrated. Just firm.

"You didn't make it a whole thing," he says. "You were sad."

Ilya shakes his head. "It's not your job to fix every time I,"

Shane reaches out and takes his face between his hands, grounding him mid-sentence.

"Stop," he says softly.

The house is quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the faint noise of the TV.

"You don't stress me out by needing me," Shane continues. "You scare me when you pretend you don't. And plus, I like it when you need me. I love to take care of you when you let me. I like being there for you, so let me, okay?" he asks, gently and with a small smile.

That lands harder than anything else tonight. Ilya's shoulders sag despite himself. Relief is still there, warm and undeniable. Shane is here and he smells so good and his hands are warm where he runs his thumbs over the dark circles under his eyes.

And that relief makes the guilt worse somehow.

"I just didn't want to ruin your night," Ilya admits. "Or your routine. Or whatever you had planned."

Shane huffs out a small, incredulous laugh. "Ilya. You think I care more about sleep than you sitting here feeling alone?"

The word alone echoes.

Ilya's throat tightens. "I wasn't alone," he says automatically, glancing at Yuna and David. "They were here."

"I know," Shane says gently. "And that's good. That's what I wanted, I'm proud of you." he nods.

Ilya looks between all three of them then, Yuna's worried softness, David's steady calm, Shane's open, unguarded concern. They don't look put out. They don't look burdened. They look like people who chose to show up.

And the relief finally outweighs the guilt.

His fingers tighten around Shane's wrists. "I'm glad you're here," he whispers, the confession small but honest.

Shane's face softens immediately. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." His voice wavers. "I just hate that you had to come because I couldn't handle a picture."

Shane leans in and presses a gentle kiss to his mouth, then to his cheek. "You handled it," he says. "You called. You came over. You talked about it." His thumb brushes over Ilya's knuckles. "That's handling it, I'm proud of you."

Yuna nods firmly from behind them. "He's right."

Ilya exhales shakily. The guilt doesn't disappear entirely, it probably won't for a while. The fear of being too much is stitched deep. But Shane is here anyway.

He came without being asked twice. And when Shane pulls him into a hug in the middle of the living room, holding him tight in front of his parents like there's nothing to hide in this house, the relief finally settles into something steadier.

"I'm sorry," Ilya murmurs into his shoulder, out of habit more than belief.

Shane squeezes him harder.

"It's okay," he says.

And for the first time all night, Ilya lets himself just feel glad that he isn't alone.

Shane pulls back and holds his face in his hands again, like he's something small and precious. "Ya tebya lyublyu." he whispers and kisses his forehead.

Ilya huffs a laugh and can feel the tears in his eyes before they fall. His accent is getting better and he's confident when he says it now, like he's been practicing on his own. He thinks about Shane, driving by himself in the car saying it over and over again, so that he can get it right; so that Ilya can know that he loves him in every language. In the same language that he knew from birth, in the same one his mama had said the same thing to him from the moment he was born.

He hoped she could see him now; loved and taken care of by a Canadian hockey family with a beautiful boy that had proved over and over again that he was willing to break time itself to make him happy and to make him feel loved. For the first time since he had seen the photo, something in his chest settled. He feels it, that she's watching from somewhere, that she's happy for him and gets to see this beautiful and warm life that he has.

He nods and smiles, small and real as he meets Shane's eyes.

“Ya tebya lyublyu.”

End Notes

hope you loved it! kisses for comments as always <3

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