

Learning Curve

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Learning Curve

by [glowingregards](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov studies Shane Hollander's every move. He likes to learn. He learns Shane Hollander the way he learns systems.

Notes

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Ilya learns Shane Hollander the way he learns systems.

Patterns first. Tendencies. What reappears when the pressure changes.

He tells himself this is normal. Necessary. Shane is good, dangerously good, and Ilya has always taken pride in dismantling dangerous things. He watches tape late at night, laptop balanced on his knees, the room lit only by the blue-white glow of the screen.

Shane always adjusts his gloves twice before a faceoff. Always. Even when he doesn't need to.

When he's frustrated, his stride shortens. When he's confident, it lengthens, smooth and it is almost lazy. He favors his left when driving the net, but he shoots right when he's angry, hard, like he's trying to punish the puck.

Ilya rewinds. Pauses. Watches again.

He starts noticing the things that don't matter for the game.

The way Shane chews the inside of his cheek when he's listening. The way his jaw tightens when a ref talks too long. The way he never celebrates alone, always turns, always looks for someone else.

Ilya closes the laptop with a sharp snap, pulse oddly loud in his ears.

Focus, he tells himself. You need to focus.

The first press event is a charity thing. Neutral ground. Banners, soft lighting, and too many microphones.

They sit side by side at a long table, jerseys traded for suits. Shane smells faintly like soap and coffee. Ilya notices because he notices everything.

He watches how Shane's voice changes when he talks about the game. It's steadier, lower. How his shoulders relax when he feels certain. How his foot taps under the table when a question edges too close to personal.

When it's Ilya's turn, he smiles for the camera and says something charming and sharp. He keeps one eye on Shane the entire time.

Shane glances over once, brief and questioning, as if he can feel it.

Their knees brush under the table. Accidental. Or not. Neither of them moves.

They end up alone afterward, the noise of the event muffled behind heavy doors. Shane's scrolling on his phone. Ilya pretends to check his messages too.

He isn't reading anything.

He's watching the way Shane's brow furrows at something on the screen, the way his thumb pauses like he's debating whether to respond.

"Bad news?" Ilya asks lightly.

Shane looks up, startled. "What? Oh.. no. Just team stuff."

Ilya hums, unconvinced. He files the reaction away. Deflects when overwhelmed. Useful.

"You played well last night," Ilya says, like it's nothing.

Shane snorts. "You stole half my chances."

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "I know."

Shane's mouth quirks despite himself. "You're infuriating."

Ilya's smile sharpens. "You keep coming back."

For a moment, they just stand there. The space between them hums, tight and quiet. Then someone calls Shane's name, and the moment fractures. Ilya watches him walk away.

Texting starts as logistics.

Game times. Travel complaints. A joke about the weather in whatever city they're stuck in.

Ilya studies Shane there, too.

Shane uses too many ellipses when he's tired. Types faster when he's annoyed. Sends voice notes late at night, voice low and rough like he's half-asleep. Ilya listens to those messages more than once.

He notices Shane never texts during games. Never during practice. Only after, when the noise dies down and something softer slips through.

One night, Shane sends: you ever get tired of this?

Ilya stares at the words for a long time. Tired of what? He types, careful.

There's a pause. Three dots. Gone. Then: Never mind.

Ilya doesn't push. He lets the silence sit, heavy and deliberate. Later, he replays the question in his head like game footage.

On the ice, it gets worse.

Ilya tracks Shane even when the puck isn't near him. Watches how he positions himself, how he anticipates plays before they unfold. Shane is smart. Not flashy, not reckless. He adapts.

Ilya loves that.

He adjusts his own game accordingly, stripping out improvisation, tightening his control. He becomes sharper, colder. He stops chasing bit hits. Stops taking risks.

With Shane, he is exact.

"You only play like that against me," Shane says one night, breathless, adrenaline still crackling between them. Ilya doesn't deny it.

Another press event. Another long table. This time, Shane is visibly exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes. Shoulders tense.

Ilya notices immediately.

A reporter asks Shane about pressure. About expectations. About whether he's feeling the weight of leadership. Shane answers smoothly, but his knee bounces under the table. Faster. Faster.

Ilya leans in just enough to murmur, "Breathe."

Shane startles, then smiles. The cameras don't catch it. No one else hears. Shane doesn't look at him, but his breathing evens out.

Afterward, in the corridor, Shane corners him.

"What was that?" he demands, voice low.

Ilya shrugs. "You needed it."

"You watching me that closely now?"

Ilya meets his gaze. Doesn't smile. "Always."

The word hangs between them. Heavier than it should be. Shane swallows.

The first thing Shane notices is that Ilya stops smiling.

Not the public smile, the one he wears for cameras and chirps and post-goal chaos, but the private one. The twitch at the corner of his mouth when he's enjoying himself. That disappears the second Shane steps onto the ice.

Ilya's shoulder goes loose instead. Dangerous-loose. Like a boxer settling into a stance he's practiced a thousand times.

Shane clocks it in warmups, the way Ilya circles wider than usual, how his eyes flick up every time Shane touches the puck. It's not obvious. No one else would catch it, but Shane has spent years learning how to read pressure. How to feel when something is aimed directly at him.

By the first period, it's undeniable.

Ilya shadows him. Not close enough to draw a call, not far enough to lose him. He times Shane's turns, anticipates his stops. When Shane cuts left, Ilya's already there. When Shane hesitates, just a fraction, just enough to sell a fake, Ilya doesn't bite.

He never bites.

It pisses Shane off. It also... doesn't.

There's a moment late in the second where Shane drives the net hard, shoulder lowered, fully expecting contact. Instead, Ilya shifts his weight, hooks his stick just right, and steals the puck clean. No hit. No drama. Just precision.

The crowd roars. Shane coasts past the crease, jaw tight, lungs burning.

You knew I was going there, he thinks. You knew.

By the third, Shane's playing sharper than he has in weeks. Not reckless, focused. He wants to crack whatever code Ilya's running. He wants to prove something, though he's not sure what.

They collide at the boards with four minutes left. Not a fight, just momentum and bad angles. Shane slams into the glass, breath knocked from his chest. Ilya's there instantly, body pinning him in place, skated braced.

For half a second, everything goes quiet.

Ilya's eyes are dark, unreadable. Studying.

The ref skates past. No whistle.

Ilya eases back, gives Shane space, murmurs something in Russian that Shane doesn't catch. Then he's gone, chasing the puck as if nothing happened.

The game ends with a one-goal loss. Shane barely notices.

In the tunnel, the noise collapses into echo and concrete and sweat. Shane's helmet is unbuckled, gloves dangling from his fingers, adrenaline still buzzing under his skin. He's replaying the game whether he wants to or not. The angles, the timing, the way Ilya seemed to already know.

Ilya appears at his side like he's been there the whole time.

"Good game," he says lightly. Shane stops walking.

Ilya stops too, turning toward him, eyebrow lifting in mock innocence.

“You only play like that against me,” Shane says. The words come out righter than he expects. Not angry. Not accusing. Just... true.

For a moment, Ilya doesn't answer. The tunnel hums around them. Footsteps, distant laughter, the clatter of sticks. Then Ilya's mouth curves, slow and dangerous.

“You noticed,” he says.

Shane exhales sharply. “I'm not an idiot.”

“No,” Ilya agrees. His voice drops, something private slipping into it. “You are not.”

Ilya notices the bruise before anyone else does.

It's faint, yellowed at the edges, blooming just under Shane's jaw where the collar of his suit doesn't quite cover it. Old enough to be ignored. New enough to matter.

They're seated at opposite ends of a long table this time, teams divided by name placards and polite distance. The room smells like coffee and carpet cleaner. Cameras hum softly, waiting.

Shane answers the question about line chemistry, voice steady, and practiced. He doesn't touch the bruise. Doesn't acknowledge it. His gaze tracks the reporters, not the room.

Ilya doesn't look away.

He tracks the tilt of Shane's head, the way his fingers curl slightly when the question drags on too long. He notices how Shane's mouth tightens when someone mentions “discipline,” how his shoulders square when he hears his coach's name.

When Shane finished speaking, there was a ripple of murmurs. A reporter pivots toward Ilya.

“Ilya, what makes Hollander such a difficult opponent?”

Ilya smiles for the cameras. “He adapts,” he says smoothly. “You take something away, he finds something else. Very annoying.”

Laughter. Shane giggles before he can stop himself.

Their eyes meet across the table.

Something flickers there, surprise, recognition. Shane looks away first. The bruise on his neck throbs, suddenly, like it's been named.

Afterward, Shane escapes to the hallway under the pretense of a phone call. The noise fades as he rounds the corner, shoulders slumping now that no one's watching.

He presses his thumb to the wall, breathing out.

“You should ice that.” Ilya’s voice is close. Too close

Shane turns. “Ice what?”

Ilya gestures vaguely toward his own jaw. “You have bruise.”

Shane stiffens. “Everyone’s got bruises.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “But that one is three days old. From a late hit behind the net.”

Shane stares at him. “You counting now?”

Ilya shrugs. “I remember.”

“That’s weird,” Shane says, but his voice lacks any heat.

Ilya steps closer, lowering his voice. “You didn’t favor it in the second period. That is impressive.”

Something in Shane’s chest shifts, a tight, unfamiliar pull.

“You watch everyone like this?” he asks.

Ilya’s gaze holds his. “No.”

The honesty lands harder than Shane expects. Before he can respond, someone calls for Ilya from down the hall. Ilya straightens, the moment dissolving like it never happened.

Shane stands there long after he’s gone, pulse thudding, the bruise warm under his skin.

The realization doesn’t hit all at once. It creeps in.

During a game two weeks later, when Shane fakes left, a move he’s only used twice this season, Ilya doesn’t fall for it. When Ilya’s stick is already there, cutting off the lane before Shane commits.

He knows, Shane thinks, breath sharp in his chest. He knows me.

In the locker room after, Shane stares at his reflection, towel slung around his neck. He replays the shift in his head, the timing too perfect to be a coincidence.

Later that night, his phone buzzes.

Lily: you try new thing tonight

Jane: didn’t work

Lily: it almost did

Shane's fingers hover over the screen.

Jane: you're insane

Lily: maybe

Lily: but you are predictable when you think you are not

Shane laughs, soft and startled, alone in his apartment.

The next press event is smaller. Quieter. Fewer cameras.

Shane's tired. Bone-deep, the kind that makes everything feel too loud. He answers questions on autopilot, nodding in the right places.

He feels it before he sees it: Ilya's attention, trained and steady.

When Shane's voice wavers, just barely, Ilya leans forward in his chair. When Shane shifts his weight, Ilya mirrors it unconsciously.

Halfway through, it clicks.

He's tracking me, Shane realizes. Not for the cameras. Not for the game. For me.

The thought should unsettle him.

Instead, it steadies him.

He finishes the answer, breathes even, shoulders relax. When he glances toward Ilya, their eyes meet, and this time, Shane doesn't look away.

Ilya stills.

Later, in the quiet of the empty arena hallway, Shane confronts him.

"You do this on purpose," Shane says.

Ilya tilts his head. "Do what?"

"Watch me," Shane says. "Like you're afraid I'll disappear if you don't."

For once, Ilya doesn't deflect. He doesn't smile.

"I want to understand," he says simply.

Shane exhales. The truth settles into him, warm and terrifying.

"I know," he says. Then, softer. "I think I like it."

Ilya's breath hitches, barely noticeable, but Shane catches it. They stand there, alone, the echo of the rink stretching around them.

Studied. Seen. Unwilling to look away.

Shane realizes something else, something quieter and more dangerous. He doesn't want Ilya to stop.

Shane notices mid-game. Not during a hit, or a goal, or anything dramatic enough to justify the way his stomach drops. It happens in a nothing moment, a line change, the puck dumped deep, the ice briefly unclaimed.

Shane coasts toward the bench, lungs burning, sweat slick down his spine. He lifts his head out of habit, scanning the ice, the clock, the gaps.

And there... Ilya.

Not chasing the puck. Not angling for position. Just watching. Not the game. Not the play unfolding in front of him.

Shane.

The look is unmistakable once Shane knows how to see it. Focused. Intent. Like Ilya is counting breaths, cataloging posture, memorizing the exact second Shane's shoulders drop as he exhales.

The realization lands hard and slow.

He's not reacting, Shane thinks. He's waiting.

The horn sounds. The moment breaks. Ilya skates off in the opposite direction, expression already neutral, like he hadn't been staring at all. Shane sits on the bench longer than necessary, heart thudding, replaying the image in his head. He feels exposed in a way that pads can't fix.

And even more unsettling, he feels anchored.

He tests it.

Next shift, Shane changes his timing on purpose. Slows his approach. Holds the puck a beat longer than usual. He expects pressure from the defense, expects the predictable collapse.

Instead, he feels it again. Ilya adjusts.

Not aggressively. Subtly. A half-step here. A recalculated angle there. Like he's already accounted for the deviation.

Shane's chest tightens.

You're watching me, he thinks, almost accusing. You're always watching me.

He should hate it. Instead, something warm and sharp curls low in his gut.

After the game, the arena empties in layers, noise draining away until only echoes remain. Shane lingers longer than he needs to, untying and retying his skates like he's forgotten how to leave.

He doesn't know what he's waiting for until Ilya appears in the doorway. Their eyes meet. Ilya doesn't pretend this time.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't mask it. His gaze is steady, unguarded, like he's decided there's no point in hiding something already seen. Shane straightens slowly.

"You do that a lot," Shane says.

Ilya arches a brow. "Do what?"

Shane steps closer, gear still on, helmet dangling from his fingers. "That," he says. "The looking. Like you're... checking your work."

Ilya considers him. Truly considers him. The silence scratches, heavy but not hostile.

"You notice earlier," Ilya says. It's not a question.

"And?" Ilya prompts.

The word and feels like a challenge. Or an invitation.

Shane swallows. His pulse is loud in his ears. "And I think," he says carefully, "you've been doing it longer than I realized."

Ilya's mouth curves, not sharp, not playful. Something softer. Something almost reverent.

"Yes," he says.

Shane lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Why?"

Ilya steps closer, close enough that Shane can smell the ice and sweat and something faintly citrus on his skin. He lowers his voice, like this is something that shouldn't echo.

"Because you change," Ilya says. "Most players don't. You do. I have to keep up."

"That's not all of it," Shane says.

Ilya's gaze flickers, just once, to Shane's mouth. Then back to his eyes. "No."

The word lands between them, bare and dangerous. Shane feels the urge to step back. To put space between himself and whatever this is becoming. He doesn't.

"So what," Shane says quietly, "you're just going to keep studying me?"

Ilya watches him say it. Watches the way Shane doesn't pull away. Watches the way his hands stay loose at his sides, open.

"Yes," he says. Then, after a beat: "Unless you ask me to stop."

The air feels thin.

Shane considers it. The exposure. The intensity. The way being seen this closely should feel like pressure, and somehow feels like relief instead.

"No," Shane says.

Ilya stills. "No?"

"No," Shane repeats, steadier now. "Don't stop."

Something shifts in Ilya's expression. Surprise, quickly buried under something deeper. Hunger, maybe. Or recognition.

"Okay," Ilya says softly.

They stand there, the rink humming quietly around them, the world narrowed down to attention, consent, and the electric charge of being chosen.

Shane realizes then, fully and unmistakably. He's not just being studied. He's being held in someone's focus. He wants to stay there.

It happens quietly. Not in a fight. Not in a goal. Not in anything anyone would circle on a highlight reel.

It happens in the third period of a game that already feels decided.

Shane is on the ice, tired but steady, reading the play two steps ahead like he always does. He cuts towards the board, glances up, and stops short.

Ilya is there.

Not in his lane. Not challenging the puck. Just there.

His body is angled wrong for defense. His stick isn't active. His eyes aren't tracking the puck at all. They're locked on Shane. The look isn't analytical anymore. It isn't curiosity or rivalry or even hunger.

It's ownership.

Shane's breath stutters.

Ilya shifts half a step closer, subtle enough that no one else would notice it. Close enough to block Shane's exit path without touching him. Close enough to say: you're here with me now.

The puck clangs off the boards behind them. Someone shouts. Time moves again. Shane skates away, heart pounding, every nerve lit up.

On the bench, he can still feel it, the weight of Ilya's attention clinging to him like static.

Later, in the tunnel, Shane doesn't mean to say anything. It just slips out, sharp and breathless.

"You don't do that," he says.

Ilya stops walking. "Do what?"

"That," Shane says, turning to face him. "That thing where you look at me like I belong to you."

The words hang there, dangerous. Ilya doesn't deny it. Instead, he steps closer, voice low. "And you skate like you already know that."

Shane's pulse jumps. "That's not funny."

"I am not joking."

For a moment, it feels like standing at the edge of something too big to name. Then Ilya straightens, the mask sliding back into place like it always does.

"If you want me to stop," he says evenly, "say it."

Shane opens his mouth. Nothing comes out.

Ilya nods once, satisfied. Then walks away.

Shane stands there shaking, realizing something terrifying and undeniable: It didn't feel like being trapped. It felt like being his.

Hayden notices because Hayden always notices.

He's watching from the bench when it happens, the way Ilya tracks Shane through a full line change, head turning like a compass needle. The puck swings wide. Ilya doesn't follow it. He follows Shane.

Hayden squints. "What the hell..."

In the locker room later, Hayden tosses Shane a towel harder than necessary.

"Okay," he says. "What is that?"

Shane freezes. "What?"

"Don't play dumb," Hayden says. "Rosanov. He's..." He gestures vaguely. "He's on you. Like, not hockey-on-you. Like.. weird."

Shane laughs too fast. “You’re insane.”

Hayden stares at him. “Am I?”

Shane’s chest tightens. He bends to untie his skates even though they’re already untied. “You’re reading into it.”

“Am I,” Hayden repeats, slower. “Or does he watch you like he’s waiting for permission?”

That lands like a punch. Shane straightens abruptly. “Drop it.”

Hayden’s expression shifts, not teasing now. Concerned. “Hey. I’m not judging. I just…”

“There’s nothing.” Shane snaps.

The room feels too bright. Too loud. Hayden raises his hands. “Okay. Okay. Just… be careful, yeah?”

Shane nods stiffly, heart racing.

When Shane is alone in the shower, water pounding against his shoulders, Shane presses his forehead to the tile and exhales shakily.

Because Hayden’s wrong. Ilya isn’t waiting for permission. He’s waiting for Shane. And Shane doesn’t know whether that scares him, or makes him feel more real than anything else ever has.

It’s quiet in the apartment. No cameras. No ice. No crowd.

Just Shane barefoot on the couch, Ilya’s hoodie swallowed up around him, and Ilya sitting close enough that their knees touch.

Ilya’s hands are gentle now. Thoughtful. He brushes his thumb over Shane’s knuckle absently, like he’s mapping something he already knows by heart.

“I study you,” Ilya says, like a confession.

Shane’s breath hitches. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Ilya doesn’t look ashamed. “But not like before.”

“How then?”

Ilya considers this seriously. “I notice what you like,” he says. “What makes you quiet. What makes you loud. When you need space. When you pretend you do.”

Shane swallows.

“I know you drink coffee too fast when you’re nervous,” Ilya continues softly. “That you sleep better with noise. That you hate surprises but love being remembered.”

Shane’s eyes burn. “You...”

“And,” Ilya adds, voice steady but intense, “I protect what I know.”

The word protect settles warm and heavy in Shane’s chest. He leans in without thinking, resting his forehead against Ilya’s shoulder. “You make me feel important,” he admits, voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya stiffens. Then his arms come around Shane fully, solid and sure.

“You are important,” he says immediately. No hesitation. No softness that implies doubt. “You always were. I just saw it first.”

Shane exhales, something inside him finally unclenching. “Don’t stop.”

“I won’t,” Ilya promises, pressing a kiss to Shane’s hair. “Not ever.”

Shane closes his eyes, safe in the weight of being seen, known, and chosen. Not as a rival, not as a project, but as something worth holding onto, and for the first time, being studied feels like love.

End Notes

i love them more than anything i have hollanov brainrot

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