**Unanswered (And Other Words Found In The Thesaurus)**

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# Unanswered (And Other Words Found In The Thesaurus)

by fandom_commitment_issues


Summary

"Were you sleeping with Rose Landry?" LeClaire asked, and Ilya felt his entire world flip upside down.

Ilya scoffed and sank into the chair. He stared at his lap and, for a second, wished he could just say yes. It would have been easier. A simpler explanation. Something everyone else could swallow. "No," he answered instead. "I was not sleeping with Landry."

Coach sighed, the weight of it settling uncomfortably in the office. "So it was Hollander, then."

Or

Ilya gets called into his Coach's office after Rose and Shane start dating and an uncomfortable conversation takes place. Ilya realizes some things. Also he may need to stop reading his thesaurus.


Notes

Hello!
I don't know what to say about this. It got away from me. Now we're here. Canon is the Barbie I slam onto the table during the playdate.

Everyone thank my editor/beta reader Dani for being the actual best human alive. Follow them here as @the_navistar_carol or on tumblr as @the-navistar-carol.

CONTENT WARNING: singular use of the f-slur, but not used towards anyone.

I FEEL THE OVERWHELMING NEED TO PUT HERE THAT THE CHARACTER OF "SMITTY" MENTIONED IN THIS FIC IS NOT IN FACT WILL SMITH OF THE SAN JOSE SHARKS. THAT WAS A COINCIDENCE I PROMISE. SMITTY IS NAMED AFTER THE RESTAURANTS.

FUCK AI. No AI is ever used in my stories. I hate that this is a thing we now have to say because it should be fucking obvious that AI fucking sucks.

See the end of the work for more notes

Ilya was playing like shit. He knew that because he knew what a good hockey player looked like, and he'd stopped seeing that in the mirror weeks ago. He'd stopped seeing that in *anyone* weeks ago, because Shane walked out of his house and then got a fucking *girlfriend.*

It was stupid, and dumb, and foolish, and ludicrous, and laughable, and — *maybe* Ilya had spent a few sleepless nights with a thesaurus open because he couldn't text *Jane* anymore.

Worse than playing bad, Ilya was playing *angry.* He was sloppy even in practice. Missed shots and late hits. Marlow had started taking over more, tapping Ilya out of shifts before he could do real damage, because Ilya had gotten a little *too* heated at practice once and made one of the rookies cry. He wanted to apologize. He hadn't yet.

Ilya Rozanov was, in all senses of the word, an *unreliable captain.*

Some of the guys who had been playing with him for a while had tried to ask him what was wrong. Ilya had shut them down, and also probably, *maybe,* almost punched them in the face when they suggested he'd broken up with his Montreal girl. If his reaction to their questions hadn't confirmed their theories, his near-breakdown during their last trip to Montreal certainly had.

He wasn't heartbroken. He wasn't allowed to be, because Shane was never *his.* Even if it felt like it. Even if they'd eaten tuna melts and gossiped like teenagers about their former teammates. Even if the absence of a slow fucking hockey player felt like actual *agony.*

Hollander had a girlfriend. A famous one. A pretty one. Which meant Ilya was *not* heartbroken over their… *whatever it was* ending.

He was the opposite of heartbroken. He was fine. Better than fine, he was *happy.* Jubilant. Gleeful. Merry. *Thriving,* even. And hate-reading the fucking thesaurus at night because for some reason he couldn't get it up for anyone except Shane Hollander.

So, yeah, he was playing poorly. He'd even broken one of his skates at practice that day, and he'd yelled a string of profanities so loud the puck bucket rattled and no one bothered to help him to the bench. No one was brave enough — which felt like a reasonable assessment of the situation.

Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised when he got called into the coach's office that afternoon. It was coming eventually. Marlow hadn't been able to talk sense into him, no amount of broken skates had knocked him out of it, and in the last seven games he had made a total of… *four points.* One goal. He should have been able to do that in his sleep, and they all knew it.

He should have been able to do that in *one game.*

Hell, one *period.*

Someone had to lecture him. It was obviously going to be Coach. Ilya had prepared himself for this conversation.

He closed the door behind him and twisted his hands together until his knuckles went white. He felt rather like a small child about to be yelled at. “Sorry,” he mumbled, his chin tucked into his chest. “Will not happen again.”

Coach LeClaire sighed behind his desk. “Take a seat, Rozanov,” he said.

As Ilya sat, Coach rose from his own chair, coming around the desk to lean right beside him. Close enough to make this feel personal, somehow, instead of just business.

Ilya had always liked his coach. He was tough as nails, but never cruel. Aside from the occasional insult about the team *skating like sissies,* he’d never really made anyone feel small. He didn’t care much about their personal lives, but had made it clear that if they truly had no one else to talk to, his door was open.

Ilya, of course, had never taken him up on that offer.

He didn’t talk about *anything* personal. Not really, and certainly not with the people he worked with every day. He had Sveta if he needed to talk about his family — which he rarely did — and for everything else he had…

Well, he just had Sveta now, and that was fine. Sometimes he could even pluck up the courage to ask Marlow something if he had a culture or language question. That was somewhat newer. Something that had started in the last couple of weeks.

Being this close to his coach, in a conversation that he had assumed was going to be about *hockey,* made Ilya nervous. It made him edgy, fussy, uneasy — *fuck, he needed to put that thesaurus down.*

The silence stretched for too long, which only wound him up more with every passing second. Eventually, Coach just huffed and shook his head. “Look, I’m gonna ask,” he began, which was *never* a good start. “You’re gonna freak out, but I’m gonna ask.”

This did very little to ease Ilya’s nerves. A conversation about how shit he was playing, he could handle. Anything *personal* might just make him lose his mind. He was already hanging by a thread here, and every single day that thread was frayed further by yet another tabloid, another headline, another article about Shane fucking Hollander and his movie-star girlfriend.

“What is—?”

“Were you sleeping with Rose Landry?” LeClaire asked, and Ilya felt his entire world flip upside down. *Rose.* He hated that name. Hated it more when it came from the mouth of someone he trusted. “Is that why you’ve been so… is that what’s been bothering you?”

Ilya scoffed and sank into the chair. He stared at his lap and, for a second, wished he could just say *yes.* It would have been easier. A simpler explanation. Something everyone else could swallow. “No,” he answered instead. “I was not sleeping with *Landry.”*

He said her name with a venom she didn't really deserve. It wasn't her fault. The ugly pit of jealousy in his stomach was entirely his own problem.

It wasn't Rose Landry's fault that she liked Shane Hollander. It wasn't her fault that Shane Hollander liked her back.

Shane was so easy to like. Warm, effortless, impossible not to orbit. He deserved to be liked. And Ilya *did* — he liked Hollander so much, and he didn't know what to do with it.

But Shane didn't want Ilya. He wanted Rose. Maybe he *loved* Rose. And it wasn't Rose's fault, but it really fucking sucked.

Coach sighed, the weight of it settling uncomfortably in the office. "So it was Hollander, then."

Ilya never looked up faster, heart kicking against his ribs. When he caught his coach's eye, he already knew the secret was out. It hadn't been a question. "What?"

LeClaire leaned back farther on his desk and crossed his arms. "It was Hollander," he repeated. "It's gotta be one of them. You get the most pissy when the guys gossip about them, or when we so much as *mention* Montreal."

Ilya proved his point by rolling his eyes and scoffing. "I don't—"

"The guys talk, Roz. I hear things," Coach interrupted. Even now — assuming what he had — he didn't seem mean. He didn't seem *judgemental.* Just concerned. "I know you had a… *person.* Thought it was a girl. Thought it was *Landry* for a second. And I know you two broke up right before this all started."

LeClaire didn't know anything. He didn't know shit. Ilya wanted to snap at him. Wanted to *yell* at him. No one knew anything about this, and they never had. They didn't know what it had been, what had happened, what it had felt like.

"I was not…" he couldn't even finish the lie. No one had ever asked him about it like this. No one had ever sat in front of him and confronted him about liking men. No one had ever even *suspected* that he might like Hollander. "That does not mean I—"

"You're playing like shit and you're angry. That tracks with a breakup." He wasn't asking. He already knew. And that was *bad.* It was so, so bad. "Can't say I'm not surprised by who you broke up with, though."

"We didn't break up," Ilya said quietly. Part of him wished they *had* — that it was something real, something definable. That it had been more serious than just fucking, so when Hollander walked out, it was a definite split. It would have been easier to explain why this hurt so much. It would have been less pathetic. "We were never together."

They were *never* together. There was no reason for Ilya to be getting on the ice every day and playing like he was missing something. There was no reason for this to feel like a loss.

But it didn't work that way — it felt like he'd lost *everything.*

This time, Ilya barely noticed how quiet it had gotten. If he had, he probably would have been grateful for it — just a few more seconds of bliss before LeClaire blew up his career.

“How long?”

Ilya just looked up at LeClaire again, because whatever he was thinking, the truth was so much worse. There wasn’t a good answer to that question. So he just shrugged and hoped that was enough.

“How long have you and Hollander been…” LeClaire trailed off, but he’d made his question more than clear. There was no way Ilya could pretend he didn’t understand.

With a sigh, Ilya dropped his gaze back to his lap. “Since summer before rookie season.”

*“Shit,* Rozanov!”

Ilya buried his face in his hands with a groan. “I know.”

He did know. Of course he knew. Even back when they were seventeen and nothing had happened yet, Ilya had known *wanting* Shane was a bad idea. Hell, Shane had known it too. Shane had *told* him that, out loud, as if that was supposed to be enough to stop it.

LeClaire looked like he’d seen a ghost. “You two were—” he cut himself off, and Ilya was grateful for that. “And the rivalry—”

“Was real,” Ilya assured him. “We did not like each other at first.”

Maybe that wasn’t entirely true. If Ilya was honest with himself, the day Shane had introduced himself was the day Ilya stopped disliking him. At least off the ice. Back then, whether he had wanted to admit it or not, Ilya had found him… *charming.*

Maybe that was another word he should look up in the thesaurus.

“No?” LeClaire asked, as if he couldn’t quite believe it. “So you were just—?” Once again, he had the good sense to stop himself. “Yeah, I’m not finishing that sentence.”

“Was just sex,” Ilya said. It wasn’t like LeClaire didn’t know. At this point, Ilya felt like he needed to explain, if only to save himself a shred of dignity. What no one needed to know was that Ilya wasn’t sure if it had ever really been *just* anything. “For a long time. Very long time.”

It was lonely at the top. It always had been. Isolated on teams, resented by other players, scouted by middle-aged men who only cared to know if he could push through broken ribs. It never stopped, and no one understood.

And then there was Shane.

Shane, who was inexplicably also at the top. Who was also isolated on his team. Who was also resented. Who had been scouted more fiercely and at a younger age. It never stopped for him either, and still no one understood.

Maybe they had needed each other in some twisted way. Not because it was healthy, but because it was *familiar.* Because it made the loneliness survivable.

And then Shane walked out. Shane started seeing Rose Landry, who was at the top in her own way.

Shane *wasn't* alone at the top anymore.

Only Ilya was.

He was going to throw up. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, trying to come to terms with the fact that he'd just confessed to his coach that he'd been sleeping with his sworn enemy. For *years.*

Oh *Jesus,* he'd just come out as bisexual and he didn't even mean to.

"And hockey?" Coach asked. He was hesitant to broach the subject, Ilya could tell. "I mean, you never…"

"Never threw a game," Ilya assured. "You know I wouldn't do that. And I know Hollander. If he thought I even considered that, he would not let me touch him again."

It was better when Ilya *won,* actually. It meant Shane got angry. It meant he took it out on Ilya. That way, it was easier to pretend whatever they had came from frustration and nothing else. And, pathetically, Ilya really loved that Shane would still tell him that he'd played well — that his win was earned.

LeClaire shook his head and took a deep breath. "I didn't think you would," he admitted. *But I had to check* went unsaid — and Ilya heard it all the same. "But this is *bad,* kid. Real bad."

Ilya felt like he might collapse in on himself. "I know. I know, I'm sorry," he whispered. It *was* bad. He knew it was bad. He hated himself for it. "I did not — I was not supposed to… and then I did and he—"

"Holy *fuck,* he broke up with *you?"* LeClaire asked, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. Like it was actually a shock.

Ilya didn't get it. Based on all of his own behavior recently, he thought that would have been obvious. And more obvious: the fact that he and Shane *hadn't* broken up. They had never been anything.

"What did you think happened?"

LeClaire blew out a long breath and stretched backwards. "I figured you would've broken up with him. I mean, it's *Hollander,"* he said. Ilya didn't know why everyone seemed to think Hollander was fragile, incapable of inflicting pain. "I thought his thing with Landry might be a way to make you jealous. Thought it was working a little too well."

Yeah, it *was* working too well.

It was working because Shane hadn't done it on purpose. He hadn't done it to hurt Ilya, he just… hadn't thought about Ilya at all.

"No," Ilya mumbled, shaking his head. "I mean… *no.* He would not do that, I don't think. I think he *likes* her. Last time we—"

Coach held up his hand. "Please don't give me details."

Ilya hadn't planned to. Something inside his head screamed *mine, mine, mine* anytime he even thought about Shane, and he had no intention to share. Until, of course, Shane reminded him that he'd never been Ilya's to share in the first place.

"I pushed too hard," Ilya continued. "Asked him to stay. He did not want that. Now I know it was because…" he trailed off, pulling at his fingers. He wished he didn't have to talk about this, because now he might do something stupid like *cry.* "Well, I do not *know,* but I think he might have… he might have already been with *her."*

"Christ, Rozanov."

Coach didn't say anything else for a long moment. He just watched Ilya in the way he did when watching a player skate through a bad shift — not angry, just taking stock. Observing what was broken, what could still be fixed.

"You're making a lot of assumptions," he said eventually. "You don't know."

Ilya huffed a weak, humorless laugh, because that was better than sobbing. "I know enough."

"Do you?" LeClaire asked gently. "Because from where I'm sitting, you're filling in a lot of blanks with whatever hurts the most."

Ilya picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. He hadn't noticed it before. It felt important now — like, if he could just pull it free, he might unravel something else with it. "He did not deny it," he said. "When I asked if he was with other people. Which was not fair for me to ask, because so am I."

"What did he say?" Coach pressed.

Ilya swallowed. His throat felt tight. *Raw.* His eyes started to sting, and he *hated* it. "He said it was private."

LeClaire made a noise in the back of his throat. Not quite a scoff, not quite a laugh. "Yeah, that tracks."

Ilya frowned despite himself. "What does that mean?"

"It means," LeClaire began, choosing his words carefully, "that guys like Hollander don't stumble into things they care about. He would've shut you down. Clean. Quick."

He *had.* Shane had shut him down entirely. He'd fucking *walked out.*

“He walked out of my house,” Ilya heard himself saying before he could stop it. *Fuck,* he’d admitted that Shane was at his *house.* And that wasn’t more damning than anything else he’d said so far, but it certainly felt more intimate. He shifted in his chair again, his pulse ticking faster. “You do not know him.”

LeClaire tilted his head. “No, but I know you. And I know what it looks like when someone gets under your skin,” he said. Ilya doubted LeClaire understood how deeply Shane Hollander had embedded himself into his life. Just how far under his skin Hollander had gone. He had gone beyond thorn-deep ages ago. Now, Ilya carried him under his skin like a scarf made of nerves and callused fingers. *Now,* every breath was fought for. “This isn’t about losing him to her.”

Ilya’s hands curled into fists at his sides. LeClaire had no fucking idea what this was. He couldn’t. Ilya wasn’t about to pretend *anyone* did. “Then what is it about?” he snapped.

Coach didn’t back down. “It’s about you thinking you’re replaceable.”

The word hit like a slap. Ilya looked away before he could actually let his tears fall. And when the silence settled again, it was *heavy.* Not sharp, which Ilya would have preferred. It felt like holding his breath — no, it felt like suffocation.

When LeClaire finally spoke again, his voice was quiet. Steady. “You didn’t start playing like shit because he got a girlfriend,” he said. “You started playing like shit because you think he chose her over you. But you’re not replaceable, kid.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. His mind flashed back to every headline, every photo, every too-easy smile Shane wore when he thought no one was looking. He’d built a story out of it. Brick by brick. Looked at it from every angle and convinced himself it made sense.

Because that was *exactly* what Ilya was: *replaceable.* Shane had replaced him.

Or maybe — *worse* — Ilya hadn’t been replaced at all. Because there had been nothing to replace. Ilya was *nothing* to Shane. Just a way to get what he wanted until something stable came along.

“You weren’t there,” Coach continued. “You don’t know how that decision was made.”

Ilya hesitated. That was the problem, wasn’t it?

Slowly, reluctantly, he looked back up. He didn’t think he could hide the way his eyes had welled up. “How did you know?” he asked, his voice low. “How did you know it was him?”

LeClaire let out a long breath. “I didn’t, at first,” he admitted. Which was good, Ilya supposed, because he would have thought his coach was insane if he’d jumped to that conclusion immediately. “I just thought you were going through a breakup. Figured it made sense that seeing your rival in a happy relationship would piss you off. Maybe love in general just made you angry.”

He paused, and Ilya tried not to lose his mind over the wording. *Love.*

Affection. Devotion. Tenderness. Infatuation.

*Love* had been the first word he'd looked up in the thesaurus. Maybe just to make himself hurt more. It was also the word he kept going back to — because every time someone described the way Shane looked at Rose Landry, Ilya went to check if it was a synonym for that forbidden word. Half the time, it was.

He'd seen the phrase *unrequited love* at some point, too. Ilya hated it, but he'd looked that up in the thesaurus as well.

*Unrequited:* unanswered, unreturned.

Ilya had all but refused to name what he felt for Shane Hollander. At first, it was fear — fear of what it would mean if Shane reciprocated. He'd been terrified of what might change.

Now, he refused to name it because he didn't want to add a word in front of it. If he let himself call it love, then he'd have to clarify to himself…

He would have to admit that it was *unanswered.*

*Unreturned.*

*Unrequited.*

"But then you still asked the guys about their wives," LeClaire continued, completely unaware of Ilya's spiral. "You weren't mad about *them* being in love. You even asked about Smitty's weird roommate."

"I think is not just roommate," Ilya said before he could stop himself.

LeClaire snorted. "Oh, I know. I think Smitty's gayer than a Pride parade, but that's not the point." No, his point was clear enough, but Ilya knew he would specify anyway. "You *only* hated Hollander's thing with Landry. I thought maybe he'd taken your girl, but it takes two to tango."

*Two to tango.*

Ilya didn't know what that meant. Part of him was sure he wouldn't want to. Some things were better left untranslated. If it ate him alive, he'd ask Marlow later, but he wouldn't ask now.

Coach didn't seem to notice Ilya's confusion. He just went on making things worse. "Figured if Hollander hadn't taken your girl, then maybe *she* had taken your *guy."*

Hollander was never his. Not *his guy.* Ilya had no claim, no right to be jealous, no right to *hate* Rose Landry.

But he *wanted.* God, he wanted.

He wanted to stay the night with Shane, and have dinner with him, and hold his hand. Not in public. No, never that — but maybe privately.

And maybe if they ever went out with teammates and ended up at the same club again, they could dance together and no one would think anything more of it than just two people who'd had too much to drink. People danced all the time. Touched all the time. It wouldn't mean anything. Maybe no one would even notice it was *them* if the lights were dim enough. If it was late enough.

But Hollander wasn't *his.* Rose hadn't *stolen* him.

Ilya had done this to himself. *Self-inflicted.* Self-imposed. Volitional. *Purposeful.* That one wasn't in the thesaurus. He looked it up separately.

Ilya swallowed and leaned back in his chair, as if the distance might help. Like if he could just get far enough away from his own body, this wouldn't feel so exposed. He hadn't meant to say any of that. He hadn't meant to *think* any of it.

"I should have been better," he said finally, because it was easier than arguing. Easier than admitting that *wanting* something didn't mean you were entitled to it. Easier than saying that knowing something was self-inflicted didn't make it hurt any less.

He did not know, however, if he was talking about hockey or Shane.

Maybe both.

LeClaire rubbed his jaw, taking a deep breath. "It's not about *shoulds,"* he said, and Ilya thought he might actually mean that. "It's about consequences."

*Consequences.* Ilya hadn't needed to look at that one in the thesaurus. *Outcomes. Results. Aftermaths.* He knew consequences. Sometimes, it was all he knew.

"You didn't do anything illegal," LeClaire continued. But Ilya *had.* Not here. Not in Boston, but Ilya wasn't a citizen. It *was* illegal for him. Coach, for all his virtues, did not seem to understand that. "You didn't throw games. You didn't compromise the team. But you did put yourself in a position to be burned."

*Position.* As if it had been an accident.

Ilya's laugh punched out of him without humor. It sounded ugly. Here he sat, sooty-winged Icarus, and the sky had never seemed so far away. "I am already burned."

"Yeah, I can see that." LeClaire's eyes were steady as he pushed off the desk and finally returned to his chair. The shift in energy was evident — this went from personal to procedural. Somehow, that made it worse. "I need to know that this ends here. That you can get your head back in the game."

Ilya nodded immediately. Too fast. He hoped LeClaire hadn't noticed. In all honesty, he could not promise that. If he ever saw the headline that Shane was engaged to Rose Landry, he thought it might kill him. He wouldn't be much use on the ice at that point.

LeClaire stared at him for a long, long time. The same look he gave players when deciding whether to trust their bad knee or send them back down the tunnel.

Ilya had never been on the receiving end of one of those looks — people always trusted his word. Not because he was telling the truth all the time, but because they knew he could still perform while in pain. He *had.*

He had played through bruised ribs and broken teeth. He'd returned to the ice too early after concussions and waved off team doctors after bad hits. Ilya had played through pain before, but it had never been like this.

"If this ever goes public," Coach began carefully, "it's not just tabloids and press scrums. It's the league. It's integrity questions. It's people deciding narratives that you don't get to control."

*It's Russia.*

Ilya already knew all that. He understood it. That was why it had been contained for so long. Why it had lived in quiet kitchens and dark bedrooms. Behind locked doors. That was why they had unspoken rules that Ilya always, *always* found a way to break.

There were already narratives. They just weren't like *this.*

The narrative was that he and Shane hated each other. That they had wanted to tear each other's throats out since the moment they first met. That no one could come between them and the top two spots in the league. They volleyed the title back and forth, always circling, always waiting for the chance to knock the other down.

The narrative was rivalry. Violence. Two prodigies locked in perpetual war. And headlines loved it. Fans loved it. The *league* loved it.

The narrative did *not* include the alley behind the rink in Regina. The narrative did not include a cigarette, or a handshake, or freckles. The narrative did not include dozens — if not *hundreds* — of hotel rooms over the years, or Hollander's investment property, or Ilya's house in Boston.

The narrative did not include the doors they locked. The names they never said out loud. The way it only existed where no one could see it.

Coach leaned forward, lowering his voice. "You know this can never get out, right?"

Ilya's chest tightened. *He knew.* "I know. Would be bad for league, I would not be able to go back to Russia, and also—"

"Montreal would eat him alive," LeClaire said.

Ilya looked up quickly, meeting his coach's eye for the first time in several minutes. He didn't look *mad.* He didn't even look stern. For the first time, Ilya realized LeClaire looked *worried.* Concerned. Troubled.

Not just for Ilya, but for *Shane.*

“I know their coach. I know their guys. They won’t protect him,” LeClaire said evenly. “They’d call him a fag. Bench him. Might even void his contract.”

Ilya bristled at the slur and still somehow, at the same time, felt himself soften at the obvious care his coach had been hiding. “They can’t,” he argued. “They are nothing without him. He is best in league.”

For a beat, there was no response. Coach looked like he was turning the words over in his head — as if it was a whole new language. Then–

“Holy shit, you love him.”

Ilya flinched *hard.* He had all but refused to admit what he felt for Shane Hollander, and he certainly hadn’t ever expected that feeling to be thrown at him by LeClaire.

“I—” He swallowed, shaking his head like that might make it go away. “What?”

“I’ve never heard you compliment a competitor.” It was hardly evidence. Or, it *wouldn’t* be if Ilya was anyone else. Or if this had been any other conversation. “I sure as hell haven’t heard you call anyone other than yourself the ‘best in the league.’ You *love* him.”

*Fuck.* Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

Yeah. He did. He really fucking did. He loved Hollander in a way that felt all-consuming. He thought about him constantly. Half his day was just his brain looping the question: *would Shane want to know about this? Would he care? Would he laugh?* The other half of his day was spent convincing himself it wasn’t weird to text Shane updates about things that had nothing to do with sex.

It hadn’t always been that way. At least, Ilya didn’t think so. For a long time, he only thought of Shane when he was horny. That was manageable, easy to write off — even if he eventually realized that he was thinking of Shane *every* time he was horny.

He started to realize the shift when he noticed that even though he thought about Shane every time he was horny, he wasn’t horny every time he thought about Shane. Which meant he was thinking about Shane most of the time. More than anything or anyone else, at the very least.

He started noticing it in the quiet moments. In the space between practices. In the way he reached for his phone without thinking, hoping *Jane* might light up the screen.

And then there were other things. Like when he would see one of Shane’s ads in public and felt the immediate need to tease him about it. When the team bought Shane’s preferred brand of hockey tape, and Ilya couldn’t wait to tell him they were matching. Or when he saw something on a menu that fit Shane’s ridiculous diet, and he texted Shane to let him know there was another restaurant he could safely go to on the road.

It became obvious to him when, while at those restaurants, he found himself ordering those ridiculous meals. Just because it made him think of Shane. Just because he knew he could

text Shane a picture of it and get his approval — even if the approval was just Shane calling him an asshole in that soft, affectionate way that didn't feel like an insult at all.

He didn't even like those meals. He just liked the idea of Shane knowing he'd chosen it.

Ash-winged Icarus.

So yes. Ilya *loved* him.

More than he loved anyone, probably.

Because Hollander made him feel *alive.* Made him want to get out of bed every day and get to the rink. Made him want to be *better,* so that Shane was never alone at the top.

Ilya took a deep breath as he considered his words. As mortifying as this was, he wanted his coach to understand. He wanted his coach to *see* him. For the first time, he wanted someone to.

"I think I love him more than hockey," he confessed quietly. He didn't miss the way LeClaire's eyes widened. "I think I love hockey because I love him."

The room went very, very still. For just a second, Ilya thought he'd finally said something that broke the world. Like the air itself had to recalibrate.

Coach LeClaire didn't speak. He didn't react in the way most people did when Ilya said too much. There were no awkward jokes, no immediate correction, no visible discomfort. He didn't ask if Ilya understood the English he had used. He only leaned back in his chair and stared at Ilya as if this was the first time he'd seen the whole picture.

"That is something I didn't need to know," LeClaire finally said.

Ilya nodded, heat creeping up his neck. It was too much. *He* was too much. "Sorry."

*"But,"* LeClaire held up his hand before Ilya could spiral further, "it explains a lot."

It probably did. For a long time, everyone had assumed Ilya was obsessed with the rivalry. He was more than willing to let them think that. It was simpler than trying to explain the truth. It was definitely *safer.*

"For what it's worth, I don't care who you sleep with. Men, women, the goddamn moon. That's not what this is about," LeClaire continued. It was fine that he was directing this conversation — Ilya wasn't sure what to say. And it was… *nice,* almost, to know that someone accepted him. "But you wear the C. That means something. You don't get to fall apart because someone didn't choose you back. Not when it costs the team. Not when it costs *you."*

Ilya swallowed the knot in his throat. He didn't argue. He didn't think he could. And if he did, then it would just be to tell LeClaire that whatever his falling apart had cost him, it wasn't *nearly* as much as he'd already lost.

LeClaire leaned forward again, hands folded, entirely business now. “You don’t need to stop feeling what you’re feeling,” he said. “But you need to keep it off the ice.”

He was *trying.* At first, he’d been grateful for the rink. He thought it might distract him. Now he dreaded every practice. Every game. Somehow, someway, *everything* reminded him of Shane. Every drill. Every whistle. Every stupid highlight package on the screen. Shane was *everywhere.* And when Ilya finally managed to find something that *didn’t* remind him of his rival, someone always brought him up.

He was *trying* to keep it off the ice. He was just failing.

“I can,” Ilya lied. Maybe too fast, because LeClaire narrowed his eyes at him. “I *will.”* Another lie.

“I don’t care how.” LeClaire’s voice was not unkind, just unmovable. Like a mountain. Like he always was. Not unfeeling, but always contained. “I don’t care if it’s you fixing things with him or getting yourself over it, but fix this.”

The words landed like a hit against the boards. Hard, unflinching, and *final.*

*Fix this.*

Not explain it. Not justify it. Not suffer through it quietly. *Fix it,* like a soldier breaking stride. A bad habit. A weak back-check. Something you correct or lose ice time for. Something that either worked or got *replaced.*

Ilya nodded once. “Yes sir,” he said, because that was the only response left to him. That was safer than saying anything else. *Obedience* was something Ilya understood.

Perform. Endure. Don’t complain.

LeClaire studied him for a moment longer. His eyes tracked every twitch of Ilya’s hand, the same way he did before sending Ilya into an overtime period. Whatever he was looking for, he didn’t find it. He gave the smallest nod and leaned back. “Dismissed.”

Ilya stood, not having to think about it as he soothed his hands down his thighs. His legs felt steady again — they always did after the rules were clear. Sometimes, he was able to convince himself that was why his knees went weak whenever Shane was around — because they didn’t have defined *rules.*

It was a lie he was finding harder and harder to sell to himself.

At the door, LeClaire called out to him once more. *“Fix it,* Rozanov.”

Ilya hesitated for all of one second. Not long enough to even look back. “I’ll fix,” he said quietly to himself, and then he stepped back into the hallway.

Later, he spent far too long staring at the word *fix* in the thesaurus. He spent hours trying to convince himself he *could* fix it, even when he knew he couldn’t. There was nothing to fix, because there was nothing to have broken in the first place.

*Fix.* As in to *repair.* Rebuild. Patch. Reconstruct.

Maybe he could do all that. Maybe for himself. But not with Shane. If there was one thing he knew he could never do with Shane, it was *restore.*

***

A few months later, when LeClaire saw the helmet-kiss at the All-Stars Game, he knew what it meant. The commentators didn't, the rest of the league didn't, but LeClaire did.

Ilya *fixed* it.

He wasn't surprised when Rozanov shuffled into the office early, before the first practice he had after Florida. Actually, he had expected it.

Ilya didn't sit down this time. He hovered in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder like he expected someone to be listening. "Is um…" he took a deep breath, and LeClaire waited patiently. "Is fixed. Me and uh… is fixed."

LeClaire nodded, trying not to show the twitch of his own lip at how nervous his captain looked. He'd already figured out that it was fixed, but it was nice to hear it out loud. "Good. Happy for you," he said, and he found he even meant it. "Even more happy for the team. They missed their captain."

The man looked like he wanted to curdle into himself. "Sorry."

"It's okay, Roz," he said, though he had just barely convinced himself to believe that. Honestly, he wasn't sure how he was supposed to have handled this situation. They didn't train him for his star player being heartbroken over their team's biggest rival. "Don't let it happen again. Keep him fucking happy."

Rozanov nodded. "I will. I think."

He didn't sound entirely convinced of his own answer, but LeClaire waved him off anyway. He didn't want to know any details. He didn't care if it never came up again — hoped it *didn't.* As long as Roz was back and ready to play.

And he *was.* LeClaire was pleased to find his player back in his usual groove. The timing returned, the edge sharpened. They won the next game. And the one after that.

Roz didn't know — *no one* knew — but LeClaire drafted paperwork the night after the All-Stars Game. Just in case.

He'd done the math and figured out which players he would need to trade in order to snag Hollander, should it ever go public. Because Montreal *would* drop him if it got out. That wasn't speculation, it was a fact.

*Two.*

He would need to cut two players in a trade for Hollander. LeClaire could afford that. Hollander played like he might as well have been two guys anyway. Not to mention that with both Rozanov *and* Hollander on the roster, it almost wouldn't matter who else filled the lines.

He refined the paperwork the next season. Updated the contracts, adjusted the cap space, figured out which two players he'd have to cut if it came down to it.

He hoped to never use that list. But he kept it.

The season after that, Roz didn't renew his contract. He moved to Ottawa. Once again, no one saw what was happening — but LeClaire did. He knew *exactly* why Rozanov was leaving, and he hardly blamed him for it. He said as much when Ilya broke the news to him privately, three days before he asked for the trade.

LeClaire still refined the paperwork that season. Only this time, he ran the numbers for both of them. He calculated how many players he would have to move in order to bring in the league's two star forwards at once. That number was higher, though somehow still affordable.

He picked their names carefully. He wrote down the reasons they would be traded. Justifications. Cap space logic. Future considerations.

With every stroke of his pen, he prayed no one else ever got to see it.

When it *did* come out, and Hollander followed Roz to Ottawa, LeClaire couldn't deny that he was envious of Wiebe. It was a dream duo to snag, the kind of roster move coaches fantasized about, and he'd spent years literally planning for Boston to be the lucky team.

But Ottawa seemed good for them — better than Boston would ever hope to be, honestly — and LeClaire was nearing retirement anyway. Let Wiebe try to wrangle them now, LeClaire was officially stepping out of their love life.

Sometimes he still wished it had been Landry, though.

End Notes

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