

Happy Together

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Happy Together

by [buckdogbuckley](#)

Summary

Shane gets in the car and slams the door shut.

“What was that?” his dad asks, voice slightly worried.

“Nothing,” Shane says unconvincingly, looking down at his hands, tearing at the skin around his fingernails.

“Didn’t look like nothing, bud. It’s unlike you not to say bye to your friend like that. Or slam the door.”

“Ilya Rozanov is *not* my friend, Dad.”

Shane Hollander thinks he's ready for 8th grade. For the most part, he is.

Enter: Ilya Rozanov.

Shane is not ready for the way his life is about to change.

Notes

“Not bad country, Canada.”

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause it’s the best country!” Shane states confidently.

“Hm. Do not know yet.”

“Uh, yeah! You *should* know. Canada invented hockey,” Shane maintains. “The best sport in the world – the best country in the world.”

“Ah, okay. Hockey is best sport in world,” Ilya agrees easily.

Ilya and Shane, and rivalry, and friendship, and hockey.

- Inspired by [Young and Hopelessly Smitten](#) by [jukoist](#)

Chapter 1: imagine how the world could be

Shane is kind of bummed that the school year is starting again. Like, probably every kid in the world is bummed the school year is starting again, but Shane especially. He wasn't done having fun at his family's lakeside cottage. For a winter-sport-playing Canadian boy, he sure loved the summer. Warm sun shining bright in skies so blue, the cool breeze rustling green leaves all around, all the time in the world to do whatever he pleased. He loved the feeling of days melting together, time becoming a long-lost concept to him for the season. It's the best part of his year, other than hockey.

When Shane is at the cottage with his parents, he can get away with doing things that they never let him do at home. He wakes up late. He swims in the lake, even when his dad is worried the water is still too cold, or his mom wants him to come inside to eat lunch. There's a lot of general running around. He stays up much longer than usual. That's his favorite part. It gets so dark where they are, so remote and isolated away from civilization, like his dad likes to say. He *loves* to watch the stars at night, how they come out after sunset, dotting the inky black sky in countless little shining spots. He went on the computer one day to look up constellations. He can definitely recognize at least three, in the right conditions.

He can even catch a glimpse of a shooting star sometimes, if he's lucky. He always makes a wish, even though he's 13 already, and making a wish upon a star feels kind of childish. He doesn't really believe they'll come true, but still – he wishes. Never tells anyone. It's his biggest secret.

Well, back to the school year.

He's in eighth grade now, and he knows everyone in his class already, obviously. Shane goes to a relatively small Canadian French boarding school, his mom insisted, and he doesn't really mind. It's not like he has a lot of friends or anything; he knows he's not the most popular boy, but he does well if he can say so himself. He's good at hockey, and that always gets him attention. It's also the reason his mom convinced him to go here. His school has a pretty good hockey program, teaches French at a high level, which his mom had insisted on, and is close to home. He's one of the local students.

Sitting down at his desk before class starts, he takes out some stuff from his backpack. More kids start filtering in, girls shrieking with excitement to see friends they had definitely seen during summer break, while boys fist-bump and high-five, energy buzzing high throughout the class.

The bell rings, and everyone finds their seats, leaving Shane in his usual spot, dead center in the back row. The spot on his right that was reserved for his buddy Joe last year is left empty. Joe moved cities. Shane is not feeling insecure about it whatsoever. He has so many other friends. He's friendly with some of the girls, though he wouldn't go as far as to call it friendship. The guys on the hockey team are kind of nice to him, even though he's younger than them, even if they're not actually that great at hockey, and they curse too often, and they

push him around a little bit, and call him names sometimes, and- never mind. You get the idea.

While lost in thought, he somehow completely missed that his teacher, Miss Danon, was already in the classroom, greeting everybody. Somehow, he also missed the tall, gangly boy standing next to her. Huh.

“Bonjour à tous,” she begins, and a few voices greet her back. “As you can see, we have a new student joining us this year. Introduce yourself, dear.”

The boy looks around awkwardly. “My name is Ilya Rozanov, I am from Russia,” spills from his mouth in heavily accented, somewhat robotic English. Huh, Russia. International students are entirely expected in his school, but usually just ones who are French, or at least speak French. Well, maybe he does speak French.

Miss Danon doesn't make him introduce himself in French as well, instead gesturing towards the empty desk on Shane's right.

When Ilya walks over, Shane catches his eye, tries to lend a friendly smile, and Ilya immediately looks away. Alright then, message received.

All day, he sneaks glances at Ilya. He doesn't seem to be doing any of his schoolwork. Mostly, he sits there looking disinterested, except in French, where Shane has caught him looking absolutely dumbfounded, looking down at his notebook in utter despair, hands in his hair like he's about to start ripping it out. Guess he doesn't speak it.

(Shane misses all the glances Ilya sneaks back, and the wide-eyed stare Ilya sends his way during French.)

—

A month of school goes by. Every day that passes is one day closer to hockey. Every day that passes is also another day spent realizing Ilya Rozanov apparently entirely dislikes him. Shane has no idea why. He tries to be so nice to him, even after that initial meeting, he's giving Ilya the benefit of the doubt. New country, new schools, no friends. He can understand. But he doesn't understand why Ilya hates him so aggressively.

Ilya doesn't look his way, doesn't reply when Shane says ‘good morning’ or ‘hello’, and nothing, not even a word. Shane attempts to be a good, respectful, welcoming classmate, and everything he tries just doesn't work.

Girls come up to Ilya, fawning over him, asking him all sorts of questions he barely responds to, but they never seem deterred. Some of the boys have somehow gotten him to fistbump as hello every morning, making a little bit of conversation mostly at him rather than with him, but still! What in the world does this boy have against Shane?

So he gives up. If Ilya is ignoring him, Shane will ignore him back.

Shane tries to do just that. He doesn't look at him, doesn't say good morning, doesn't offer help in class when Ilya clearly needs it. It's a bit harder to do when a month into the school year, hockey practice begins, with a new addition to the team.

One Ilya Rozanov.

And Shane was really excited for hockey this year! He's doing *so well* now that they're letting him play against the biggest kids, the fastest kids, the *best* kids. He's so excited! Shane knows one thing for certain: he's better than all of them combined. Some would call him a prodigy, a once-in-a-generation talent. This would make him blush, but he'd never deny it. His mother raised him better than that; he knows his worth in hockey.

Now, however, this hockey season, much like this school year, is different. For the exact same reason.

That's fine. Shane can keep ignoring him.

Shane's coach is standing in front of the entire hockey team, introducing Ilya, and Shane is distracted. Ilya looks different here at the rink. He stands taller, sure of himself. He has a certain glimmer in his eyes that Shane can't quite place. To Shane's surprise, he's even smirking a bit. He looks a thousand times more confident here than he did back in class.

Coach is done talking now, sends them off to the ice for their usual routine, and Shane finds out exactly why Ilya Rozanov looked like that.

Ilya Rozanov is a marvel on the ice. Damn it.

He performs all the drills with such intense precision, he's easily maneuvering between other teammates on the ice, puck glued to the end of his stick, he checks kids much bigger than him, dodges and swerves just right, and does it all with a shit-eating grin on his stupid face. Shane is almost having a hard time keeping up with him.

Key word: 'almost'.

Shane isn't afraid to skate right up to him, narrowly avoiding the check Ilya was just about to land at him, steal the puck, and then he's off. He glides on the ice, passes the puck to a kid on his left, and when he's right up to the net, he gets the puck back and sends it home. Score!

He turns around to smile at his teammates, maybe high-five some of them, and finds them all huddled around Ilya Rozanov. They're firing so many questions at him, faster than he can answer. Shane thinks Ilya might be overwhelmed by all that attention, but then the look on his face changes, quickly turning into something cocky and so sure of himself.

Shane looks down at the ice, contemplating. He's the one who won, and Ilya Rozanov is the one who's getting all the attention? How is that fair? Looking back up, he makes eye contact with Ilya. Ilya's grin widens, and he gives Shane a mean, condescending look. Shane huffs and turns around, skating towards the benches to drink some water.

Sitting down at the bench, he sighs and closes his eyes. He should have expected this outcome. New, aloof boy from another country, insanely good at hockey, already deemed so cool by seemingly everyone. And how could he not? Shane has eyes. He can see that Ilya Rozanov has everything Shane doesn't have to offer. Ilya Rozanov is a mystery. He doesn't talk, but that makes everyone want to know more. He doesn't try to be friends with anyone, and that makes everyone want to try harder. He's so good at hockey, and that makes the team like him. It never made the team like Shane. Not talking never made Shane more sought after.

It hurts, it does. But Shane is used to it by now. He takes a deep breath, just like his dad practiced with him, and opens his eyes. Predictably, all the boys are still surrounding Ilya. Unpredictably, Ilya catches Shane's eyes with a somewhat worried stare like he's pitying Shane for being the loser that he is. Whatever.

When they finish practice, it's almost dark out. Shane sits outside the rink waiting for his dad to come pick him up, and who else sits down next to him, but Ilya Rozanov. Shane looks away with a huff. What does he want? Can't Shane get a break?

"Hey. Good game."

"What?" Shane whips his head around to look at Ilya. Ilya has the same annoying smile on his face that he had all throughout practice. Oh. He came over to taunt Shane. Figures.

"You... small. But whoosh!" Ilya moves his hand forward in a swift motion. What does that even mean?

"I'm not small. We're in the same grade," Shane grumbles and frowns.

"Same, maybe, but..." Ilya trails off and makes another gesture. He puts his hand forehead height and moves it towards Shane, comparing their heights. He's taller.

Shane groans and rolls his eyes, turning his face back away. He's starting to get really annoyed by this guy. Luckily, his dad just pulled up. He quickly gets up, grabs his bag and doesn't say goodbye to Ilya. Ilya stands up as well, and just as Shane opens the car door to get in, he yells.

"But whoosh!"

Shane gets in the car and slams the door shut.

"What was that?" his dad asks, voice slightly worried.

"Nothing," Shane says unconvincingly, looking down at his hands, tearing at the skin around his fingernails.

"Didn't look like nothing, bud. It's unlike you not to say bye to your friend like that. Or slam the door."

"Ilya Rozanov is *not* my friend, Dad," Shane replies, looking up at his dad, offended.

“Oh, that’s too bad. He has no idea what he’s missing,” his dad chuckled. Shane rolls his eyes.

Over the course of the next few weeks, something weird starts happening in class. Shane keeps ignoring Ilya, obviously, but it seems like Ilya cannot take a hint. Shane is unbothered by Ilya’s attempts of embarrassing him, or annoying him, or hurting his feelings, which is what Ilya seems to be trying to do here. Shane doesn’t really get it, because Ilya is going about it all wrong. Like, obviously, Shane doesn’t want to be bullied, but at least do it like you mean it. Whatever Ilya’s trying isn’t working. Shane doesn’t care, which apparently makes Ilya try harder. He thought bullying worked the opposite way, like, reacting is what you’re not supposed to do, because then the bullying doesn’t stop. Apparently, if you don’t react, the bullying also doesn’t stop. Go figure.

Anyway, Shane still doesn’t care. He doesn’t care when Ilya keeps asking for pens, pencils, and all sorts of school supplies, and then doesn’t give them back. Shane stopped giving him those pretty quickly, but Ilya won’t stop asking. He also doesn’t care that he finds Ilya sitting on his desk every morning. He simply waits near the back of the class, careful not to make eye contact with him until the first teacher of the day walks in. Ilya usually moves back to his own seat by then. He also definitely does not care about the notes Ilya throws at him. Well, not really at him, Ilya aims at the desk, so they land on Shane’s open book or worksheet, so he isn’t able to pretend they don’t exist. This one, though, he truly doesn’t care about for one simple reason—he can’t read Russian. Ilya has been in this school for a couple of months by now, and somehow has not made the connection that Shane does not understand Russian. Which is why Shane doesn’t care. What he can’t read can’t hurt him. The notes do pose a threat of making the teacher think Shane is a willing participant in all of this, but thankfully, that has not happened yet. Shane usually just stuffs them in his pencil case to avoid suspicion.

When other kids decide, as so often happens, that they don’t like Shane, he respects that. Honestly, other than Joe, he doesn’t particularly like anyone else in the entire school. But he respects it, because when those other kids decided they didn’t really like Shane, at least they had the decency not to constantly bug him about it. Ilya has turned his antagonism into a professional sport, and he’s trying to win gold at the Olympics.

Ilya is also a very competitive boy, and it’s very apparent in how he plays hockey. Shane usually is just as competitive, but as per his new set of rules of ignoring Ilya Rozanov, he has mellowed out some, which makes Ilya chase him twice as hard. Ugh. Can he leave him alone already? Why does he need to rub it in Shane’s face that he’s so much better and so much more liked around here? Shane knows. He has eyes. He’s not even trying to be as popular as Ilya; he’s actually not trying to be popular at all. Ilya doesn’t seem to get that.

Shane plays hockey just as well as he did before, obviously. It’s not like he’s making himself play worse; he just doesn’t engage in stupid competition. Ilya keeps trying to lure him into said stupid competitions. Every drill they have, Ilya tries to do it a little bit faster, a little bit better. He keeps looking over at Shane, to check if he’s noticing, like, ‘hey, look how much better I am!’ and it drives Shane nuts.

He's better than Ilya, most of the time. Ilya has to adjust to a whole new language and team, and Shane doesn't. Ilya is starting to catch up, though, and it's becoming a *real* struggle. A worthy opponent. Wait, that sounds so conceited. Shane just thinks it's about time there's someone on the hockey team who can keep up with him. He still doesn't like him, though.

Still, no matter how little of a reaction, absolutely nothing of a reaction, Ilya gets out of Shane, he doesn't seem to get bored like Shane thought he would be by now.

More notes find a home in his pencil case. He still doesn't care. Until.

Until this note.

One Thursday morning, Ilya just took it a step too far. The note that lands on Shane's desk today is different from the others. It's folded up, which makes Shane curious. Shane should know better; he knows what happened to the cat, and yet, he opens the folded-up note. Inside, instead of the usual Cyrillic script, he finds a drawing.

Looking at it a bit more, Shane realizes it's a drawing of him. It's not a good drawing; it shows his face very simply, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, hair. What sticks out to him are the dots covering his face, and an arrow pointing to them. At the end of the arrow is a single written word: pretty.

That's it. Shane could handle each and any other form of bullying at the hands of this boy, because they truly did not get to him. This, however? This was crossing a big red line. Unbelievable.

Shane crumples the piece of paper in anger and tosses it back at Ilya, hitting him square in the face. Ilya tosses it right back. Shane can feel his face getting redder by the second.

"Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov! What has gotten into you two?" Miss Danon exclaimed. "Passing notes in class is unacceptable."

Great. Not only is Ilya making fun of Shane, but he's also getting him into trouble now?

He's never gonna like this guy. No way.

He glances to his right, expecting that same smug look he's grown so used to plastered on Ilya's face, and finds he can only recognize a layer of anxiety, somewhat hidden, but he knows that feeling too well to let it escape him.

Shane reacts before thinking too much about it. "Désolé, Miss Danon. It won't happen again."

"Yes, uh, désolé," Ilya repeats, the word foreign in his mouth, his head bowed down, hands clutched together. God, even when Shane covers for him, he can't help but mock him.

"Merci, boys," Miss Danon dismisses them with a stern look. "Don't let it happen again," and continues with the lesson.

Shane tries even harder to ignore Ilya now, but he won't stop whispering his name. They *just* got a warning. He looked stressed about being reprimanded. Why would he risk it again? Does he never learn?

Thankfully for Shane, class is just about to end. He can block out any of Ilya's shots at communication and bolt to the cafeteria. By then, the other kids would normally be flocking to Ilya, and he wouldn't be interested in pestering Shane any longer. Counting the seconds until the bell rings, Shane stares at the door. The second the bell rings, he's out of there.

After a very ambitious speed-walk to the cafeteria, he can finally relax. Sweet, sweet solitude. He routinely sits alone during lunch, not that he cares, and he barely ever sees Ilya in here not surrounded by at least three hockey dudes asking for tips, sharing stories, and arguing over who's the best player in the league, or a girl or two, still seeking to decipher the mystery behind his stoic face.

Unfortunately, Ilya Rozanov did not get the memo. Again. When will Shane be free of his stupid, perfect, dumb, charismatic face?

Shane's patience is being tested. This is all one big prank, a joke at his expense. He looks up at Ilya, despite himself.

Ilya has a serious look on his face. "I want... sorry. Apology," he states to Shane. The audacity of this guy! In what world does Shane owe Ilya an apology? Ilya is the one who should be saying sorry! Ilya started this! He makes his annoyance known.

"What?" he yells, "You started it! I never did anything to you. What do you want from me? In what world would I be the one to owe you an apology? What are you on about? Since the beginning of the year, I've been nothing but nice and kind, and I was really trying to be a good classmate, but you decided you hate me, and I never did anything to you, and now, after *you* almost got us in trouble, you want *me* to apologize? What the hell?" He breathes heavily, panic slowly setting in, he just yelled in the middle of the cafeteria where everyone can see and hear, and— he's really panicking now. "Well?" He finishes his rant.

"Too much word, too fast," Is all Ilya says.

"You're such an asshole, dude," Shane declares. "Leave me alone." Shane stands up, leaving his tray of food behind. He doesn't feel so hungry anymore. As he's making his way out of the cafeteria, he hears everyone starting to whisper.

—

Actually, to Shane's surprise, Ilya finally does. Completely. Or completely-ish. He stops whispering his name in class, stops watching him in class, and stops trying to engage him in competition when they're at hockey practice. Really, he stops almost everything, except the notes.

Shane learned his lesson. He doesn't unfold them anymore. Never reads what other insults might be waiting inside. Notes that find their way onto his desk get stuffed in his pencil case and ceremoniously dumped into the class trash can at the end of every day. Ilya doesn't stop.

Kind of like he really wants Shane to look inside, like he's daring him to open it, but Shane's been burned once, and he's not stupid. He learns from his mistakes. And that was one hell of a mistake, so.

At hockey practice the next week, Shane keeps scanning the rink for all possible places or instances where interaction might be impossible to dodge. He almost has it, nearly goes home without a single look, shove, word exchanged, anything.

False sense of security.

At the end of practice, Ilya gets him cornered.

Shane is right on his way out from the restroom, and there he stands, blocking the door. Shane decides this is where it ends. He's not gonna let this guy bother him and bully him and step all over him anymore; he can't stand around and accept it anymore. He really tried to be as un confrontational as he possibly could about this whole thing, but it didn't work, so now he has to end it himself.

While he's trying to gain the courage to do something, Ilya makes the first move.

"Stop. Please." Ilya puts both palms up, a universal peace-making gesture.

Shane is taken aback. There's sincerity in his voice that Shane did not expect to hear, and an honest look in his eyes. Fine! Might as well hear him out. Shane raises his eyebrows at him, waiting for him to resume talking.

"I am sorry. *I'm* apology," Ilya pleads.

"Apologize," Shane corrects without thinking.

"I'm *apologize*," Ilya amends. "For drawing I draw."

Oh. Shane did not prepare for this. Never in a million years did he think that the kid who spent all his time since the beginning of the year being absolutely aggravating would say sorry. Like, that was just mind-blowing. Shane is dealing with a lot right now. This simply does not compute. The boy in front of him is the same boy who just last week demanded Shane be the one to apologize— Oh. Oh shit.

Oh shit, Shane is the asshole. Well. Not entirely. Like, it's not all his fault. Ilya is still an asshole, but he tried not to be, and Shane yelled at him in front of everyone in the cafeteria for it. Ilya tried to apologize when Shane thought he was demanding an apology from Shane.

Shane took a step back, bewildered. What is he meant to do in this scenario? Ilya's eyes are scanning his face, waiting for him to respond, to say something, Shane realizes. Ilya takes a step closer to Shane, moving away from the door.

"Oh, uh. Um," Shane's eyes dance back and forth between Ilya's. "Okay. Bye," he quickly mumbles and slithers out of the opening created by Ilya's movement. He makes his escape to the parking lot, where luckily his dad was already waiting. Climbing into the front seat, he closes the door and spots Ilya just coming out of the building, eyes searching.

“Hey, bud. Everything alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” his dad asks.

“I, I don't know.”

“What do you mean, bud?”

“I- I-” Shane tries. He can't find the words. He feels terrible. How can he begin to explain what he himself doesn't still completely understand?

“Hey, no, bud. Deep breaths,” his dad looks away from the road at him for a second. “You don't have to tell me, you can take your time,” he assures.

Shane takes a deep breath as instructed. He's starting to see things more clearly. Slowly, he begins sharing with his dad everything Ilya did for the past couple of months. From ignoring him to not giving him a moment's rest, to the note.

“And, and, he drew this picture, and it was obviously of me, and he drew me with a bunch of freckles, and he drew an arrow to them and wrote ‘pretty’ next to it,” Shane told his dad, “And I knew it was to make fun of me, like I was so sure, and after everything else it really pissed me off, so I threw the note at him. And then he threw it back at me,” he added.

“Why didn't you tell anyone sooner, Shane?” His dad questioned.

“Well, I was just hoping it would go away on its own. Like, that he'd get bored with me and stop bugging me all the time like usual. But that doesn't matter, Dad, because at lunch after that, he came up to me asking *me* to apologize to him, but now I'm not so sure that's what he meant,” Shane expressed.

“And why is that?”

“‘Cause he apologized to me right before you came to pick me up. I don't get it! I don't understand him at all!” Shane is getting exceedingly frustrated. At least they are driving down their street now, and he could go inside and go to bed and forget all of this happened.

“Oh, I think I get it.” Right as they park the car, his dad turns to look at him. “I think you should tell Mom, too. I think she could really help you, maybe get you to understand him a little bit better.”

Mom would have a lot of... strong opinions about Ilya Rozanov, and she wouldn't be afraid to say them, so yeah, maybe he should. Mom would have his back. She'd know what to do. Good one, Dad.

Walking into his house, Shane immediately feels the nerves begin to dissipate. He takes his shoes off and hangs his backpack in place, and wonders what his mom would say.

“Hey, Mom?” He asks tentatively. Somewhere between the car park, the front door, and where he's standing now, in front of the couch where his mom is sitting, his confidence diminished, lost to the wind, or his never-ending thoughts, or the pit that opened up in his stomach. He kind of doesn't want to say anything, but he really needs her help. Mom looks

up at him, her eyes warm and her hands welcoming, patting down on the couch cushion, beckoning him.

She waits for him to find his words. Mom and Dad are always so patient with him. He sinks lower into the cushion, letting out a breath.

“So, at school... There’s this boy.”

Mom nods.

“And this boy has been really bothering me, and it’s not like I did anything to him, ever. But he just doesn’t like me, and usually I wouldn’t even care, but he’s been so annoying about it.”

And it’s like the floodgates have opened.

“I was being so nice! And he ignored me, so I ignored him also, but then I don’t know what changed, Mom, I swear I didn’t do anything to him, but suddenly he started, like, really bugging me. He’d do all these things, like take a pencil and not give it back, so I stopped lending him stuff, and he’d be in my seat all the time, and be just really annoying, and he’d pass me notes all the time,” Shane rambles, getting himself going.

“The notes are the worst part, Mom. Ugh. He’d pass me notes, and I couldn’t even read them, you know, ‘cause they were in Russian, and—” But his mom interrupts.

“What? Why Russian?” She asks, confused.

“Oh, ‘cause he came here from Russia. He’s in the boarding school,” Shane explains. “But never mind that, Mom! So the notes were in Russian, so I didn’t even understand what he was saying to me, and it didn’t hurt that he was making fun of me because I literally couldn’t read it, right? So I’d just throw them away. But last week he threw a note at my desk, and it was in English, and it was making fun of me, and so I threw it at him because I got really mad, and Miss Danon caught us, so I apologized. Then, at lunch he came up to me telling me to apologize, and I got even madder, because he started it, so why should I apologize, right, so I yelled at him in the cafeteria, and today he apologized to me and now I think that’s what he was trying to do last week, but I don’t know, and I feel bad for yelling at him but I’m also really, really angry.”

With his speech over, he finally relaxes into the couch, head leaning backwards onto the pillow, body still tingling, face still hot from all the emotions he just felt, from all of the words that came out of his mouth in quick succession. His chest rises and falls with his breath, and he feels his mom’s gentle touch on his face, her hand providing a much-needed cooling sensation.

“Can you tell me a little bit more about this boy? And I don’t mean what he did to you, Honey. I mean like... him. As a standalone,” his mom implores. Shane doesn’t quite understand why, but he tells her anyway, about how Ilya came to their class at the beginning of the year, how he doesn’t really talk to anyone, but everyone still really likes him, ugh. He shares that he catches Ilya looking confused more often than not during lessons, but that he’s truly at home on the ice. She asks more questions, and Shane clarifies.

“Honey, why did you think he asked *you* to apologize that first time?”

“He just said, like, ‘I want sorry,’ or something stupid like that, I don’t know,” Shane complains. His mom was taking her time having his back. Why isn’t she agreeing with him already?

“And don’t you think, Shane, that a boy who landed here two months ago from the other side of the world might not have the best English yet? What if he was trying to say he wants *to say* sorry?” His mom hints. Heavily hints. Spells it out for him, more like. Shane feels really stupid and really ashamed. He buries his face in his hands and groaned.

“You know, Sweetheart, I don’t think I’ve ever told you about what it was like for me when I came here from Japan.”

“Yes, you did. You told me about how you used to skate with grandpa and how much you loved hockey. You told me a bunch,” he speaks from behind his palms.

“Not the bunch that really matters here. I came here when I was twelve, so not that different from this Ilya of yours. And I also didn’t speak the language yet, just like Ilya. I was quiet, and I didn’t have any friends, and I was miserable, and I wasn’t even at a boarding school. I had my family right here with me, and I was still suffering. Could you imagine what that poor boy might be feeling, going through this experience while being so alone?”

Shane could not imagine.

“Shane, Honey. I’m not saying what he did was okay, or that it’s fine because he’s suffering, but you should consider that he doesn’t know how to make friends with you, and that he’s trying. Are you sure the notes were making fun of you? They were in Russian. Did you ask him to explain them?”

Shane shakes his head. He didn’t.

“Maybe tomorrow we’ll go to the mall and look for two English-to-Russian dictionaries, huh? What do you say?” His mom offered.

“Why two?”

“Communication is important, Honey. We’d be helping him communicate with you, like he’s clearly been trying to do, but it isn’t a one-way street. The other one is for you, so you can learn a little bit of Russian for him. Make him feel welcome in this scary, new place he’s in.”

Shane strongly doubts that Ilya Rozanov is afraid of anything, but his mom was right. He feels so awful for not even considering this a possibility. Ilya wasn’t talking to anyone, yes, although not because he thought himself better or anything, but because he literally couldn’t. How did Shane not see it? But mom helped him see it now, and he’s gonna do better. So long as Ilya does, too.

But Shane is willing to give him another chance.

“Oh, I have another idea!” His mom exclaims. “Why don’t you invite him to dinner next week?”

“I don’t know, Mom...” Shane tries to find a way out of it.

“Shane Hollander. This boy is away from his parents in a foreign country. You will be inviting him to have a home-cooked meal. I’ll talk to the boarding school staff.” She stands up, makes her way to the kitchen, muttering about home-cooked food and cafeteria food, and the like. Well, that leaves no place for arguing. Fine.

“Fine.”

“Great. Now put your hockey stuff away, please, and go take a shower,” she says, then pauses. “Oh, and Shane?”

He turns to her, finding her with her arms open wide. He immediately hugs her.

“Thank you for telling me, Sweetheart.”

He squeezes her a little tighter. He doesn’t know what he’ll do without her.

—

Shane sits at his desk. He doesn’t really know how to approach Ilya Rozanov. Should *he* apologize now? Should he act like nothing had happened? He’s starting to get a little stressed. His mom is expecting him to make nice today, and he wants to, at least to put this whole bad blood thing behind them. He doesn’t need to actually be friends with the guy, and he doesn’t believe that the past several weeks indeed were Ilya’s attempt at making friends. He really could have anyone he wants as a friend. Everyone is obsessed with him. Well, not *everyone*. But really, all he needs to do around here is just say ‘good morning,’ and seven kids are already rushing to be the first to say it back. Why would he want to befriend Shane Hollander of all people?

His train of thought is cut and promptly gone when he notices Ilya walking in the door.

“Good morning,” Shane says when Ilya passes by his desk, trying to appear nonchalant.

Ilya’s eyes widen, obviously not having expected Shane’s attention. He stops in his tracks. “Hi,” he returns.

Shane only has a few more minutes before class starts. He decides to rip the band-aid quickly. Hand reaching into his bag, he pulls out the two dictionaries he got with his mom at the bookstore. He hands one to Ilya, making very little eye contact in the process.

“What is this?”

“Dictionary. For you.”

“My English is so bad?” Ilya jokes, but Shane knows better now. Behind this joke, he surely hides at least some pain.

“Uh, for me too.” He raises the second one.

“English dictionary? For you? You don’t know many words?” Ilya jokes more confidently now. Shane gives him a small smile.

“Oh, uh, no. I mean, yes! I do know many words! This is an English-*Russian* dictionary. So we could... talk better. English for you, Russian for me,” Shane explains gracefully. There, delivery done, Ilya wouldn’t care for it, and Shane wouldn’t have to rack his brain before every interaction with the other boy. Because there wouldn’t be any, to be perfectly clear.

A massive grin slowly overtakes Ilya’s face. Shane doesn’t know how to react. Ilya looks so different like that. His eyes shine, and his face turns slightly pink with excitement. He immediately starts flipping through the pages of the gift dictionary, stopping at a page and looking for something, ferociously focused.

“Da!” he raises his voice slightly, but then his eyebrows scrunch in, puzzled. He pokes a finger at Shane’s cheek. “I say pretty, you angry. Thought I was incorrect. Nyet! Was correct! Smotri, uh, look,” he says, and turns the dictionary page he’s looking at over towards Shane.

In an unfamiliar alphabet, sits the definition:

Красивый - krasivyy - adjective
Pretty, Handsome.

“Was compliment,” Ilya insists, and pokes his cheek again.

Shane doesn’t have any time to reply before the bell rings and the first teacher of the day walks in, demanding their attention. He probably wouldn’t be able to think of one, anyway.

—

When the bell rings for lunch, Shane makes his usual way, grabbing a tray and standing in line for the food. He really doesn’t like most of the food they serve at the cafeteria, but like, it’s the cafeteria. He doesn’t need much. Just any normal protein option and a subpar carb. He likes the rice. He piles some vegetables on his plate as well and sits down in one of the far corners of the room, at the edge of an empty table.

He likes the silence he gets at lunch. He misses Joe for sure, but he has gotten used to sitting alone already. It’s a nice little break in the middle of the day. Today, he needs it especially, to mentally prepare for hockey practice later today. Not the hockey part, no. The team, the boys on the team, one boy on the team in particular, who apparently still has not had enough of Shane and is sitting down in front of him right now.

“Boring lunch,” Ilya nods towards Shane’s plate. “Is good new word from dictionary. I use.”

Shane did not consider the side effect of having given Ilya the ammunition of numerous English words to better make fun of him with.

“The food here is bad,” Shane sighs. He’s trying to implement some of the pieces of advice his mom gave him after their talk. One of them is talking clearly in simple, short sentences.

Not the way you would a child, he knows the person in front of him is not stupid, just learning.

“Yes, oh my god,” Ilya agrees. “And I eat this bad, boring food daily. For all week!”

Perfect opportunity to do what mom asks, but Shane isn’t sure whether he should take it. He’s still not quite friends with Ilya, and inviting him over on these weird terms they’re on would be kind of awkward. He decides to wait.

“Are you always here? Even weekends?” Shane knows how the boarding school works, but he doesn’t know anything about Ilya’s familial situation.

“Da. My dad send me here, but he, uh, stay in Russia,” Ilya reveals. Shane thinks he’s putting on an act of nonchalance, because how could you not care about being sent alone to a different country while your family stays home?

But like he’s a mind reader or something, Ilya simply says, “Is okay,” then adds, “Not bad country, Canada.”

“Yeah, that’s ‘cause it’s the best country!” Shane states confidently.

“Hm. Do not know yet.”

“Uh, yeah! You *should* know. Canada invented hockey,” Shane maintains. “The best sport in the world – the best country in the world.”

“Ah, okay. Hockey is best sport in world,” Ilya agrees easily.

It’s a comfortable conversation topic. Hockey is something they both share, they both know and love. Shane finally has a willing victim to infodump upon, and he respects Ilya’s language difficulties and is mindful of them, keeping his word selection simple enough. He makes a mental note to start taking the dictionary with him to lunch from now on, as something’s telling him he’s already had his last lunch alone for the near future.

Ilya, in his turn, manages to convey his feelings about the kids on their hockey team, the hockey league, and what teams he was aware of in Canada. They squabbled a bit about who was the better team until Shane realized Ilya didn’t know anything about Canadian teams and their rankings and was just instigating, trying to bait him into a fight, and it was almost working.

Lunch ended with Shane feeling lighter than he has since summer ended, probably.

—

Shane doesn’t think this newfound friendship with Ilya Rozanov will really, actually last long. For now, Ilya is entertaining him with his presence, hanging around Shane before and after classes, during lunch breaks, between hockey drills, generally everywhere. Shane didn’t notice, but he’s just now realizing Ilya only hangs out with him. Which won’t serve Ilya in the long run, socially. Still, Shane is kind of glad he got that dictionary; Russian is an intriguing language.

When Shane was learning French, it was with the same alphabet he was used to. Russian, however, has a set of thirty-three letters. Thirty-three! That's so many new symbols to learn, but he's ready. Ilya has been kind of teaching him; Shane knows how to write his and Ilya's names in Russian now.

It's been a few days since Shane spoke to his mom about Ilya, and unsurprisingly, she was right about everything. He still hasn't gotten around to asking Ilya over for dinner, though. What is he scared of? Rejection, maybe. Losing the buds of friendship that managed to sprout, when many others withered away, maybe. This new feeling he feels around Ilya, that's the thing he's definitely afraid of losing. This lighthearted, giddy feeling that has his body tingling in ways he hasn't experienced in such a long time, making him feel *so much* he physically has to shake some of it out. He smiles more, and he laughs more, and it's been just a couple of weeks.

His mom gently reminded him yesterday evening to invite Ilya for dinner, and by 'gently reminded' Shane means she demanded once again, and left no room for excuses. Now that he's been coming home with better things to say about Ilya Rozanov, his mom and dad really want to meet him.

They're at lunch again, he and Ilya, in their usual spot in the far corner of the room, snickering about anything and everything.

"Ugh, chicken day, I hate so much. Is so very..." Ilya trails off, flipping through his dictionary. He rarely goes anywhere without it. "Ah! Is so dry." Ilya sticks his tongue out in disgust. He stabs the horridly flavorless, moistureless chicken breast, lifts the fork, and watches gravity do its thing. The chicken plops down onto the plate, sending some grains of rice flying.

"Hey, Stop that!" Shane recoils as a few grains of rice fly his way. "You're not wrong, though." There, a perfect opportunity. Casual, nonchalant. "Hey, you know what? You could come to my house. My mom cooks much better food than whatever they serve here – you'd love it."

"Your house?" Ilya asks hesitantly.

"Uh, yeah, my mom said it's fine. She said the boarding school staff said it's fine as well, because they want to encourage local and international students to bond, and like, be friends, I guess," Shane babbles, but tries to act as if he's saying this offhandedly, and not like he thought about it for an entire week and planned it with his mom ahead of time.

"Eh, too much words you say." Ilya waves his hand dismissively, shoving a spoonful of rice into his mouth, and then, with his mouth full, he says, "Yes. I go to your house. Today?"

"Yes?" Shane speaks uncertainly, like a question.

"You ask me? Is your house."

"Yes." Shane amends.

“Good.”

And so it's decided. Ilya receives the permission slip from the boarding school at the end of the day, and they both wait outside for Shane's dad to come pick them up.

“How is your dad like?” Ilya breaks the silence between them as they wait. It wasn't awkward; sometimes Shane just didn't have anything to say, and he enjoys just sitting with Ilya.

“My dad? He's fine, he's cool. Funny, sometimes. Normal dad things,” Shane lists noncommittingly.

Ilya makes a slight face, but then it's gone.

“Normal dad things, da. And he is... nice, yes?” He pushes further, looking at Shane expectantly, eyes burning a hole into his side profile.

“Yes, of course he is,” Shane answers immediately. What a no-brainer. “Oh, there he is,” he points, standing up and walking towards his dad's car. He turns to Ilya and finds he's still sitting down on the curb.

“You coming or what?” Shane calls to him.

“Da. Yes.” Ilya replies, but makes no move, frozen in place.

“Nu?” Shane flaunts one of the words Ilya taught him, and it's like a switch was flipped, because Ilya responds to that in an instant, getting up and catching up to Shane. “There we go,” Shane chuckles happily, leading Ilya to the right car.

“Russian word against the Russian. You play dirty, Hollander.” Ilya mumbles, and it only makes Shane laugh more.

Once both boys are seated inside Shane's dad's car, Shane's dad greets them both.

“Dad, this is Ilya. He's coming over for dinner,” Shane introduces, turns back in his seat to face his friend. “Ilya, this is my dad.”

“Hello, Mr. Hollander,” Ilya offers. All of his H's still make a rough throaty sound. He sits with his hands clutched together on his lap, back stiff, face making the most unnaturally neutral expression Shane has ever seen on him.

“Oh, Kiddo, you can call me David,” his dad smiles, “Seatbelts on, boys?” He checks before driving.

“Yes, Dad.”

“Yes, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane's dad laughs. “We'll work on that.”

The rest of the drive is pretty quiet. Shane talks to his dad about his day, about hockey, about the terrible food they had at the cafeteria today, and how Mom's food is so much better. Ilya is uncharacteristically quiet.

"What is Mom making for dinner?" Shane inquires, eyes large and stomach already growling.

"Chicken parmesan, I think," his dad responds. Okay, chicken parmesan is good. Not Shane's favorite, but he does like it, then his dad keeps talking. "Ilya, do you like chicken parmesan?" he looks at him in the rearview mirror.

"I do not know. Never ate this, Mr. Hollander," Ilya returns, more politely than Shane has heard him talk, like, ever. Even at school, but that doesn't really count. He barely talks to anyone but Shane.

Shane's dad gives Ilya a warm smile. "Well, I think you'll really like it."

A few more minutes of idle conversation between Shane and his dad pass, and then they're home. Shane and Ilya walk up to the door together behind Shane's dad. When they go in, Shane sees Ilya immediately remove his shoes. He places them neatly in the corner, then hoists up his bag at Shane. "Where to put this?" he whispers. Shane shakes his head, just takes it from his hand, holding both Ilya's backpack and his own. Shane takes his own shoes off as well after that. The floor is kind of cold.

"Wanna go to my room?" Shane gestures over his shoulder to where the stairs are, behind him.

Ilya looks around a little nervously and nods.

"Oh, boys! You're here!" a voice calls from within the kitchen—Shane's mom.

"Hey, Mom!" Shane yells. "When will dinner be ready?"

His mom appears at the kitchen entrance. "Probably twenty minutes, or so," she tells Shane, and then her eyes move over to Ilya. She looks him over, and Shane sees her let out a tiny smile. "Hello, Ilya. How are you, Sweetie?"

"Good, Mrs. Hollander," Ilya voices robotically, much like he did with Shane's dad. What is his deal with Shane's parents? Is he shy?

"Okay, nice. C'mon, Ilya." He tries to usher Ilya upstairs, grabbing his hand and pulling him in the direction of his room. "Thanks, Mom!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Hollander," Ilya recites, and lets Shane guide him away.

In the safety of Shane's room, Ilya seems more himself. "Ah, I see you have boring bedroom, is all hockey," he teases. He scans all of Shane's trophies and medals from all kinds of competitions. He pauses for a second to glance at the framed photos Shane has on his desk before quickly moving on to poke his head into Shane's closet, peeping and snooping around.

"Shut up, hockey isn't boring," Shane counters from where he's sat on the bed.

There's a stretch of silence as Ilya goes through Shane's room, and Shane doesn't really know what to do with himself. Is his room really boring? Shane likes it. Will Ilya stop being Shane's friend over what his bedroom looks like? No, that doesn't make any sense. But here he is, looking at this boy going through his room with such focus. What is he looking for? And what even is his thing with Shane's parents? Should he ask? Should he wait for Ilya to bring it up? Maybe he should act like it didn't stick out to him.

Lost in thought, Shane starts rocking back and forth slightly.

"What are you doing? You are alright?" Ilya calls Shane's behavior out. Shane stills immediately.

"Haha, yeah, it-it's something I do sometimes, sorry, I was just thinking about stuff," Shane tries to brush it off. Some of the kids he went to grade school with never stopped making fun of this odd habit of his.

"No, not sorry, I just ask," Ilya reassures. "What did you think?"

"You know you can call my parents by their names, right? They're normal about it, I promise," Shane attempts to convince Ilya.

"I call them by names. Mr. and Mrs. Hollander," Ilya insists.

"No. Ilya, you can just call them David and Yuna. Their *names*," he stresses.

Ilya looks at him like he's grown a second head. "No! Is disrespectfully!" he declares.

"Disrespectful," Shane gently corrects. "And it isn't."

"Disrespectful," Ilya accepts. "And it is."

Shane shakes his head. "No, but really. They already like you. Mom especially. She also wasn't born here, so she feels, like, protective of you or something because she understands your situation. The dictionaries were her idea."

Another silence follows. Shane contemplates whether this was the right thing to bring up. Ilya looks like he's thinking really hard about something.

"Your parents are nice," Ilya voices.

"Yeah, I mean, they're normal parents," Shane reiterates.

"Yes, normal," Ilya mutters. Before Shane can think too much about it, Ilya jumps on the bed beside him, knocking him flat on his back. Shane goes down with an 'oof' and starts laughing. Ilya joins, and just like that, they're both on their back on Shane's bed, laughing about nothing, the weird and stilted conversation from before gone and forgotten.

"What the hell, man?" Shane fakes annoyance, but he doesn't think he sounds very convincing, giggling all through the sentence.

“You need to be chiller, Hollander.” Ilya elbows him.

“What is with you and that name? Just say Shane!” He elbows Ilya back.

“Is fun to say. Listen. Hollander,” he pours his entire accent into the one word, and it makes Shane laugh. “Hollander, Hollander, Hollander,” he persists.

“Oh my god, stop, shut up.”

They both laugh loudly.

Chapter 2: so very fine (very fine)

Chapter Summary

A tap on the window cuts his spiral short. What is that? Another tap. Then, another tap. He gets out of bed to check. He opens the window, and on the ground below stands Ilya Rozanov. In the dark, in the cold, throwing pebbles on his window like they're in some teen movie.

"Open the door!" Ilya calls.

"Shh, dude! My parents are asleep!" It was late. What is Ilya doing here? Who allowed him to come here so late? How did he even get here?

"Shane, come on, I am freezing," Ilya pleads.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane's dad calls them down for dinner. Ilya and Shane are sitting on one side of the table, facing Yuna and David. Shane looks over at Ilya, who has not said a word since they came downstairs, and recognizes anxiety in his friend. He's sitting up straight, his jaw is locked shut, he's looking down at his plate, mostly, and he barely touched his food.

Shane lightly knocks his foot into Ilya's in an attempt to be supportive. Of what, Shane isn't really sure. It does make Ilya lift his head up and glance over at Shane, who sends a reassuring smile his way. Ilya gives one back.

"So..." Shane's mom begins. "Ilya, Shane has been telling us you're pretty good at hockey," she mentions.

"Yes, Mrs. Hollander." Same response he keeps giving Shane's parents.

"Oh, Bud, that's so polite. You can call us Yuna and David, we'd like that," Shane's dad joins the conversation.

Ilya just nods at that.

"And are you... Just good? At hockey?" Shane's mom tries to get him to talk. The accusation makes him smile.

"Better. Best, probably." Ilya is successfully baited and speaks. His smile is gone faster than it showed, and he adds, "Mrs. Hollander."

“You will call me Yuna one day — we’ll be seeing each other a lot, I think.” Shane’s mom claims. Shane wonders why she’s so sure of that. Like she can hear his thoughts, Yuna makes eye contact with Shane and raises her eyebrows at him playfully. Just then does he realize that Ilya called himself the best, and that is definitely wrong; it is abominably, cosmically wrong.

“Whoa, you are *not* the best. That’s me, hands down,” Shane declares.

“No, because I am more tall, and I am better shot, and your backhand is very weak, Shane,” Ilya lists, one of his fingers going out for every reason he has.

“My backhand is *not* weak. And I’m faster than you, and height doesn’t matter because the doctor said I’m still growing,” Shane opposes strongly.

“Your backhand could improve, Honey,” Shane’s mom quietly interrupts. Shane splutters and throws his hands up in defiance.

“Ha!” Ilya’s guard goes down significantly, enough to let himself make fun of Shane in front of his parents. Shane would be mad, but all he can think of is that he’s kind of glad Ilya isn’t so wound up and closed off anymore.

“Shut up and eat your food,” Shane grumbles in defeat.

Ilya does. He slices off a bite of chicken, the first bite of chicken he has all night, and lifts the fork into his mouth. His eyes widen instantly. “Mmm!” He sounds. He likes it, then. Good. Ilya basically attacks the chicken breast in front of him, wolfing it down like he has not eaten in weeks.

“Oh, you like it!” Shane’s mom says excitedly.

Ilya nods forcefully, mouth full, and loads his fork with more for his next bite. He swallows, and before he takes his next bite, he informs Shane’s mom of the truly subpar food the school cafeteria has.

“Your food is so better, Mrs. Hollander. Tasty,” Ilya compliments.

“Aww, Hun. You’re always invited here. I’ll cook you anything you like.”

Ilya’s eyebrows rise comically high. “More this?”

“This and whatever else you’d want, Sweetheart,” Shane’s mom promises.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hollander.”

“Uh-uh-uh, you call me Yuna from now on. Yuna,” she asserts.

“Thank you, Yuna,” Ilya gives in.

Shane laughs at Ilya for finally calling his mom by her name. Ilya kicks him underneath the table.

Shane did not expect the dinner at his house to make such a big difference in their friendship. It did. Ilya doesn't even look at the other kids, telling Shane they're boring, bad at hockey, and that 'their mom's food probably sucks'.

Ilya hangs around Shane all the time. They have lunch together, sit together at recess, partner up for drills in hockey, and partner up for projects and homework. Ilya spends so much time at Shane's house, and Shane thinks he feels comfortable there because Ilya has really started referring to his parents by their first names.

All the kids who were so obsessed with Ilya at the beginning of the school year keep shooting Shane dirty looks. Some of the meaner kids started trying to trip him in the hallways, only when Ilya isn't around, which is rare. These kids didn't like Shane even before Ilya got here, so he doesn't really care that they still don't like him now. He just worries it might make Ilya look at him differently, and he doesn't want that.

As the days of the school year pass, Ilya and Shane become inseparable. Everyone at school knows, Shane's parents know, and the boarding school staff is aware as well. They are a package deal. This has made them absolutely *killer* on the ice, much to the rest of the team's dismay.

They've been practicing on the same team for a while now, four or five months, but rarely do they get to play on the same line, both being centers and whatnot, but Ilya is a pretty good wing player as well, so when the opportunity arises for them to play together, they pounce on it, no mercy—they read each other so well when they play together; they know exactly where they both are and exactly where they want to go. Sucks to whoever plays the other winger with the two of them; he barely gets to see the puck. The other kids hate to play against them when they're together on a line.

But with regionals fast approaching, they give it their all in practice, both as teammates and competitors. Shane has the lead on assists, Ilya has the lead on goals. Shane thinks it's in the team's best interest to let them play the same line. Not like he's biased or anything.

Shane and Ilya are once again in Shane's room, where they can be found more often than not after school hours. They finished all their homework for today. Shane withheld the answers for French, saying Ilya 'will never learn like that!' but Ilya didn't really seem to care. Shane always gave them in the end. He can't deny Ilya for long these days, anyway.

Now, Shane sits on the bed, Ilya is on the floor, and they're just tuning in to an analysis of a game on the radio, but they're not really concentrating. Shane is mostly thinking about the upcoming Ottawa middle schools' tournament that he's determined to win. "Oh, man. Do you think Coach will put us on the same line for the tournament?"

"If he wants to win, da," Ilya says from where he's sprawled out on Shane's floor, legs up in the air against the bed. He's tossing a small ball in the air and catching it. He turns to look at Shane, presumably to say something, and the ball hits him in the face. Shane laughs. What a dumbass.

“Oh, you laugh?” Ilya bares his teeth in an unhinged grin. He stands up, looming over Shane, who’s already started curling into himself to defend from whatever assault Ilya is planning, still laughing. “Is funny?”

Shane’s arms are up by his face, hands in fists, and he’s alert to every move Ilya makes, but he’s at a disadvantage like this, lying down. They both know this. Ilya pounces on the bed, missing Shane ever so slightly. Shane manages to roll out of the way, but that puts him with his back to Ilya, who grabs him by the shoulder and spins him back around. Ilya playfully pins Shane to the bed with two hands on his shoulders and sits on Shane’s stomach. This draws a hearty laugh from Shane.

“Say sorry!” Ilya demands, but he can’t hide the chuckles in his voice, making this all the more unserious. “You laugh, say sorry now!” He punctuates his demands with a push to Shane’s shoulders. They’re both smiling wildly.

Shane is unable to speak; he’s laughing so hard. He only shakes his head violently and tries to push Ilya off, unsuccessfully. He will not give up so easily. He plants both feet, fists the sheets for stability, and lifts his hips. Ilya, who was not ready whatsoever, flies off the bed in an arch and lands on the floor with a thud.

Shane takes the moment of Ilya’s disorientation, gets off the bed, and starts hitting him in the face with a pillow repeatedly. “I will not apologize for laughing at your stupidity,” Shane reiterates, each word accompanied by a smack to the head.

Ilya doesn’t give up yet. He dodges Shane’s attacks, stands up, and grabs the pillow Shane was using to hit him. They’re both tugging at the pillow, and once Ilya gets Shane to tug really hard, he simply lets go, causing Shane to stumble backwards onto his bed. Ilya doesn’t waste a second and pins Shane to the bed once again, this time by grabbing his wrists and using his knees to immobilize his legs. Shane tries to break this hold, but he can’t.

“Apology, please.” Ilya is a little breathless.

“Never,” Shane challenges.

“No, I think now,” Ilya asserts. “Is now, or else.”

“Or else, what?” Shane calls his bluff.

Only, there is no bluff. As soon as that sentence is out of Shane’s mouth, Ilya starts tickling Shane relentlessly. Shane’s limbs flail around uncontrollably, and he can barely breathe with amusement. “Okay, okay, sorry! I’m sorry!”

Ilya gives his sides one last squeeze, milking out one last breathless giggle. He gets off of Shane and lies down on the bed next to him. Shane kind of misses the weight of him. They’re catching their breath for a minute, then Shane asks again, “No, but really, he should put us on the same line.”

“Yes. Be stupid if not,” Ilya agrees easily, then, after a short pause, “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Shane sighs.

“Your mom makes very great food! Sorry I want to eat,” Ilya retorts, ending the sentence sarcastically.

“Unbelievable,” Shane says, but gets up and goes to the kitchen with Ilya in tow.

—

Coach does indeed have them play the same line. Because they didn't get to practice it a lot this year, they have to catch up for the tournament, so Coach has them running drills in their lines, dividing the team into two for a friendly game, and to see how the team works together and how well they can really play.

Shane and Ilya, obviously, play flawlessly. Shane is really excited. They’ve been plotting every time Ilya comes over, going over strategies and plays, watching old games and trying to copy pro players’ moves.

Today they’re trying out one of the moves they’ve been talking about. They hadn’t had the chance to practice it on the ice yet, but in theory, they both know what they should do. Shane is confident.

Shane is at faceoff opposing a boy in his year. Adrien Lewis. Adrien never liked Shane, and he’s always made it known. After Ilya’s arrival, Adrien got worse, partly out of jealousy of Shane’s success at befriending the *elusive* Ilya Rozanov, and partly because of his jealousy of their sheer compatibility on the ice. So Adrien Lewis was jealous of Shane, and that made him really hate him.

The puck drops, Shane wins the faceoff.

He skates down the rink, passing the puck to Ilya with a wide grin. Suddenly, he’s face down on the ice, only barely successfully catching himself. He starts to get up, but someone pushes him back down. “Stay down,” Adrien threatens. He raises a fist.

Shane can’t even react before the sound of skates hits his ears and someone pulls Adrien off him aggressively. Not someone—Ilya. He hears Ilya yell something in Russian, of which he only catches the simple words, like ‘you’, and ‘me’, and he quickly rises to his feet. He hears Coach yelling in the background as he witnesses Ilya Rozanov punching Adrien in the face.

Their coach is on the ice, removing Ilya from Adrien with force, yelling and reprimanding and seething at the two boys. “What the hell is wrong with you two? You are on the same team here, even when you play against each other. This is unacceptable. I will be having words with both your parents. You're both done for today.” He sends them both off the ice and turns to Shane.

“You okay, kid?”

Shane isn’t. When Adrien pushed him into the ice a second time, he managed to hurt his nose, somehow, and it is bleeding.

“Go see the nurse, Hollander.”

The nurse doesn't do much, because his nose isn't broken, just bleeding. She just sends him off with instructions on how to deal with it and a wad of tissues up his nostril. It's uncomfortable, but it'll pass. By the time he's back at the rink, practice has resumed as usual, but Ilya is nowhere to be found. Probably back at his dorm, Shane thinks. He sits and waits for practice to end.

When his dad picks him up, he's surprised by the state of Shane's face.

“Fell during practice,” he lies. His dad believes him.

His mom is worried to see him come home with bloody tissues stuffed up his nose, but he tells her he's been to the nurse, who said he's fine, and that it happened by accident. She believes him as well.

Now, he's in his room, after his parents have gone to bed, but he's still up. He's worried about Ilya. For his well-being, yes, but also for their friendship. Is Ilya blaming Shane for being benched? He hopes not. Shane didn't ask Ilya to fight for him, but Ilya did. Maybe that's a good sign for their friendship, that Ilya is willing to do that for Shane.

A tap on the window cuts his spiral short. What is that? Another tap. Then, another tap. He gets out of bed to check. He opens the window, and on the ground below stands Ilya Rozanov. In the dark, in the cold, throwing pebbles on his window like they're in some teen movie.

“Open the door!” Ilya calls.

“Shh, dude! My parents are asleep!” It was late. What is Ilya doing here? Who allowed him to come here so late? How did he even get here?

“Shane, come on, I am freezing,” Ilya pleads.

Shane gets up quietly and goes downstairs. He opens the front door, and, yeah, Ilya is really here. He steps back and allows his friend to step inside, away from the freezing temperatures of the Ottowan winter.

“What are you doing here?” Shane whisper-yells.

“Hello, Ilya, how are you, Ilya? Thank you for punching asshole Adrien for me, Ilya.”

“Hi, how are you, how the hell did you get here?” Shane locks the door, heading upstairs to his room, not checking if Ilya's following or not.

“Bus,” Ilya replies unhelpfully.

A silence stretches between them when they sit down on Shane's bed. Their faces are illuminated by the streetlights pouring in from the window and the small bedside lamp Shane turned on. It's a soft, orange light, caressing their features. The kind of light that's easy on the eyes. It warms up the room and helps Shane calm down a little bit. He looks at Ilya's profile,

watches how, when a car passes every once in a while, Ilya's eyes brighten and then darken with the dancing lights.

He feels that he needs to give Ilya some time, let him be the first to speak. It does take him a few minutes, but when he's ready, he first expresses his worry for Shane.

"Are you okay?" Ilya studies Shane's face. They're sitting pretty close together. Ilya grabs Shane's cheeks with a thumb on one cheek and his finger on the other, moving his face around to make the light hit all the darker spots, looking for evidence of injury.

Shane jerks backwards, freeing his head from Ilya's hold. "Yeah, I'm fine now. Just a bloody nose."

"I should hit him harder." Ilya knocks their shoulders together softly. Neither move.

"You shouldn't have hit him at all. Coach saw everything. Why risk your place on the team? You know they hate players who fight."

"They will not take me off team, Shane, I am too good," Ilya boasts.

"Fine, yeah," he agrees shortly, "But they will call your parents. What if your parents take you off the team?"

Ilya lies down on the bed. Shane turns around to face him, still sitting up.

"Eh."

"My mom would kill me if I did something like that, won't your mom care?"

"Let's talk about something else," Ilya quietly demands. His whole body has gone rigid, his eyes are shut, jaw set, palms gripping the blanket beneath them. Shane senses that perhaps leaving it would be best.

"Uh, okay. Umm—how are you getting back to the dorm?" Shane changes topics as requested.

"Am sleeping over," Ilya informs.

"Where?" Shane asks.

"Here," Ilya answers.

"And where would I sleep, exactly?"

"Hollander, bed is big. We both sleep here," Ilya announces. "Move. Make me space."

Shane stands up, and Ilya seizes the opportunity to make himself comfortable in the bed. He throws the blanket aside, burrows in, totally at home. The bed is pretty big, they probably will both fit all nice and cozy, but they have school tomorrow. Ilya has nothing here. How

will he change? How will he brush his teeth in the morning? What will he eat? Can Shane even do his morning routine with another person? What will his parents think?

Oh no. His parents. What will his parents say? He just snuck a friend inside. He's letting said friend sleep over, completely unannounced. Oh no, oh no, oh no, they'll be so mad! He's never done anything remotely like this! Will they punish him? Will they say no more hockey? Oh my god, worse, what if they say no more Ilya?

"Oh my god, what will I tell my parents?" He voices his concerns. "They'll be so mad, oh no, Ilya, what will they say? What if—"

"Shane, Am Yuna's favorite son. She will only say, 'Oh, Ilya, so good you are here, do you want to eat best food and stay forever?' or something," Ilya imitates Shane's mom's voice very badly.

"Shut up, you are not even her son," Shane asserts, but some of his nerves did relax. Shane's parents did love Ilya, and his mom told Ilya multiple times that he was welcome anytime. Now does count as a time, Shane decides.

"You relaxed, Shane? We can sleep now, please?"

It was getting pretty late, and they had school tomorrow, and they owed his parents an explanation tomorrow morning, so they probably should go to bed now.

Shane lifted the covers and got into the bed, lying next to Ilya. He turns the bedside lamp off, letting the room fill with darkness. The silence between them is a welcome one, almost lulling him to sleep, until Ilya speaks up.

"My mom won't care," he pauses, swallows, continues, "My mom is dead," Ilya reveals.

"Oh, Ilya, I'm so sorry," Shane tries to offer comfort. He doesn't really know what to do in this scenario. "Was she sick?"

"No. Was accident."

"When did it happen?" How long has Ilya been without his mom?

"Last year," Ilya whispers. "I miss her," he admits.

Shane thinks he can hear sniffing. He can't see anything, but he's certain Ilya has started crying, but he sounds stifled, like he's holding himself back. Should he reach out to him for comfort? Let him let it all out on his own?

"You can cry here," Shane says out into the room. He reaches his hand and pats Ilya's shoulder a couple of times.

Shane imagines a life without his mother and what it means for him. What it must mean for Ilya, who not only lost his mother, but also got sent halfway across the world soon after. How does he deal? How is the grief not completely debilitating? How strong he must be to keep carrying on like that, alone. Shane thinks about the fact that without his mother, Shane and

Ilya never would have become friends, probably. Who would Ilya have spoken to, in that case? Keeping a thing like this bottled up can only harm a person, Shane's sure. Only imagining it makes Shane's body ache all over. All this pain seems intolerable. At least he's providing some comfort, he thinks. At least he's being a friend to Ilya.

Next to him, Ilya is sobbing, muttering words in Russian. Most of them are unintelligible, but then, one word repeats over and over. Even if he didn't know a single word in Russian, he would still be able to decipher this one. Next to him, Ilya is crying, echoing over and over again one single word—Mama.

Shane just lies there next to him, figuring his presence is enough. He listens to the cries, rubs a hand over Ilya's back every once in a while, after particularly ugly sobs and whimpers. That seems to help a little.

Time passes like this, and eventually the crying stops, and the breathing of the boy next to him starts to deepen, and that means he has finally fallen asleep.

"Good night, Ilya," Shane tells the sleeping body next to him, wishing him sweet dreams in his mind. Maybe a happy memory of his mother.

Shane falls asleep soon after.

—

A half hour earlier, in his parents' bedroom, a sleepy Yuna wakes her husband gently.

"David. David, I think someone's at the door."

"Whatimesit?" David mumbles, still not totally awake.

Before Yuna gets up to check for herself, she hears her son's footsteps quietly descending the stairs. She hears him talk, but it's too far away to hear whatever's happening. Soon after, she hears two sets of footsteps and the familiar voice of her son's best friend.

"Oh, it's just Ilya," she tells David, who's already fast asleep.

She assumes it must be serious if he's here at this hour, but it also must mean he doesn't want any adult attention and intervention, and if he's at her house, then he's safe. It's fine, they can talk in the morning.

—

Shane thinks his parents are way cooler than he ever imagined. As Ilya said, they don't care that Ilya's here. They don't ask him too many questions, just if he was safe on the drive over, and if everything is fine, and they remind him he can always call them if he needs any help. They give him a spare toothbrush, fix him a plate at breakfast, and Yuna drives the boys to school.

"You are always welcome at our house, dear. I want you to remember that," Yuna tells Ilya, looking at him in the mirror.

“Yes, Yuna, I remember,” Ilya confirms.

“I also want you two to know that I know about the fight at hockey yesterday. The school called to tell me,” She says sternly, but she’s not mad, not that Shane can tell. Still, that means she knows he lied. Before he can say anything, his mom continues.

“Ilya, thank you for stepping up for Shane. I’m not glad you hit another boy, but this is hockey we’re talking about. Still, I’m happy he has a friend like you.” Her voice is genuine and kind. Shane is also glad he has a friend like Ilya. He smiles, but then his mom turns to him.

“I’m *not* glad you lied to me, Shane. But I understand.”

Shane nods in embarrassment, defeat, and acceptance. “Sorry, Mom.”

“You can tell me anything,” she promises, “Both of you can.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Yes, Yuna.”

—

After that instance, which Ilya has apparently treated as a trial run, he starts showing up unannounced at the Hollanders’ place of residence. Not all the time, because he doesn’t need to; he can just get picked up with Shane. The only problem with pick-up with Shane is that the staff knows to expect his return. Ilya has voiced his disdain of the matter to Shane many times. Shane has relayed some of the information to his mom, who’s in contact with the school, getting some sort of permanent permission slip. Shane doesn’t really know.

Still, he doesn’t show up unannounced a lot. Says it’s for the food, or the more comfortable bed, or whatever excuse he chooses that day, but Shane knows it’s for something else. For days he feels lonely. Because it’s only on nights when he sneaks out of school to go to Shane’s does he open up more about his familial situation.

Shane now knows Ilya doesn’t really like his brother, who’s going to be a cop. He’s older and mean, and he said some really horrible stuff to Ilya after their mother’s death. Ilya said his brother blames him for it, and that’s so unfair. Ilya said his mother’s death was an accident; how could it ever be his fault? So obviously, Shane now hates Ilya’s brother.

Shane also knows how distant, cold, and uncaring Ilya’s father is. How he is the antithesis to everything Shane knows about parents, about families. Shane wants Ilya to never go back there, to that place where no one appreciates this wild, talented, beautiful boy that came into his life like a whirlwind and changed it completely.

Honestly, he doesn’t know what he’d do without Ilya at this point.

“Ilya, Ilya, Ilya.” Shane pokes at his friend one night when he’s sleeping over. Shane needs to talk to him right now because he just had a thought that cannot wait, and he needs to share it right this moment, and yes, it has to be now, or else he’d forget.

Ilya sleepily swats at his hand, but Shane is undeterred. He begins shaking him slightly. “Ilya, c’mon, wake up.”

“I will push you off bed,” Ilya threatens.

“No, seriously, wake up, I just thought of something,” Shane doesn’t let up.

Ilya sits up in bed, rubbing his eyes unhappily. “Fine, okay, am up.”

“What–Uh, where are you for summer break?”

“Ah. Do not know.” Unhelpful. “I think dorms. My father did not talk with me of break.”

“What, would he just leave you here for the entire summer?” Shane’s shocked.

“Da. He... is not nice like your parents. You know.” Ilya’s face gives nothing away; he looks like he really doesn’t care about being alone for so long. When did he even see his father last? Christmas? He actually doesn’t really know.

Shane can’t have that. He has to talk to his parents; they’d hate it as much as he does. There’s a lot to plan, and the end of the year is approaching rapidly. He can speak to his parents about this; they wouldn’t want Ilya to stay alone in the dorms. How did his father even convince the school of this? The country of Canada?

“Would you want to... stay? Here?” Shane hesitates.

“Da, sure. I can go sleep now?” Ilya is already lying back down and closing his eyes.

“What? Ilya, no,” he complains, “This is important.”

“Sleep, more important,” Ilya yawns. Shane knows he’s lost.

Shane can’t, though; he’s busy formulating a plan. He needs his mom’s help. Well, before he can get his mom’s help, he needs to have his parents' permission.

So, the next morning, as Ilya is taking his sweet time in the bathroom, Shane asks his parents if Ilya can come to the cottage.

“Whoa, buddy, that’s a nice idea and all, but Ilya’ll probably be in Russia for the summer vacation. Did you not ask him?” His dad points out.

“I did, Dad. He said he doesn’t know where he’ll be, and he definitely doesn’t want to go back to Russia. Please, can he come with us? Mom? Can you talk to the school?” Shane pleads.

“Honey, it’s not that simple. I don’t think he’s staying in Canada for the summer; the dorms are closed. He’s probably going back, but he just doesn’t know when,” his mom explains.

“He wouldn’t have to stay in the dorms if he came with us to the cottage,” Shane insists.

“Bud, all we’re saying is it’s not that simple. I doubt Ilya’s dad would want him away from home for so long,” his dad reasoned.

Shane let out a long groan. What weren’t they getting? “Can you talk to his dad, then?”

“Shane—” his mom tried to speak, but he didn’t give her a chance.

“Please? Please, just try to talk to his dad? It doesn’t even have to be the whole summer.” Even though he’d like that very much.

“I’ll try getting his contact information from the school, Shane, but I can’t promise anything. Do you understand?” His mom sternly says.

“Yes, yes, thank you, thank you so much, Mom!” Shane hugs his mom and runs up the stairs to urge Ilya to get a move on, already.

—

Shane’s team is dominating the tournaments. They can’t stop winning. He can’t believe he can finally share this feeling and experience with someone. Only now, when he has this, he realizes how much he’s been missing. It makes him think of the cottage, of his nights stargazing. He never thought his wishes would come true, but here they are, standing in front of him, materialized as his best friend.

How he’s longed for a connection like this. This is what he spent night after night during summer break asking, praying, begging the stars for. A connection. A friend. A sense of belonging. Here it is, here’s where he belongs—on the ice, with Ilya Rozanov, absolutely demolishing other middle schoolers at ice hockey. He hopes they never have to stop.

They’ve made it as far as the semi-finals. The stakes are high, and both teams are well aware. Shane and Ilya are as ready as they’ll ever be. Winning this game will place them in the finals. Shane is confident in his skills; he’s confident in Ilya’s. They’ve got this.

They’re playing on the ice like they were born there. They’re executing plays immaculately, each move cold, calculated, and precise. The other team can’t keep up with them, nor can their poor right winger.

They win the semi-finals. Ilya scored the winning goal, assisted by Shane.

The finals are the hardest game they’ve ever played together. They’re up against the best team in the province, who’ve won this tournament for the last three years. They’re giving it their all, they’re relentless and somewhat aggressive with it. They’re barely hanging on, the game can go either way.

One of the boys on their team is in the penalty box, leaving them at a 4-5 disadvantage. They can’t allow for mistakes like that to impact their game negatively. They’re in the home stretch now, Shane’s arms feel like jelly, and his legs are just barely still functioning.

The game is tied, with only a minute left on the clock.

Shane makes eye contact with Ilya, and they share a knowing look, they both understand the situation. They ran this scenario multiple times, and now they know exactly what to do. They fly into position faster than the other team can blink. They maneuver the puck out of the opposing players' reach.

Shane has the puck; he passes it off to Ilya, who dodges a hit and slides the puck between the offensive player's legs, right at Shane, who swings his stick and buries the puck into the net.

With too little time left on the timer, there's no way the other team could tie the score, let alone gain the lead. The second on the clock counts back, until they hear the beautifully loud, ear-screaming sound of the buzzer.

They won.

They won!

Shane turns to look for Ilya so they can celebrate, and is met with a force colliding hard into his midsection, taking him off his feet.

"Haha! Win! We win!" Ilya shouts.

"Oh my god, Ilya, put me down!" Shane shouts back. His legs are dangling over Ilya's shoulder, his head hanging down by his waist. Shane's arms are wrapped around Ilya's torso. This has to be very, very dangerous. He has knives on his feet, for god's sake! He makes sure not to flail his feet around, but Ilya is spinning around, and he can't really stop.

Ilya shakes them around for a few seconds more and then places Shane back on the ice, gently. They join the rest of the teams, high-fiving, fistbumping, and yelling all around. A few boys pat Shane on the back. Even Adrien, who was a complete asshole to Shane all year, claps him on the back with a smile.

They shake hands with the rival team and pose for the winning picture with the trophy. Ilya's arm is wrapped around Shane's shoulders when they pose, pulling him close. It makes Shane smile so, so wide.

—

Shane's parents treat Shane and Ilya after their win by taking them to eat out. They're at this small restaurant that serves anything and everything. Shane's parents told them that they could order anything they want. Shane's order is tame: a burger and fries, with ginger ale. Ilya, however, orders himself a whole pepperoni pizza, a side of chicken wings, fries, and a tall drink of Coke. Scarfs down the entire thing, to no one's surprise.

After congratulating them both, while waiting for dessert, Shane remembers his mom and dad had not yet given an answer about the cottage, and it's been a few weeks since he first asked. The school year ends in like two and a half months; they have to get everything ready if they want this to work.

“Mom, did you talk to Ilya’s dad yet? Can he come to the cottage?” Shane brings the previously avoided subject up again.

“Ask him what? What is cottage?” Ilya speaks through a mouthful of food.

“I told you, for summer break, I asked if you wanted to stay with us?” Shane reminds. “It’s the best place on earth, you’d love it.”

“I want to go to cottage, yes,” Ilya says decisively.

“Well, boys, I haven’t contacted Ilya’s dad yet. The school is supposed to connect me with him soon, don’t worry,” Shane’s mom responds. “I’ll let you know when I have.”

“Yes! Oh, Ilya, you’d love it! Wait, can you swim? If not, we can still do a ton else, like, we can stay where the water’s shallow, or we can go to the woods, or, or, oh! Or we can stargaze at night, I like that the most, you can see so much. What do you say?” Shane prattles.

“Ah. I can swim. Everything after…” he trails off, but ends the sentence by blowing a raspberry. Shane probably spoke too fast for Ilya to catch all that. No matter. They’re one step closer to spending summer together as well.

He sees his parents share a look and smile.

—

Ilya isn’t in class today. It wouldn’t be so strange, but he hasn’t been to class yesterday or the day before, as well, and before that was the weekend, and he hasn’t seen him then either, and he’s definitely not sick because Shane would know if he was. Shane misses him, his absence noticeable in every part of Shane’s day. He knew, of course, that they spent a lot of time together, but like this, being left alone all day, that was pronounced. Unmistakeable. Ilya’s spot next to him in class, empty. Shane’s lunch, eaten alone because there’s no one to sit by him and talk his ear off. Every lesson, every recess, every crevice into which Ilya has fit himself in Shane’s life, now exposed, barren, unused.

He’d even feel it at home, Shane thinks. This absence. He walks dejectedly towards his dad’s car. They don’t really talk during the drive home. It’s fine. Maybe Shane should ask his mom to call the school to inquire about Ilya. Or maybe he can ask Ilya directly, seeing as he’s sitting on the stairs leading up to their door. What?

As soon as the car’s parked, Shane runs up to Ilya. When he gets closer, he sees Ilya’s eyes are bloodshot and puffy. His nose is snotty, his hands are trembling, and generally, he looks awful. It makes him stop dead in his tracks, unsure. What could have happened?

Before Shane can react, his dad is already right there with them. “Hey, Ilya, bud, what are you doing here?”

“Knocked, like you say. Is empty. Waited.” His voice is raspy, like he’s spent a really long time crying. He also looks like that, so that makes sense.

Shane's dad unlocks the door, ushering both boys inside. Ilya doesn't even wait for Shane before heading up the stairs to his room. Shane follows in his step, closing the door after themselves when they enter his room. Ilya sinks to the floor, weeping.

"What, Ilya, what's wrong?" Shane has never seen him like this. Well, that's not true. He has, during that night when Ilya told Shane about his mom. He was inconsolable then. Unfortunately, today is a close second. Shane drops to his knees next to him. "You can tell me."

Ilya's next stream of words is purely Russian. Raw, emotional, fast-paced Russian. They have neglected Shane's part of the deal, and his Russian is entirely unhelpful. At least he'll be able to count if Ilya needs him to. God, he feels so stupid. That's what he studied, no, was supposed to study for. Okay, maybe he didn't learn his friend's mother tongue, but he certainly learned his body language, including how best to soothe him. He knows to wait for Ilya to talk first, and for now, he rubs comforting circles on his back.

Ilya's sobs are heartbreaking, so are the Russian words sprinkled throughout. They sound like they're punched out of him, or like they're forcing their way out of his chest of their own, hacking at muscle tissue, blood vessels, bones, and whatever else in their way, paying no mind to how much pain they're putting the boy that says them in. Shane wants to fight them on Ilya's behalf.

Shane caught just one, out of that entire thing, yet again. This time it's the complete opposite of the last time they were in this situation. This time, Ilya's pain comes from the way he spits out one word—Papa.

Which can't mean anything good. He doesn't know what yet, but that has him worried.

Ilya seems to have let out a significant amount; he starts breathing better, sounder, and finally looks at Shane. As their gazes catch, Ilya's eyes start to well up all over again. He throws his arms out, flinging himself at Shane, who was just barely ready to catch him. They manage not to topple over onto the floor.

Ilya's crying again, clutching at Shane's shirt as if he's going to disappear. Shane starts to rock back and forth, arms pulling Ilya as close as he can get him. They sit like that on the floor, and they sway to the pace Shane's rocking them in. Ilya keeps bawling his eyes out.

Shane squeezes even harder.

Eventually, Ilya is able to settle down. He pushes out of Shane's hold and looks at him again. Ilya looks exhausted.

"Shane..." he whines. He takes a deep breath and tries again. "My father..."

Shane doesn't know what to expect.

"He said I'm not allowed to come to cottage," Ilya snuffles. He wipes a hand at his eyes, his nose.

That is pretty bad, but Shane doesn't think it warrants such a big crisis. So, something else must be wrong.

"And... And I go back to Russia." To be expected. "And... I can't come back."

What.

What?

Wait, what? No. That's not what was supposed to happen. Even if Ilya's dad said no, he'd see Ilya next year, for the last year of middle school. They were supposed to win another tournament together. They were supposed to spend all their time together. Shane was supposed to pretend not to let Ilya cheat off him in French. Ilya was supposed not to leave Shane alone for a second.

This does indeed warrant a reaction of this size. Tears start to well up in Shane's eyes, now. He has no words left, just the remnants of whatever he was about to say, fragments of words and thoughts completely gone by the atomic bomb of a sentence that landed on them, shattering everything, leaving destruction and havoc and a huge crater in its wake.

Shane stutters nonsense for a few seconds, syllables and sounds leaving his mouth as he tries to form a sentence, articulate a single thought. He finds that he can't. He racks his brain for anything he can say to make this better. There's nothing.

"Shane," Ilya whispers pathetically. It snaps Shane out of the state of shock he was in.

"What-What-He can't do that!"

"He can. He is my father."

"But why?"

"He said, uh, I was not here to have friends."

"Too late for that."

"Yes. Too late." Ilya said with a wet chuckle.

Shane pulls Ilya in again for a long hug. Neither boy is actively crying, but they're both still sniffing sadly into the other's shoulders. Ilya's body sags into Shane's hold. He's heavy when he's like this, a dead weight in his arms. Gently, Shane lowers them onto the floor of his bedroom, lying down on his back, Ilya sprawled on top of him.

"When are you leaving?" Shane voices quietly.

"After school year. My father, he care about school, said I must finish first," Ilya says into Shane's collarbones.

A long beat of silence stretches between them.

“Tell me more about cottage,” Ilya requests.

Oh, that does something to Shane’s heart. It hurts, because Shane doesn’t want to tell him. He wants to show him. Wants to have Ilya right there with him, experiencing it alongside him. But, he’s not the one flying back to Russia. He’s not the one who’s being flown around from country to country, uprooted and changing. Shane’s mad that Ilya’s dad is robbing his son of the best place on earth. If Shane can offer some sort of stability, comfort, or any sense of refuge from this horrible news, he’s gonna do just that.

“It’s my favorite place. You’d love it,” Shane sighs. Then, he tells Ilya all about the lake, and swimming until his muscles ache and his parents are scared he’ll get sick. He tells him about the trees, and lying in their shade, and falling asleep in the hammock his parents set up for him years ago. He opens up about the nights of stargazing. How that was always his favorite part, the cool evening air, the birdcalls, the occasional shooting star.

The shooting star.

The wish.

His wish that never changed.

His wish that came true when Ilya came to his school, entered his life, buried himself so deep into his heart that now, as they’re being ripped apart, it’s tearing him apart.

“Shane?” Ilya lifts his head to look at him. Shane realizes he has stopped talking. “The stars?”

“Yeah, the stars. Because it’s so dark there at night, sometimes you can see shooting stars.”

“Pew-pew?” Ilya mimics a gun.

“Haha, no. Shooting star, like, meteor?” Shane tries.

“Ah, da,” Ilya agrees and then says something in Russian. Probably the translation.

“And you know, like, wish upon a star?”

Ilya sets his head down and nods into him.

“So whenever I saw a padyushya zveda...?” Shane butchers the pronunciation.

“Padayushchaya zvezda,” Ilya corrects. “Falling star.”

“Whenever I saw *that* I’d make a wish. I never thought it’d come true,” Shane confesses. “But it did.”

“What did you wish?”

“For you.”

“Me? You did not like me one bit, for whole two months of school,” Ilya snickers. “I was not wish.”

“Well, not *you* you. A friend. That’s what I wished for, and then you came along.” Shane smiles just thinking about it.

Ilya suddenly squeezes him hard. Really hard. Shane yelps in surprise.

“What?” Shane wheezes.

“You’re my best friend in whole world.”

Shane’s arms squish Ilya back. “You’re my best friend in the whole world, too.” Tears well in his eyes again, his breath shakes.

“No more crying,” Ilya commands. Shane takes in a big gulp of air, lets it out slowly.

“Okay. No more crying,” Shane murmurs.

—

The last few months of school pass by way too fast for Shane’s liking. He’s hyperaware of his time with Ilya running out like sand in an hourglass. They make sure to spend every possible second together. School, hockey, home. Ilya tags along for every unimportant outing Shane goes on, just to be with him a little while longer, and even goes with Shane and his mom grocery shopping a few times.

Shane’s parents, of course, were devastated to hear of Ilya’s impending return to Russia. They tried to be there for both boys, letting them spend more and more time together, allowing them to come to terms on their own about what it means for them. They accepted their fate, Shane and Ilya, that they probably will not see each other again, at least while they’re both in school. They decide to make sure this departure isn’t permanent.

They make a pact. They need to put their all into playing hockey because in just four or five years, they will be playing at the highest level possible. They were both determined to get into the MLH. Imagine that, huh? Shane and Ilya, professional hockey players. They sit in Shane’s room and theorize, and strategies, and talk about what teams they’d wanna play in. They disagree, they fight, they laugh. But they know this isn’t a hollow, void promise.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are both making it into the MLH.

Shane’s mom is the one who comes up with a near-future solution.

“Ilya, let’s set you up with an Email address,” she says one evening, unprompted.

“Why?”

“Because Shane already has one,” she explains.

“So?”

“So you two can email while you’re away. Keep each other updated, send pictures, stay in touch.” What a brilliant idea. Ilya beams at the prospect of having a way of keeping in touch with Shane that doesn’t have to go through his father. They sit down at the family computer, and Yuna sets up an email address for Ilya.

“I want to know everything, too, you hear me? *Everything*,” she comments.

“Me too!” Shane’s dad calls from somewhere in the house.

—

Then comes the day Ilya has to leave.

None of the Hollanders can hide their tears. Shane’s the worst at it, tears streaming down his face the whole day. They had talked to the school, something his mom set up, and they helped Ilya pack up his dorm. Ilya’s entire time in Canada is stuffed into a couple of suitcases and a backpack sitting in the trunk. They’re driving to the airport now, where Shane and Ilya will say goodbye for the... they don’t even know how long.

Their friendship lasted the better part of eight months. Shane is regretting the two months at the beginning of the school year, when he wouldn’t even look Ilya’s way. They wasted all that time.

Shane and Ilya are sitting in the back seat. They’re not talking; Shane doesn’t think he can open his mouth without the most pathetic, miserable sounds coming out. Every once in a while, they glance towards each other. Smile. Look away.

At the airport, Ilya thanks Shane’s parents for everything. Shane’s mom sheds a few tears. She really does love him a lot. His dad hugs Ilya close. Then it’s Shane’s turn. Ilya turns to him and clutches him in the most bone-crushing, breath-stopping embrace. Shane holds Ilya with all his strength, and then holds on tighter still. They don’t say anything. The only thing they can say is goodbye, and they want to delay the inevitable as much as they are able to without making Ilya miss his flight. Or maybe that’s what they should do, keep Ilya here, make him miss his flight, take him back home.

But he is going home. And he can’t miss his flight.

After a long few minutes of just hugging in silence, Ilya speaks first. “Shane. MHL, don’t forget.”

Shane huffs wetly. “Of course not. I’m gonna get there first.”

“Ah, you wish.”

Then they detangle from one another. They each take the smallest step back, just to see the other a bit better.

“I have to go,” Ilya mumbles. Shane doesn’t want him to.

“Yeah.”

“We will meet again,” Ilya promises.

“Yeah.”

“Goodbye, Shane.”

“Goodbye, Ilya.”

And Shane watches him walk away. Hot tears are streaming down his face again, and his nose is so runny. His parents guide him back to their car, and he sits in the back, not uttering a word.

His time at the cottage is not the same that year, that summer. His mind, time and time again, drifts back to Ilya. They could have had the best time together. But one warm day, by the lake, instead of feeling down, he feels—determined. Inspired.

If he wants to see Ilya again, play in the same league, be professionals together, he has to work for it. He promises himself he will, but just to make sure, he lies under the stars every night, looking for his wish.

Chapter End Notes

yay <3

next and last chapter is the epilogue :)

hope u enjoyed

i'm on [twitter](#) say hi :3

Chapter 3: so happy together

Chapter Summary

“I missed you,” Ilya whispers.

“I missed you, too,” Shane answers.

Epilogue: reunion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What’s taking him so long? Oh my god!” Shane exclaims impatiently.

“He’ll be here any second, I’m sure,” his mom reacts calmly.

Shane has waited four years. He doesn’t want ‘any second’, he wants now, right this moment. He wants to see him with his own two eyes, and feel him under his fingertips, he wants his senses to be overwhelmed with him. Sight, touch, hearing, smell. Taste. Not that his parents know, yet. He doesn’t, as well. Didn’t have the time to taste him, the opportunity, the knowledge. He does now, so he wants it to be now, not in a few minutes. But still, he waits.

Shane watches as people trickle in, faces upon faces, none of them the right one. He makes eye contact with strangers, looking for the one face he’s grown accustomed to. He worries he won’t recognize him after so long. Stupid reason to worry, though, there’s no chance he’ll miss him. He keeps scanning the crowd. He’s been standing here for twenty minutes, and he’ll stand here for hours more to come, if needed.

He looks around again, and spots him.

A mop of familiar dirty blond curls pops up from within the crowd. He’s taller than most people there. Shane doesn’t yell, exactly, but he’s getting pretty close as he calls to him. “Ilya! Over here! Ilya!” He waves his arms around ridiculously. He can’t help himself, he knows he’s making a fool of himself, but he doesn’t care in the slightest. He’s finally here. He jumps up and down to try to attract his attention.

Ilya looks around for the source, and his eyes meet Shane’s. He starts running in his direction. Shane should have expected this, but he didn’t. He’s totally unprepared for the way Ilya’s body barrels into him, how Ilya uses his momentum, muscles, and the element of surprise to pick him up and swing him around in front of the small crowd at the Ottawa airport landing hall, which includes two more people who have also waited for four years to

see Ilya. Ilya doesn't seem to care, bouncing around and spinning even as Shane yells in his ears.

"Put me down, oh my god! Ilya!" But he's laughing, he's laughing so hard. How he missed him. Of course, they kept in touch via email and told each other about every little detail. Every thought, every feeling, every unimportant story. Obviously, they told each other all about their accomplishments as well, every win, every major success, and most importantly, the day each of them found out they were making it to their respective national teams, accompanied by a photo.

Ilya does put him down eventually, not without choking all the air out of his lungs one last time. He then goes to greet Shane's parents. His mom's eyes glisten at the look of him, at the sound of his voice, as he completely engulfs her in a hug. He's much taller than her, a little taller than his dad. They joke about it.

He's talking nonsense for the entire drive back home. He got here earlier than he should've, his national junior team is only scheduled to fly a week and a half from now, and he tells the Hollanders about how he managed to convince his dad to let him fly out early, somehow.

Shane just looks at him and smiles, nodding along to everything he already knows, received in the form of very excited emails.

When they get home, Shane beats him to the trunk and carries his suitcase in for him, much to Ilya's discontent. He claims he's perfectly able to take his luggage by himself. They walk in the door, take their shoes off. They race up the stairs to his room, Shane at a significant disadvantage from carrying the suitcase. Ilya wins. When Shane enters the room a few seconds later, he closes the door and places the suitcase down near it. When he looks up, Ilya is right up in his face, crowding him until his back hits solid wood.

"I missed you," Ilya whispers.

"I missed you, too," Shane answers.

Ilya's big now. Much bigger than Shane remembers. Shane is also much bigger now, having grown taller in the four years since they last saw each other. Ilya is still taller than him, but only slightly so. Still, Shane has to angle his head upwards, just a bit, in order to look at him properly.

Shane looks into Ilya's eyes, glimmering with a sort of happiness, an all-consuming glee, mirrored on Shane's face, for sure. Ilya's large palms rest at Shane's waist. Shane lifts his hand to circle Ilya's neck, pulling him closer.

Their first kiss.

It's everything Shane could have wanted. Ilya's lips are soft against his, his palms warm and comforting, now moving all over his body, feeling, touching, reacquainting himself anew to Shane's body, a way he's never known before. He's mapping Shane all over, and Shane does the same, his hands move from where they started, around Ilya's neck, up to cup his cheeks,

grip and tug at his hair, and back down his sides. Their lips are moving together as if they've done it a million times before.

They part, but not for long, only for a breath or two, before meeting again in the middle. Shane's hands rest on Ilya's chest now, and Ilya's are wrapped around his back, pulling Shane much, much closer. The kiss is sweet, lips on lips.

Ilya begins to tremble. Shane pulls back and watches tears trickle down Ilya's face. He raises a hand to gently wipe at his cheek with his thumb, caressing his face lovingly. Shane hiccups. Seeing Ilya cry makes his eyes start to water as well. He walks Ilya backwards until they reach the bed, pushes down, and lets himself be pulled down on top of Ilya.

Ilya doesn't let them stay like that for more than a moment, though, because just as Shane's chest hits his, he rolls them around so that Shane's back is on the bed and Ilya is hovering above.

"No crying," Ilya snuffles.

"You started it," Shane accuses. It makes Ilya giggle, which makes Shane giggle, and soon enough, neither boy is crying anymore; they're both chuckling softly, wrapped in one another. Ilya placed a swift kiss on Shane's lips again. Shane has no time to react before Ilya pulls back, and Shane's chasing after, a hand grabbing the back of his head to pull him back down for another kiss, much longer this time.

They kiss, laugh, and kiss some more for god knows how long.

When they do stop, Ilya uses his entire body weight to pin Shane down into the mattress. Shane is perfectly content right where he is. He loves this. He can't believe he ever went without, because now the thought of not having this wonderful boy trailing him around feels like torture. Like its own circle of hell. Shane's hand creeps up under Ilya's shirt, traces abstract shapes on the soft skin of Ilya's back, connecting the moles like his favorite constellations, mapping and charting his body to no end. Ilya's head is resting in the perfect forehead kiss vicinity. Shane places one small peck on his forehead, and then another, and suddenly he's overcome with the urge to kiss Ilya all over his beautiful face. He puts two hands on his face to make Ilya look at him, and attacks.

He pecks and kisses every part of Ilya's face he can reach, and Ilya is just taking it, giggling and happy and accepting his fate. He pecks all over his high cheekbones, his strong brow ridge, his nose, his mouth, his chin. The last one lands right on Ilya's mouth, and he hums into it. Shane thinks he'll never grow tired of kissing him.

"Hey," Shane utters almost inaudibly against Ilya's lips. He drags his nose across his cheek, nuzzling him like a cat. It feels so good. "I practiced my Russian while you were away."

"Oh yeah? Let me hear it," Ilya challenges.

Shane gazes deep into Ilya's eyes. He's always thought they were beautiful, but now he can truly appreciate them for how stunning they are. Now he's allowed to say it out loud, and he's allowed to do something about it, like kissing him.

“Ya.” Shane points to himself.

“Tebya.” Points to Ilya. He’s pretty sure Ilya knows where this is going.

“Lyublyu. Ya tebya lyublu, Ilya.”

Ilya’s face splits open in the biggest, widest smile Shane has ever seen on someone’s face. “I love you, too. I love you, too,” Ilya repeats like a mantra, “I love you.”

Shane is filled with this overwhelming, all-consuming feeling of absolute giddiness. He feels it coursing in his veins, pumping in his heart, from all the way up in his head to the very tips of his fingers and toes. It’s like a hum, a buzz, and it’s everywhere in his body. He needs some of it out, the feeling is too big, it’s becoming suffocating (in a good way). He shakes his arms around lightly and feels better soon after.

“I can’t believe you’re my boyfriend,” Shane sighs.

“Who said?” Ilya demands.

“Well, I—I just thought, I mean, aren’t you?” Shane stutters, fumbling over words. Eyes searching in Ilya’s own for the reason he’d say that, for where Shane went wrong.

“Kidding, Hollander, of course I am. Of course. Never worry about that.”

“Oh, you asshole,” Shane pointedly blames, but inside he melts.

“Da, asshole. But you love it,” Ilya smirks.

Shane slaps a palm over his own face. “Fuck, I do.”

—

Over dinner, Shane’s parents, Shane, and Ilya are chatting, eating—well, Ilya is lucky he’s not choking from the amounts of food he shovels in his mouth for each bite—and joking around. Ilya kicks his foot against Shane and leaves it there, pressed together. Shane’s heart flutters at that.

“Is a shame we still have not gone to cottage,” Ilya mentions. Shane is impressed with how his English has improved.

“Well, it’s not the season,” Shane’s dad specifies.

“Eh, is fine. We have time,” he says and looks at Shane. They share a smile. “Besides, I get to do something much, much more fun.”

Everyone at the table looks at him with a hint of confusion.

“Beat Shane at championships.”

Shane gasps, offended. “You will not. Canada has so got this in the bag.”

“I do not know what bag Canada has, but Russia will kick Canadian ass in two weeks, just wait and see.”

“Wow. Unbelievable. I graciously welcome you into my home and you want me to lose,” Shane acts disappointed and hurt. His mom joins in and shakes her head disapprovingly.

“Yuna! But you will be so proud of me!”

“Yeah,” Shane’s mom folds immediately.

“What? Mom!” Shane whines. “You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“Well, I love you both, what can I do?” She defends herself.

Ilya pumps a fist in the air. “Yes, Yuna!”

“We’ll just have to see about that,” Shane grumbles, annoyed.

“Yes, we will see. Me, win.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Shane groans, but he can’t hide his smile. Playing against Ilya is new, it’s exciting, it makes him want to be better than his best. It makes him want to show off and to try so, so hard to impress Ilya.

And he’ll get to do that. He really will get to do that. It’s almost surrealist. Shane has waited for this moment since he was, like, fourteen, and it’s finally here. Ilya’s finally here. They get to hang out again, sleep in the same bed again, and play hockey again. Everything in his life changed and yet remained entirely the same.

He’s so pumped.

He can’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

I CANT SEE ME LOVING NOBODY BUT YOU FOR ALL MY LIFE

thank u so much for sticking around guys, i hope you enjoyed this last chapter :)
they have ruined me forever.

i’m on [twitter](#) say hi :3

End Notes

title taken from the song happy together but specifically gerard way and ray toro's version.

english is not my first language, if u spot a mistake please say so!

this work was inspired by artwork as well as another fic, go read the fic and look at [the amazing art](#)

hope you enjoyed, im obsessed with them, this is the longest fic ive ever written for any fandom ever, and they inspire me so much i think ill write more.

completley written, will update over the weekend :3

i'm on [twitter](#) say hi :3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!