Lonesome Is A State of Mind

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Lonesome Is A State of Mind

by zankiefanatic

Summary

Set ~6 months after The Long Game. Shane and Ilya have settled nicely into married life, and the big stressors of sneaking around are finally behind them. *Enter all that mental health shit we barely addressed at all* Ilya finds himself in the thick of a depressive episode, and Shane finds himself desperately auditioning for Husband of the Year. There is love and feelings and therapy.

Notes

Holy shit I cannot believe another grumpy russian/sunshine puppy dog duo has brought ya girl out of hiatus. But if there's one thing I understand, it is sad men and their need to be seen and loved at all times. This show has made me feel ALIVE. Yay for that. Hope you like.

P.S. Any Russian was done on best-faith translating online. Happy to accept critiques/edits on anything language related!

He awakens back in Russia. The light from behind the curtains is muted and dense, laden heavily with the winter snow. He knows if he stepped outside of bed, the wooden floors would freeze his toes and the hairs on the back of his legs. But it's no use. He couldn't step outside of bed if he tried. His limbs are just as heavy as the snow. The air is sluggish and punishing until the effort to grip the sheets beneath his body ripples through him with exhaustion. He hears his mother's voice - a smooth soprano that rings through the thick haze that binds him to his bed. Rýpka, (little fish) she calls. He uses the last of his strength to reach for his mother, but the darkness swallows him whole before their fingers ever touch.

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* Shane's pov*

7:15 am

Shane bounds up the stairs leading from the home gym to the ground floor, where the kitchen lies uncharacteristically quiet. He'd finished his hour-long workout and was ready for Ilya to surprise him with a protein shake that he'd describe as flavorless, but would ultimately be made with love regardless. Instead, when he arrived, the blender sat stark in its corner beside the refrigerator, clean and unused. Shane frowned at the diversion from their daily schedules – Shane wakes up at 6:05 sharp and is in the gym by 6:10, Ilya awakening 45 minutes later to start his day with something typically deep-fried and smothered in chocolate, or whatever other artery-clogging confections he could get his hands on. Then they ate breakfast together while Shane read the current league standings or any business emails from their publicist that needed both of their approval. Most mornings they played footsy at the table and snuck kisses just because they could. So imagine Shane's surprise when none of that was happening because Ilya was basically missing.

He took the stairs two at a time, half-expecting Ilya to be cuddled up in bed with Anya. He was already sculpting a quick-witted joke about how Ilya was being a lazybones, but if he was good, maybe Shane could take care of his other lazy bone. However, that did make it sound like Ilya couldn't keep an erection, which was clearly not true, so he really needed to work on the punchline.

He was still working on it when he made his way to their bedroom. Anya was perched on the edge of their bed, half her body sprawled across Ilya's feet. Shane had long since lost the war of keeping her to the designated dog bed in the corner. And speaking of Ilya. Ilya was not

lounging as Shane originally thought. Lounging insinuated some level of comfort or peace. But Ilya didn't look peaceful at all. He looked…sad.

"Roz?"

Anya gave a whimper when Shane got closer to the bed like she was picking up the same signals as Shane. The kind that said their big, dumb, beautiful Russian wasn't okay and that it was absolutely unacceptable. He scratched at the dog's ear to keep himself from shaking Ilya as he cleared his throat and tried again.

"Ilya," Shane hummed. "You overslept. It's after seven."

Ilya cracked open one eye, not even to look at Shane but more so to judge the distance it would take for him to flip away from him instead. Which he did. And covered his face with a pillow for good measure. That sinking feeling Shane sometimes got when a stressful event popped up, and he wasn't quite sure how to handle it, was rearing its ugly head. He felt a little sick, actually.

"Babe?" He mumbled, shaking Ilya's six-foot-plus frame to urge some momentum. "You gotta get up. We've got meetings…practice…"

"*No.*"

His accent cuts sharply through the air and settles firmly in the space Ilya had created between them by rolling away.

"What do you mean? Are you sick? I–I told you not to do that beer keg with the rookies. Who knows what kind of germs were on that thing!"

A couple of the rookies on the team thought the sun rose and set with Ilya, something Ilya thought they had in common, actually. They'd been invited to the NHL equivalent of a frat party, and the entire place had practically roared when Ilya flipped himself upside down for a

keg stand like he hadn't swapped fraternities for Rookie of the Year awards. Shane had told him not to, but secretly recorded the whole thing so he could show Ilya in bed later that night and listen to him boast with soft eyes and a freshly softened cock. (Things were good lately.)

Shane held the back of his palm to Ilya's forehead, only to be swatted away instead.

"H–Hey. What's going on? Talk to me. Let me see you, please?"

The blankets and pillows were in the way, not to mention Anya, who was still curled at his feet. And the longer Ilya stayed away from him, the more worried Shane found himself getting. Was it a fever? Maybe food poisoning? Shane had insisted on an eggplant lasagna recipe for their most recent dinner date, and even he wasn't confident in the outcome.

"Is no good."

"What's no good, Ilya?"

And then there was the unmistakable sound of sniffles, and Shane would swear he could even hear the thickening of his husband's sinuses if it were not for the thunderous sound of his own heart.

"Me."

He tries a few more times to get Ilya out from under the covers, but it's futile. He can see the vibrations of his body shaking as he cries, but Ilya won't let him get any closer. Eventually, he leaves the room with the door just slightly ajar and immediately starts pacing and dialing on his phone in that order.

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Ilya's pov

Time comes to him in lulls between sleep and nightmarish dreams. Sometimes he's afraid to close his eyes and see his mother's shadow always just out of reach. Sometimes the nightmares feature Shane, and it's always Ilya losing him somehow. Always losing. Always alone. Nothing to keep safe and for himself.

At some point, Shane presses one of the buttons to close the curtains, and the room descends back into darkness more aptly attuned to his insides. It fills him with both relief and finality. It is as if there is a permanence to this weight. Like he's stuck here. And that makes him cry until the pillow covering his face is damp, and he passes out again in exhaustion.

He hears rumbles of phone calls. Chirps from Anya that sound like a demand to be walked. He can feel Shane even now. That nervous, frenetic energy of his that thrummed through him at all times often settled in the very tips of his toes. He remembers squeezing his fingers in the space right where Shane's trap met his spine whenever it got to be too much. A touch point to calm him and dissipate a little of the energy. Ilya always loved that he could do this for him, that he was the only one who could ground him in that way. Illya hears his voice tremble outside in the hallway and knows it is his fault. It fills him with a type of loathing that reminds him of his father for the first time in many, many months. He begs for sleep to come then.

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Shane's pov

4:25 pm

Shane sets his phone on the counter and lets his head collapse into his own arms. There had been swells of panic this morning that threatened to overwhelm him. A familiar tightening of his throat and chest, a churning in his belly that swished like a rising tide. He reaches back to his own neck and squeezes the tense muscles while he focuses on his breathing.

There had been calls to make. First to Coach who might wonder why his two star players were MIA from practice for the first time ever. To his mother to confirm Ilya wasn't, in fact, dying, and he didn't need to take his husband to the hospital. And then his dad had intervened to ask how his son-in-law was doing, and there was an edge to his voice that sounded too familiar to his ears. Mostly because he'd heard the same tilt to his own voice all morning.

Then he'd had to talk his parents off a ledge from driving straight over. But Ilya didn't even seem ready to face the light of day or his husband. The last thing he needed was Yuna trying to diagnose him with her latest self-help book of the week.

The last call had been to Galina. Ilya had been in therapy for over a year now. It had scared Shane how little he still knew about Ilya's mental illness, but Ilya assured him he was working on things. Shane was the kind of guy who liked to have all the facts, who thrived with as much information as possible. All the better to make a plan and take action on it. But he'd been respectful when Ilya had told him how new this all was for him. Not just going to therapy but reckoning with his emotions instead of placing them elsewhere within himself.

After everything with the leak and the NHL, Shane's move to the Centaurs, they had just started settling into a life together. He hadn't wanted to push. And look how far that had gotten them.

"I must've missed something. He was–he was taking his meds, and we were…he said things were going okay. I didn't know."

Galina had thankfully not been with a client when Shane called her office in a panic, and a separate part of his brain–the overtly rational part, even in moments of utter chaos–wondered if he wouldn't get a bill for this phone call.

"Shane, listen to me." She'd said in a similar accent to Ilya's.

The familiarity and proximity to Russian was the closest he'd felt to his husband all day. It did wonders in the moment for his anxiety and stopped him completely in his tracks.

"What is happening to Ilya is what we call a depressive episode. Do you know anything about that?"

He didn't really, but made a mental note to learn everything he could about it as quickly as humanly possible.

“Not really. He’s sad but…this feels like more than that.”

She hummed affirmingly, and a bit of tension eased from his shoulders.

“It is more than that, unfortunately. They can be brought on by all kinds of little triggers, but ultimately, it’s just brain chemistry. Ilya is experiencing some really intense emotions right now, and it’s weighing on him not just mentally, but physically.”

Shane bit his lip and peered, not for the first time, up at the stairs in the direction of his husband.

“He won’t get out of bed. I don’t think he can.”

“I think you’re right about that. He might sleep more than he typically does, have a loss of appetite, or not experience joy or pleasure with his usual activities.”

Shane's mind continued to connect the dots as Galine spoke. No breakfast or morning sex in the shower before work. No taking Anya for a run to justify his morning sugary coffee. With every confirmation came an even shakier emotional response because *what could he do to stop this?*

He asks Galina as much and even opens the notebook he sometimes carries with him for… well, for note-taking and planning. It’d been a Christmas gift from his mom and secretly his favorite of the year.

“What I would tell any of my patients is that this is the kind of thing we have to let run its course. It can be helpful to think of this almost like a wave. Right now, the wave is at its peak, and fighting against the current could feel impossible. But every wave must dissipate eventually. We want to be ready when that happens, so that we can get Ilya out of the water and start to repair the damage.”

She seems to know that Shane needs something tangible to do, and gives him a checklist, even stopping to make sure to tell him it is not exhaustive and does not have to be completed in full. It's things like offering Ilya something plain and easy to eat. Limiting sensory exposures. Making arrangements at work and with their family to allow him the time to heal. Shane takes it all in his stride, even though the more he learns, the scarier it all feels. Ilya trusts Galina, which means he does too.

They end the call with a tentative appointment scheduled for the end of the week, but Galina tells him to call back if anything changes and he needs more immediate assistance. She leaves him with a few parting words.

"I know it is scary right now, but I promise you there is no better place he could be than there with you. We'll do this together. Neither of you is alone in this."

The affirmation washes over him, and he has to end the call before he gets too weepy. It leaves him with a bit more confidence now that he has his marching orders, sets him off down a more decisive path. One where he could do things to make it all a little easier for Ilya. Shane liked decisive paths. And he liked taking care of the people that he loved, the person he loved most.

When his stomach growled mid-afternoon, he realized just how far off the rails their day had gone. He went digging through the cabinets for some crackers and a protein bar for himself. He grabbed two bottles of water and headed for the stairs again, feeling slightly more up for the task ahead.

Anya had decided to take guard of Ilya. She sat even now on the floor by his side of the bed with her face on her paws, watching the door warily as Shane entered.

"You keeping an eye on Papa?" He smiled sadly.

Ilya was still in bed, nothing but his curls on the crown of his head sticking out from under the duvet. Looking at him broke Shane's heart. He'd never seen him like this before. Had only caught glimpses of tense frowns, irritation laced with hurt when Shane couldn't read his mind, and that had all been before. They'd only been fully moved in together for less than six months. It was supposed to be a home, no more hiding or back-and-forth trips at midnight to

squeeze a few hours together. He had thought naively that they were done with challenges. At least for a little while.

It was hard for Shane not to take this on his shoulders. He sometimes didn't feel fully in touch with his own emotions. Not in a macho way, but more so like he couldn't quite name the different flavors. He didn't always know why his lips pulled together and his jaw tensed or why his eyes would blur with tears. Often it was only after an event, an argument with a teammate, or a disagreement with his mom, that he could reflect and pull at the threads until the picture became clear to him. Sometimes it was Ilya who had to tell him, who had made his own language of Shane-isms –trademarked and all, according to him. Now it kind of felt like Shane's turn, and he wasn't so sure he had the same literacy.

Shane crawled into his side of the bed with his snacks. They were not a "snacks in bed" household, though Shane had a sneaking suspicion Ilya sometimes snuck ice-cream for himself and Anya after dicking him unconscious so he wouldn't protest. But the bowls were always gone in the morning, so he could never prove it.

He took a deep breath and tugged at the duvet until his husband was revealed to him. Ilya was awake, but his face looked ashen, his stubble thickening by the minute. There was a certain daze to him, like he wasn't quite here in the room but somewhere else, farther away. This scared Shane more than anything.

His hand trembled when he reached his fingers into Ilya's hair. The look on Iya's face seemed like he might crumble at any moment.

"I brought you a snack." He whispered. "Do you think you could eat some crackers for me?"

Ilya muttered something in Russian, but it was too low and too fast for him to translate.

"I didn't catch that, but it's not really a question. You need to eat."

He's not sure how he gets him to sit up for the first time, but it's maybe the greatest accomplishment of his life. Who needs a Stanley Cup anyway?

Ilya rests his back against the headboard, allowing Shane to see him for the first time since last night. His eyes go wild, tracking every muscle, every ounce of flesh li there might be something physically attacking this man that he loved. But the only signs were the redness of his nose, the matte finish of tears that had flowed and since dried. He looks so tired. Small.

“Can I..”

He pulls one of the crackers from the packet and raises it to Ilya’s lips, like maybe feeding him could help solve this. But all it does is make Ilya’s nostrils flutter, and his eyes rim with tears. Shane freezes and doesn’t move closer.

“Pozhaluysta.” *Please*.

The plea rocks Shane to his very core.

“I just want to help.” He whispers back to him.

Ilya bites back a sob and lets his lips take shape around his native tongue. Shane leans on every word with rapt attention to translate.

“I cannot burden you with this.” He tells him in Russian. “It makes me sick.”

Shave replays the words gently on his own tongue, sussing out the meaning in stagnant phrases and then doubling back to place them together in context. And then he shatters.

“O–Okay. It’s okay. I’m sorry.”

He ends up sitting there helplessly while Ilya eats pieces of a cracker and sniffles. His posture is rigid, and he keeps a line of space between the two of them so their skin doesn’t touch. It’s

the first time he's ever had to even think about something like that outside of public scrutiny.

Ilya, at least, lets him take the cap off the water bottle for him before he takes a few gulps to wash it all down. When he pulls the covers back over himself, Shane doesn't protest. He just sits there staring a hole into the husband-sized lump in his bed and silently freaks out.

Ilya's pov

He is 10 years old. The cold of the ice is so intense it feels almost warm against the heat of his cheeks. His hockey stick is nimble in his fingers as he leans in for the final face-off of the game. Behind him, his teammates tap their sticks against the glass to support him in the final moments of the game. But over the roar of his team, he hears his father's sharp voice cut across the ice and directly into his consciousness.

"ILYA!! YOU WILL DESTROY THEM!

The anger in his words fills him with nerves and reminds him of how little wiggle room exists for him on and off the ice. His stick stutters against the ice. He loses the face-off.

His body jerks to the right and his skates curve towards the opposing team's end of the ice. His thighs burn with every dig into the ice, and his heart races faster in his chest than it had the entire game. His desperation to fix his mistake, to right himself in his father's eyes, fuels him faster and faster. But today he is not enough. The buzzer sounds. The other team piles into an excited heap. His head bows in shame.

As he exits the ice, a sharp whack lands across his cheek, both punishing and final. He does not cry. He does not speak back. Instead, the shame settles over him in waves more painful than any physical blow his father could have dealt. He would do better next time. There would be no question of it.

In the dream, his mother is not there, just like the memory his subconsciousness beckons him towards. It is a first taste of the loneliness that is to come in his life - a stillness in the void that consumes the space between his ribs until one day he'll go in search of anything that might fill it. Anything to take this feeling away.

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He wakes in the middle of the night. The lights are dimmed except for the bedside lamps and the mood lighting under their bed that Shane had seen in some magazine and had to have. His mouth feels like cotton, and his arm feels funny where he slept on it for hours. It's the first time in hours he's able to notice anything but agony. When he pokes his head out from the sheets, Shane is there. With his glasses and a book, as if it is just like a normal day. Normal day where his husband's brain is broken and his stupid feelings are leaking all over the bed sheets.

Shane notices him stir and puts the book down, but doesn't move towards him like he is hesitant, afraid. Even now, the emotions are pulsing through him – anger at hurting him, loathing at himself for still feeling so fucking tired, fear that this might never end, longing for his mother whom he'll never get back.

He clears his throat. "What time is it?"

Shane pulls at his glasses and checks his phone from the bedside table.

"It's a little after ten."

"I slept entire day."

He's not sure if it's a question so much as a reckoning. His throat is dry, and his limbs are still heavy, and he doesn't really understand what is going on.

Shane nods. "That's okay. Clearly, you needed it."

"*Shane…"*

He searches for the words to explain to him, to apologize, maybe even beg for forgiveness. But nothing comes.

Instead, Shane pushes himself down into the safety of the covers, turns his body so that their faces are so close he can see a faded scar where he must've nicked himself shaving. The fog rears back, allowing him a moment of clarity just to see the destruction he'd left behind. It's a cruelty that rocks him to his very core.

"It's okay."

Shane places his palm right side up in the space between them like he's afraid Ilya won't want his hand touching him. There's a memory of broken crackers settling like sand in his mouth and the burn of tears in Shane's eyes. The loathing again rears up like a great big wave that threatens to swallow him whole. He reaches for his hand, and it's the best feeling he's had in hours. He closes his eyes, and it feels like stepping into the sun after a lifetime of darkness.

"Can I ask something of you?"

"Anything." Shane answered immediately.

"You are sure?"

Because there was part of him that maybe wanted Shane to deny him this, that felt like he deserved to be denied.

Shane only nodded and squeezed his fingers.

"Would you maybe hold me for little while?

Shane's face morphed into a smile that would have had Ilya kissing him silly any other day of the week. His eyes are still glazed over, and there's a sadness there that breaks Ilya's heart. But for now, he will settle for plopping firmly down onto his chest and letting his husband cuddle him. It's all he has the energy for.

Shane puts his fingers in his hair and scratches his nails against his back. He feels absolutely wrung out and raw. And there's a sense of dread that reaches him from the outer edges of his mind. He can feel the darkness of clouds just beyond him, not fully gone but broken up in the moment. He's grateful now for the touch, starved for it even.

"I just wanna say one thing, and you can tell me to go fuck myself if you want, alright?"

His voice hits Ilya's ear a little differently in the haze of a post-depression nap. When Shane gets nervous, the stiltedness of his voice grows like a stick shift refusing to move cleanly between the gears. Ilya finds it soothing and nestles deeper into his arms.

"I just want you to know you can always tell me anything. I would sit here all day and listen to you tell me every thought you've ever had. I'd listen to you in Russian. I'd listen to you in English, and I wouldn't even care if you had to slow down and take breaks to find the words. I would . . . I would wait for you to find the words."

It hits him like an actual beam of sunshine. Shane wasn't always a man of many words. So much of what he came to know about him was in the way the muscles in his face twitched or a tiny shift of movement in his eyes. Ilya loved to read him and took pride in his fluency. So when he did find the words, when he worked so hard to make himself be understood, it felt like a lifeline to Ilya.

He feels his eyes betray him when a tear finds its way down the bridge of his nose and onto Shane's nipple because life is a cruel joke with a terrible punch line.

"Is still…too much. All of it. I want to tell you, but I am so tired."

Ilya pauses and weighs his next words on his tongue as the tears come stronger now.

“My mother.” His voice breaks. “I cannot see her. Gavno (*shit)*. Not in real life. In my dreams, I hear her, but she does not come.”

It’s just a piece from the pile weighing heavily on his heart, but Shane seems to understand enough to pull him closer, his arms like a vice around Ilya’s back. Ilya has to fight the discomfort where his skin still feels overly exposed just to be close to him. He falls asleep this way with Shane’s scent in his nose and a hand in his hair. He hopes more than anything that when he wakes, the fog has gone away.

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three days later

Shane’s pov

Shane closes the rear car door behind Anya as she thumps her tail against the back seat in excitement. He’d already dropped Ilya off for his first therapy appointment since the episode and was desperate to be in the parking lot waiting for the second the appointment was over.

The past few days had been a lot to say the least. Shane had covered most of what the internet had to offer on depressive episodes and how to help your loved ones manage them. He wasn’t in therapy like Ilya, and he wanted to make sure he didn’t say the wrong thing. His husband was still surprisingly tender and hadn’t returned yet to most of his daily responsibilities. They were taking it slow, and Shane wanted to make sure he was there to support him through it all.

Ilya stepped outside of the therapist’s office, face pensive and committed. Without thinking, Shane stumbled out of the car to meet him as if he couldn’t make it there in one piece. He just wanted to make sure. His arms were stuffed into the pockets of the sweatshirt Shane had laid out for him before they left. He reached to thumb at the fabric of the pocket to help with the nerves. He bit his lip and locked his knees, so he didn’t leap and *hold him*. He, too, was still just barely keeping it together.

“Hi.”

“*Hi*.”

Shane smiled. “How'd it go?”

“Okay. Actually, Galina said I should invite you into the process so that you are not alone. Will you come?”

His head is already nodding before Ilya has finished his sentence. It takes a moment for his brain to catch up to his body’s need to do anything, Ilya asked.

“I want to. Anya’s in the car, though. I took her to the groomers.”

His eyes track every detail of his husband's face, looking for signs of disappointment or sadness, or his least favorite, the voidless expression that came when Shane caught him staring at the wall for hours. He wanted to make sure he understood every flicker of emotion he could.

Ilya looked back at the car where Anya was currently going wild now that she was within his eyesight. Shane notices that he smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I know. I told her. She says she has treats inside her desk.”

And that’s how Shane finds himself sitting on a couch beside Ilya, clutching desperately at a pillow for emotional support while Anya sits in the corner gnawing on a dog bone. Dr. Galina Molchalina sits in a chair facing them with a notebook in her lap and her hands clasped on top. She gives him a knowing smile as if she is on a joke Shane himself is unclear of. He wonders, not for the first time, what kinds of things Ilya has told her about him.

“Hello, Shane. Thank you for joining us.” She welcomed. “I wanted to make sure we spent a few minutes as a group to chat about next steps for Ilya. It can be jarring for our loved ones when we have these dips in our own wellness. Ilya wasn’t able to communicate with you the way he typically would, right, Ilya?”

Ilya nods and squeezes a pillow of his own. Shane turns so that his body faces him, so Ilya knows he has his entire attention.

“Yes. I have much more to tell you. And I will, I promise. But I wanted you to know I’m grateful and to thank you for taking care of me.”

“Of course. I’d do anything for you.” He assured him.

Ilya’s eyes flicker back over to Galina. She gives him a nod of confidence. It seems to be the push he needs to speak a little more.

“All my life, I have found a way to ignore my emotions. Because it kept me safe from life with my father and my–my mother too. Now I am not so good at telling what they are when I need to…or that they are there at all until, well, you know.”

He can see how hard it is for Ilya to work through his thoughts, can see him rehashing fresh revelations from his session in his mind before he shares. More than anything, he still looks so tired and wrung out. And Shane knows better than anyone how bad things must be to halt him in his tracks this way. He wants to tell him that sometimes he feels the same way, that he’s the one who helped him figure out he should try. But he doesn’t want to interrupt.

He drops his pillow and reaches for Ilya’s hands. It’s still new, these public displays of affection, but the need to touch him again outweighs any feelings of shame. It’s the first time Ilya lets him touch him since he found him that morning. It kind of takes his breath away, and he can feel his face warm at having such an experience with an audience. Ilya raises a hand and brushes his thumb across his freckles. It’s almost embarrassing how good it makes him feel.

“I do not take our life for granted. I do not take you for granted.”

All he can do is nod and try to show him it had never been a question for Shane. Ilya was sick, and that didn't mean he didn't love him or their life together.

"I think you're giving my ability to jump to conclusions a little too much credit. I never thought that you did."

It gets a chuckle out of him and maybe a stray tear, too. And then, as if to hide from the moment he shoves his face into Shane's neck and lets him hug him close like they're the only ones in the room. Or the world.

"Whatever it is that's got you here now, we can work on it together," Shane promised. "Pretty sure we're stuck with each other for life, so…"

"I love you." He sniffles in Russian.

And it causes him to smile even in what is undoubtedly one of the more depressing rooms he'd ever occupied. So he says it back and thanks Galina for all her help before he gets Ilya back into the car to drive his family home.

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Ilya's pov

He stands in front of a closet door, young again –maybe 12.. His hands are clenched tightly at his sides, and he twitches where he stands. Whatever is on the other side scares him beyond belief. Before he can turn away and run with his tail between his legs, he becomes aware of his father's presence. It looms behind him and casts a shadow that engulfs his entire body. For some reason, he doesn't speak. But for all his silence his being still finds a way to do the talking for him. He feels threatened by the very knowledge of sharing space with him. In horror, he has the thought that he might piss himself.

Then the door opens, and he steps through to put as much distance between the two of them as possible. Darkness opens up to his mother's bedroom. He recognizes the scene immediately, has never quite been able to rid himself of the image. The quilt his mother had knitted in the springtime to keep the flowers close in the winter months was sprawled at the foot of the bed. Her body was well covered, but her hand hung limp off the side of the bed and onto the bedside table. It was like her hand pointed guiltily to the empty pill bottle. And as the scene became clear to him, so too did the raw emotions that filled him. Agony. Desperation. Fear.

He begs and pleads and cries and shakes, but she does not move, forever gone away from him. He, alone.

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He awakens with a start, his hands fisted in the duvet and his heart racing against his ribs. The room is dark and silent except for Anya snoring at the foot of the bed. Shane sleeps quietly beside him. He lies there quietly for a few minutes, willing his heart beat to calm and his hands to stop trembling, but the steadiness never comes. With a grunt, he exits the bed in search of nicotine.

Shane finds him in the backyard next to the fireplace with a cigarette between his lips.

"Is my last one, promise." He mumbles lazily.

Shane flicks the remaining pack off the patio furniture and throws a blanket over their legs.

"Sure, I believe you."

They sit in silence for a moment, Shane's presence warm and comforting beside him. It makes him shiver in the wake of his dream, so opposite was this feeling that he could only share with Shane. He thinks it's this comfort that helps the words start to roll off his tongue as he works to open himself up like he knows he needs to.

“I’ve been having dreams. It’s like a mix between a memory and a dream. Mostly it’s my mother. I rarely get to see her, which feels cruel, no? It’s mostly just her voice, or this feeling that she is so close yet I know I will never reach her. It makes me feel…alone.”

Shane nods and shuffles forward even closer until they touch from shoulder to thigh. He has to flip his cigarette to the hand farthest from his husband so the smoke doesn’t waft too badly. Then he keeps talking.

“Sometimes it’s my father. He wasn’t just hard on my mother. He could be…what’s the word um–punishing maybe? Is not right, but close enough. I had to learn not to be afraid, or I could never have survived. He used to scream so loud my teeth would shake, and that made my hockey worse, so he would scream more. I learned that to be calm, I needed to not feel.”

Ilya takes another drag of his cigarette and pretends he’s not just pausing to make sure Shane won’t go running for the hills. The past week had left him less sure of everything.

“I’m trying to imagine baby Ilya,” Shane smirked. “Were you a wild child before?”

He shook his head. “No, that was already reserved for my brother. I was much more sensitive, quiet. Is what brought me closer to my mother. Is also what led me to hockey. My father thought it would bring the man out in me or something. I wanted to be whatever they wanted me to be.”

It wipes the smirk from his face and reminds them both of the more serious tone of conversation, each of them used to playful undertones and gently chiding.

“That explains a lot, you know? When you moved to Ottawa and all the things you did to make us work…I’m sorry I didn’t see that at the time. I’m sorry I ever made you feel that way with me.”

He claps his palms gently to Shane’s cheek and probably blinks back tears because apparently that’s a thing he does now.

“Is not about you, Hollander. I was repeating old cycles. That’s what Galina calls it. We needed to talk more, yes? Be honest with each other. Is my fault too.”

“Well, I forgive you.”

“Me too.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Ok.”

Shane swipes the nail of his thumb back and forth across his lip. It’s one of Ilya’s favorite tells. That he’s building up to putting himself out there, showing himself to Ilya. Usually, Ilya has more patience for the build-up, could squirm and wait for the words to come out in their own unique staccato rhythm. Not tonight.

He stubs out the cigarette and sets it to the side to dispose of later. They’re already as close as they can get, but he lets his hand creep steadily up Shane’s neck until he’s grasping his jaw. It makes Shane look at him with lust and want, which is a topic they must return to as soon as possible. But the intimacy of the moment feels important, feels like the thing Galina had said he needed to lean into. Letting others in. Being vulnerable.

“How could you be nervous to speak to me?” He hummed. “You can ask me anything, you know that.”

Shawne wraps his own hands around Ilya’s forearm and lets his chin sink into Ilya’s hold.

“Was I in any of your dreams?”

It’s a big question. Mostly because it’s a big answer. He pauses to give himself time to think, but this seems to be answer enough for Shane, who starts to pull away.

“I knew it.” He muttered. “I hurt you.”

“Jesus Christ, Hollander, you did not even give me time to speak! What happened to waiting for me to find words, huh?”

Shane glances up at him with soft eyes and a sheepish smile.

“Guess I got a bit ahead of myself.”

“No shit.” He deadpanned. “You were there, okay? But not the same as my family. Most of what I dreamed about was before. With the hotel rooms and the condo. I dreamt of all the times I pushed you away. And how lonely it made me feel. I told myself I only deserved those seconds between orgasms, the ones where you looked at me like maybe you loved me too. I told myself whatever to keep me…small. Afraid. Is what I was used to.”

He softens at the explanation, and though his face doesn’t show it, Shane’s eyes are haunted by his words. He pulls Ilya’s face close once again and kisses him.

“You don’t have to be any of that anymore. Not with me. Ever.”

His hands don’t let Ilya turn away when the tears come again. One thing he still hadn’t gotten over was his caring for Ilya so clearly. He’d been loved before, certainly by Svetlana and a boy or two from his first couple of summers when he’d been old enough to sneak into the clubs. But never so intensely, and never reciprocated by every fiber of his being. Sometimes Shane looked at him like he was all there was. It was a scary feeling to mean so much to someone when you did not believe in yourself. It was both overwhelming in his desire for it to be true as it was paralyzing to anticipate living up to. He wanted to be worthy so badly.

“Okay.” He mumbled wetly. “I am learning, though; have patience, yes?”

“We’ve got time. Like nothing but it.”

It brings him comfort to remember they’ve only just begun.

Later, when they’ve shut off the fireplace and snuck back into bed, he finds himself back in Shane’s arms. He feels lighter than he has in days, though his body is still somehow exhausted. At least now there was a path forward, and he was not alone. It was something he knew consciously but had lost somewhere in the thickness of the fog. He’d already been chosen. There were no further boxes for him to check.

Shane rubs his back in soothing circles until the room grows fuzzy around the edges and his eyes begin to droop. In his dream that night, he is not alone but with Shane. He never has to be alone again.

The End.

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