

The Space Between

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The Space Between

by [LeCheesie](#)

Summary

Shane picks up a hobby one off-season, he claims it isn't a thing, but it slowly turns into one. Ilya lets him navigate how it makes him feel on his own, but he's always there, steady and warm.

Post The Long Game, spoilers for Ilya/Shane's relationship if you care about that. That's the only spoiler.

Notes

I am SO sorry this is super long, the words kept coming, and it didn't feel right to split it into chapters. ♡

Shane buys the damn espresso machine *only* because it's on sale.

This is an important bit of lore because if it wasn't on sale, he wouldn't have bought it. Shane isn't the type of person who will buy small appliances for the hell of it; he is the type of person who will research something for weeks and months, reading every review he can find, and cross-checking prices and brands before purchasing it.

He does *not* impulse buy kitchen gadgets.

But it is on sale, it's very late, he's a little bit bored, and he's standing in the middle of an aisle at a store he had no intention of being in because Ilya had wanted to look at speakers and had wandered off and gotten distracted by a guy trying to sell him one of those massage guns.

So here Shane is, all alone, with a stainless steel espresso machine that will absolutely take up an annoying amount of counter space; but he has a lot of counter space, so he could sacrifice a little bit of it, probably.

It's not even a fancy espresso machine. It's not one of the sleek, minimalist ones that look like they came out of a design magazine. It's boxy, large, kind of ugly, and aggressively made out of stainless steel. The sales tag is a giant fucking bright red sticker slapped over the original number, and Shane stands there longer than necessary, staring at it like it might explain itself if he waits long enough.

He doesn't even really drink espresso very often. He drinks coffee. Normal coffee. Drip coffee, usually black, sometimes with a bit of milk if he's feeling indulgent. But even then, he's not really much of a coffee drinker. Espresso feels extra. Like something for people who have opinions about mouthfeel, people who go to wine tasting events and comment on the different fragrances in their wine.

Shane is *not* one of those people.

He picks up the box anyway; it's heavier than he expected it to be.

"Shane," Ilya's voice echoes from two aisles over in the mostly vacant store. "This man is lying to me about battery life."

Shane exhales through his nose, and looks down at the offensive box and its offensive sales tag and tells himself, very reasonably, that if he doesn't like it he can return it. He reminds himself it's on sale. This isn't a thing and it doesn't have to *be* a thing. This isn't a commitment, it's just espresso.

He drops it into the cart. Ilya finds him a minute later, his eyes lighting up immediately.

"It was on sale," Shane says automatically.

"You say this like defense," Ilya grins.

“It’s not a thing,” Shane says. “I just thought I could try it. It’s on sale,” he reiterates.

“Mmm,” Ilya peers at the box. “You do not *just try* things.”

Shane pushes the cart forward. “It’s just coffee.”

Ilya hums, amused, but he doesn’t push. He just follows Shane to the checkout, one hand drifting to Shane’s lower back the way it always does now without him thinking, warm and familiar and grounding.

Shane tells himself he’ll probably use the stupid machine once, maybe twice. Maybe on the weekends when he and Ilya sometimes make a big breakfast.

It’s not a thing.

The machine sits on their kitchen counter in its box taking up a lot of unreasonable space for exactly two days before Shane touches it.

Not because he’s been avoiding it, he hasn’t, technically, but because he’s been busy and because the box is big. He’s acutely aware that opening the box will make it feel more real; it will change from being just an impulse buy to a full decision.

Morning two after buying the espresso machine, Shane wakes up well before Ilya. This happens less often these days, but does sometimes, especially during their off-seasons when they have looser schedules and sleep is something they collectively pretend to be normal about.

The house is quiet; early morning sunlight cuts through the kitchen window blinds, catching on the edges of the counters and slanting over the linoleum. Shane pads into the kitchen in socked feet to open the cupboard for a mug, and his gaze lands, again, on the offensive, unopened box.

He stands there for a moment, considering it; then he grabs a knife and cuts the tape.

He tells himself he’s just curious, that he will probably mess it up. Reminds himself that he won’t be going all in on this, whatever *this* happens to be. He takes every piece out of the box carefully and lines them up on the counter before reading the instructions.

He watches a short video about espresso on his phone, then another one, then a third, because the first two contradicted one another and Shane didn’t like that at all.

He fills the reservoir with water, he grinds the beans he bought just yesterday at the grocery store, a little too coarse, he realizes, frowning. He adjusts it, tries again. He tampers awkwardly, spilling grounds on the counter and swears under his breath.

The first shot is not great, and the second one is somehow even worse.

By the third shot, he’s timing it on his phone, thumb hovering over the screen like he’s about to time a race. He squints at the flow, adjusts the grind again, wipes the counter and starts all

over.

When the espresso finally comes out drinkable, thick, dark and *not* sour, Shane feels a small flicker of satisfaction in his chest.

He drinks it standing at the counter, his mug warm in his hands and stares out the window like he's contemplating something profound.

He doesn't think at all about how many hours he's been at this, how long he's been awake for, struggling with this goddamn espresso machine before Ilya has even awoken.

He does not think about the notebook he's grabbed from the junk drawer and written *Espresso* on the first page, underlined once.

This is not a thing.

Ilya notices the machine in the afternoon that day because Shane has moved it into a permanent spot.

It's taking up space in a particular spot, angled so there is enough room for Shane to work around it without being too crowded. The grinder is next to the espresso machine with a towel underneath, and Shane's even rearranged the mugs to put all of the ones he likes at the front of the rack they hang from.

Ilya leans up against the door frame to the kitchen, watching Shane fuss over his beans. Shane is wearing loose sweatpants and a t-shirt, and his hair is still damp from a recent shower. His expression is hyper-focused in a way that Ilya knows rather intimately.

"How is coffee?" Ilya asks.

Shane startles. "Fine."

"You moved it."

Shane shrugs. "It didn't fit where it was before."

"You have a notebook."

"It's just notes about what works and what doesn't. Timings. Things like that."

"Notes about coffee."

"It's not a thing," Shane says, a little too quickly, almost defensively.

Ilya raises his hands in surrender. "I say nothing."

But he does watch.

He watches as Shane weighs the beans, as he adjusts the grinder in tiny increments before frowning and adjusting it again. He watches Shane time the shot, dump it into the sink without trying it, and then start over again all while not saying a word, only furrowing his brows.

It is, Ilya thinks, one of the most intricately *Shane* things he has ever witnessed.

Later that night, Shane goes to make some espresso after dinner. He's still tweaking with the measurements, the numbers, and the math of it all, but Ilya drinks whatever is handed to him. He doesn't make any comments, even if it's bitter or strong, and *especially* not when Shane winces and apologizes, saying he'll be sure to get it right next time.

"I like it," Ilya says, every time.

Shane doesn't quite believe him, but he smiles anyway.

"And," Ilya adds, crowding Shane up against the counter, his hand on his face. "You are very hot when you are like this."

Shane frowns at him, gripping the counter on either side of his body. "Like what?"

"Focused," Ilya says. "I don't know, passionate."

"This is not a thing I am passionate about."

Ilya rolls his eyes and kisses him. He tastes like watered down espresso, but he licks the flavor out of his mouth anyway.

By the end of the first week, Shane's got it down to a routine.

By the end of the second week, he has preferences for how he likes to do everything. Certain steps in certain ways and certain measurements and timings.

By the end of the third week, he's started forming opinions like one of those hobbyists with YouTube channels who review different things.

He insists repeatedly that this is not a thing.

"It's just something to do," he says, when Ilya points out that he has started buying many different types of beans.

"It's not like a hobby," he says, when Ilya notices that his notes are getting more detailed. Taking up more pages. Becoming color coded.

"It's just coffee," he says, when Ilya catches him watching another YouTube video in bed at midnight with his glasses on.

Ilya hums, noncommittal, kisses Shane's temple and lets it go.

For now.

Shane's morning routine begins shifting before he even notices that it has, mostly because of how subtle it is.

He wakes up ten minutes earlier than usual, then fifteen; then one morning, he wakes up an hour early and stares at the ceiling in the dark, with the vague, anticipatory feeling creeping over him that he tends to only get on game days. The sun hasn't even risen yet, it's dark, and it's too quiet. He lies there for a moment, listening to the soft sounds of Ilya breathing. Ilya sleeps all sprawled out these days, completely unapologetic about the space he takes up with one leg thrown over Shane's calf and an arm heavy over Shane's stomach.

Shane extricates himself carefully, because despite all evidence to the contrary, Ilya is a light sleeper.

He doesn't really want Ilya's teasing commentary this early.

The kitchen feels different in the mornings now.

Not like, dramatically, and not really even in a way that he'd point out if asked; but there's a rhythm to it that didn't exist before, a sequence of motions that fit together neatly. He fills the reservoir, he turns on the machine, he weighs the beans carefully, he grinds them, he adjusts, and he prepares.

He doesn't time the shot today because he doesn't need to.

The espresso isn't *perfect*, but it's at least consistent, and that feels like a victory. Shane drinks it slowly, savoring the taste as he leans against the counter. He watches the sunlight creep further across the floor, thinking about training later, and Ilya, and the life they've crafted.

He's *not* thinking about how good it feels to do this.

When Ilya wanders in a half an hour later with his hair sticking up, he squints at the counter like he's assessing a gruesome crime scene.

"You are awake early," he says.

"So are you," Shane replies.

Ilya hums, reaches for a mug, and then pauses. He watches Shane for a second before leaning back against the kitchen island, across from Shane to face him.

"You make coffee like you are defusing a bomb," Ilya says.

"It's not that serious."

"Mm. You say this, but you have this look."

“What look?”

Ilya tilts his head, narrows his eyes and taps his finger against his lips. “The look you get when you are about to win a game.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but his mouth twitches into an almost smile. “This isn’t a competition.”

Ilya smiles like he knows better, and takes the mug that Shane hands him. He sips it, considers, then nods approvingly.

“This is good.”

Shane watches his face carefully, cataloguing every little twitch of muscle. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not just saying that like you usually do?”

Ilya looks rather offended. “I would never lie to you.”

Shane laughs. “Okay.”

Ilya sets the mug down, and Shane watches him as he steps into his space. They kiss, slowly, warmly, Shane’s hands gliding up Ilya’s sides. He’s still warm from sleep, his mouth tastes like espresso, and Shane feels *euphoric*.

Ilya draws back, just an inch, his breath tickling Shane’s face as he speaks. “Ah, I see espresso makes you horny.”

Shane bats his arm. “Does not.”

Ilya presses into him, and Shane swallows down a moan at the sudden friction against him. He hadn’t even realized he was hard. It wasn’t the espresso. Probably. It was the way Ilya strutted in with no shirt on, sleep mussed and domestic. Probably.

Ilya leans in again to kiss him, his hand moving between them to tug Shane out of his sweatpants. Shane gasps into his mouth as Ilya strokes him.

“I do love it when you get all passionate about things,” Ilya says against his lips. “It is hot.”

“I’m not passionate about this,” Shane says, his voice breaking when Ilya’s thumb swipes across his tip.

He feels Ilya smile against his mouth. “Okay.”

Shane’s mouth falls open as Ilya gets him off with his skilled fingers. He knows exactly how to touch Shane to coax out little moans of pleasure, and it isn’t long before Shane’s spilling over Ilya’s tight fist.

“Fuck,” Shane says.

“You should get more hobbies,” Ilya says. He wipes his hand on Shane’s sweatpants which earns him a quick smack to his chest. “It gets *me* horny.”

“Go away.”

By the end of the first month, he hasn’t returned the stupid machine. He even took the box out to the curb on trash day. This was a thing now. Like, not a *thing*, but the machine is staying.

It sounds stupid, but less stupid in Shane’s head. He likes the machine. He’s committed to it now.

He’s reorganized one of the kitchen drawers. The measuring spoons are all in order, the scale has a spot, the tamper gets its own little section, padded with a folded cloth so it doesn’t clatter.

Ilya notices it immediately when he goes looking for the teaspoon.

“Is this new?” He asks, opening the drawer and staring inside.

Shane glances over at him. “What?”

“This drawer. Did you rearrange this?”

Shane shrugs. “It was a mess before.”

“It was organized chaos.”

“It was just chaos.”

Ilya smiles at him. “You’re nesting. Cute.”

“I am not nesting,” Shane says flatly.

“You have system.”

“It’s just easier this way.”

“For what?”

“For,” Shane gestures vaguely. “For making espresso.”

Ilya’s eyebrows shoot up in the way they do when he’s half judging Shane but not outwardly saying so. “For your thing.”

“It is not a thing.”

Ilya’s eyebrows only raise even further, amusement crossing his features. But he lets it go.

Ilya doesn't interfere, this is important.

He doesn't offer any advice. He doesn't touch the espresso machine without asking for permission. He doesn't rearrange Shane's setup or suggest any improvements or send him links to espresso forums or videos, even though Shane knows that Ilya could. Ilya probably *has* gone down several rabbit holes about espresso already.

Instead, Ilya observes him.

He watches Shane flip through his notebook, frown at his own handwriting, and add marginal notes. He watches as Shane adjusts ratios with the same careful precision he uses when he's on the ice. He watches him get quietly, stubbornly better at this thing.

And Ilya, who has spent the majority of his life surrounded by excellence, finds himself deeply fond of this small, private process.

One day, during training, someone on the team pisses Shane off more than usual. Ilya does his best not to interfere, letting them solve their problems on their own, but when they come home, he feels the annoyance radiating off of Shane in waves.

He wants to ask him if he's okay, if Ilya can do anything to make him feel better, but he slams the front door shut, kicks off his shoes, and throws his bag on the floor.

Ilya sets his own bag down and watches him, quietly.

"Do you want coffee?" Shane asks, already heading toward the kitchen.

Ilya blinks. "I want you."

Shane pauses, then huffs a laugh that doesn't sound all that amused. "Later."

"I can wait."

Shane makes the espresso carefully, and Ilya leans against the island to watch him, quietly. He moves deliberately, like he's grounding himself through pure muscle memory. When he hands the mug over to Ilya and their fingers brush, Shane doesn't pull back right away.

"You okay?" Ilya asks.

"Yeah," Shane says. It's not really an answer.

Ilya doesn't push. He never does, not directly. He just leans in, presses a kiss to Shane's shoulder, lingering long enough to say something without actual words.

Shane exhales, and watches Ilya thoughtfully as he sips the espresso.

Ilya's eyebrows lift. "This is good."

"You say that every time."

“No,” Ilya persists. “This is *very* good. Try.”

Shane takes the mug from him and tries it himself. The soft smile that crosses his face afterward makes Ilya nod. “It is good.”

“Told you.”

Shane sets the mug down. “Do you still want me?”

Ilya’s nostrils flare. Stupid question. “Always.”

Shane grins at him, and Ilya watches as he steps into his space, his fingers toying with Ilya’s waistband. “I’m okay,” Shane says. He sounds more okay now than when they first got home. Ilya’s learned over the years that Shane finds comfort in muscle memory, in routine. In doing something with his brain shut off.

It grounds him.

Ilya grabs his face with one hand and pulls him into a kiss. Shane’s eager to open his mouth for him, but he pulls back with a mischievous grin.

Ilya keeps his eyes on Shane, not saying a word, as he unties Ilya’s basketball shorts and shoves them down with his briefs. He drops to the hard kitchen floor and looks up at Ilya before grabbing his erection with one hand.

He rubs it across his lips, his eyes lifting to see Ilya’s reaction.

Ilya grips the counter with one hand, and his other moves to caress Shane’s cheek. “You are beautiful,” he says.

Shane gives his quiet little smile before opening his mouth, taking Ilya between his plush, wet lips.

Shane has gotten *very* good at this. His enthusiasm to get Ilya off is the hottest part of all of it. The way he hollows his cheeks and takes him in as far as he possibly can without gagging. The way he tugs at the base with one hand, and the way his other hand always goes to his own erection.

Ilya grits his teeth when Shane stops, his eyes lifting up to his face. It’s a silent invitation for Ilya to move on his own, so he does. He gently grabs Shane’s hair before moving, watching as his length slides in and out of Shane’s pliant mouth. The way Shane’s eyes begin to water from the effort.

Shane’s stroking himself through his own shorts, and Ilya’s already flying over the edge. He stills, coming in Shane’s mouth with a groan.

Shane pulls off, panting, and Ilya looks down to see a wet spot on his shorts.

“You still come in your pants so easily, like a teenager.”

“Shut up,” Shane rasps.

Later that night, Shane catches Ilya in the act.

He comes out of the shower, towel slung low around his hips and finds Ilya leaning against the counter with his elbows, notebook open, flipping through it with an expression of intense concentration.

“Hey,” Shane says sharply. “What are you doing?”

Ilya looks up, unrepentant. “Reading.”

“That’s private.”

Ilya tilts his head. “You leave it on the counter.”

“That doesn’t mean..” Shane stops, scrubbing a hand over his face. “It’s just notes, anyway.”

“Notes about grind size,” Ilya says, flipping a page. “And extraction time. And little star when you are happy.”

Shane freezes. “There are not stars.”

Ilya smiles sweetly. “There are stars.”

Shane crosses the room in three long strides to snatch the notebook back. “You aren’t supposed to read that.”

Ilya watches him, more curious than offended. “Why?”

“Because.” Shane frowns. He’s clutching the notebook like it’s a child. “Because it’s stupid.”

Ilya’s expression softens. “It is not stupid.”

“It’s coffee.”

“It is something you care about.”

Shane looks away. “It’s not a thing.”

Ilya doesn’t argue. He just steps closer, close enough for Shane to feel his warmth, his presence.

“Okay,” Ilya says gently. His fingers find their way into Shane’s damp hair. “It’s not a thing.”

Shane nods, his throat tight for reasons he doesn’t want to examine too closely. Not now, maybe not ever.

Ilya kisses him, slow and unhurried, like a punctuation mark rather than escalation.

Shane sets the notebook down on the counter. His hands grab both sides of Ilya's face, and they kiss again. Once, twice, pressing together and pulling apart like Shane is asking a question and Ilya is responding.

"Bed?" Shane asks, his lips still pressed against Ilya's.

"Mm," Ilya says, his arms moving to wrap around Shane's naked waist. "If we make it there."

Shane grins. "I prepared myself for you."

Ilya nips Shane's lip. "Maybe I will just take you here."

Shane snorts. "No lube down here. We don't have emergency kitchen lube."

Ilya frowns. "Maybe we should."

Shane rolls his eyes. He steps back out of Ilya's space and grins at him, turning to leave the kitchen. Ilya draws in a breath before following him moments later, his eyes landing on the towel Shane dropped on the stairs.

He grabs it and heads up behind him, finding Shane spread out on the bed for him, waiting.

"I should read your notes more often if this is the prize I get."

Shane narrows his eyes. "I will put my clothes on."

Ilya raises his hands in the air and laughs. "Okay, do not kill me."

He pulls off his own clothes, dropping them unceremoniously in a pile on the floor before climbing onto the bed, over Shane.

"How do you want me?" Shane asks, handing him the bottle of lube.

Ilya ponders this for a moment. "On top."

Shane is quick to sit up and push Ilya down into the pile of pillows Shane had some designer recommend he buy fifteen million of. He's grateful for them now as he leans back into them.

"I love you," Shane says as he straddles Ilya.

Ilya's hands settle on his hips, digging into the skin as Shane strokes lube over Ilya's length.

"I love you too," Ilya replies. "And your thing."

"Shut up before I leave the room."

Ilya laughs, but it's cut off when Shane lowers himself onto him, taking him in one quick slide. His lips part at the feeling of Shane's warm body enveloping him. He's always in awe of how Shane opens up for him so easily, the way they fit together so perfectly.

“God,” Shane says breathily. “You feel so good.”

He tips his head down to kiss Ilya, slowly, softly. His hips move without any rush, gently riding Ilya like they have all the time in the world.

His hands are warm on Ilya’s face, holding him place to lick into his mouth as he moans, slowly drawing out his own orgasm with the steady rocking of his hips.

Ilya lets him control it, lets him have his way.

When Shane comes, he does so on the end of a broken gasp of Ilya’s name, over Ilya’s stomach.

Only then does Ilya flip them over, pinning Shane down to the bed as he chases his own release.

“You are perfect,” Ilya says after, between kisses. “No matter what.”

Later even, Shane stares at the ceiling in the dark and thinks about the word *stupid*.

He thinks about how much he enjoys the espresso thing, how grounding it feels, how satisfying. He thinks about how Ilya observes him, like this matters because *he* matters.

He turns on his side, presses his face into Ilya’s shoulder and breathes him in.

“I don’t want to get weird about it,” Shane says quietly.

Ilya hums, half asleep, his eyes still closed. “Too late.”

Shane snorts. “I mean it. I don’t want this to be... Something.” *Stupid*, he thinks.

Ilya’s arm tightens around him, pulling him closer. He’s warm and loose with sleep. “You do not have to want anything.”

Shane closes his eyes.

It’s not a thing.

But it’s certainly starting to feel like one.

The first sign that this espresso thing is seemingly becoming a noticeable hobby is the beans.

Shane comes home one afternoon from the grocery store to find a small, unassuming brown box on the counter with a shipping label and his name written in Ilya’s sharp, messy, impatient handwriting.

“What’s this?” Shane asks.

Ilya doesn't look up from the couch. "Coffee."

Shane pauses. He frowns. "What kind of coffee?"

"The good kind."

Shane opens the box carefully with a knife. Inside are two neatly stacked, sealed bags, matte black with minimalist labels, the kind of packaging that implies some level of seriousness and expense without overly implying either.

"These are.." Shane squints. "Fancy."

Ilya finally looks up. "Yes."

"Did you order these?"

"Yes."

Shane looks up from the box. "Why?"

Ilya shrugs. "You like coffee."

"I like *making* coffee," Shane corrects. He immediately regrets that admission because Ilya's mouth curves like he's just won something.

"You like making coffee," Ilya says. "So I buy good coffee."

Shane presses his lips together, trying to find the argument here. He can't, exactly, but that doesn't mean he's comfortable.

"You didn't have to do that," he says.

"I know."

"You could've asked."

"I did not want to interrupt."

Shane exhales. He runs a hand over the back of his neck. "These are expensive."

He doesn't say: these are expensive and what if I mess it up?

Ilya waves him off. "So are skates."

"That's different."

Ilya considers this. "You also take care of skates very carefully."

Shane has no response to that.

He opens one of the bags, and despite himself and the way he's feeling about this, he inhales. The smell is rich and complex, chocolatey, maybe. Something brighter underneath. He feels an immediate, traitorous spike of excitement.

"I can return them if you would like me to," Ilya offers, watching Shane closely now.

Shane shakes his head. "No. It's fine."

Ilya's expression softens, satisfied but not smug. "Good."

That evening, Shane makes espresso with the new beans, carefully. So carefully. Almost reverent. The shot pulls slow and dark, crema thick and glossy.

He tastes it and goes still.

"Oh."

Ilya watches him over the rim of his mug. "Oh?"

Shane swallows. "Yeah."

After that, Ilya's schedule shifts.

Not dramatically, not in a way that Shane can immediately point out, but suddenly, Ilya is awake earlier more often. Suddenly he is home in the evenings, hovering around Shane. Suddenly, in the mornings, when Shane goes into the kitchen, Ilya follows him.

He doesn't interfere. He just leans against the island, arms crossed, watching Shane with open interest.

"You are very serious," Ilya observes one morning.

Shane squints at the grinder. "I'm adjusting."

"You say this every time."

"Yes, because every time it's true."

Ilya grins. "You are beautiful when you are focused."

Shane groans. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Make it weird."

Ilya steps closer, close enough that Shane can feel the heat of his body at his back. "You make it weird by pretending it isn't weird."

Shane tampers a little harder than necessary. "It's just coffee."

Ilya hums, low and unconvinced.

Shane is distracted now, he can't focus on the stupid espresso. His thoughts narrow down to Ilya, behind him, the way his hand has found its way to Shane's lower back as he's leaning over the counter.

His thoughts shift, his world tilts on its axis and he's suddenly overcome with the desire for Ilya to pin him against the counter and fuck him, right here in front of his stupid espresso machine and his stupid expensive beans.

Ilya leans over him, and his breath tickles the back of Shane's neck. "You are thinking dirty thoughts."

Shane inhales. "I am not."

"You are."

Ilya's hand moves, touching the front of his sweatpants. "Ilya," Shane warns.

"Oh, so you are embarrassed to be horny in front of your coffee?"

"You really are such an asshole still sometimes."

"Mmm," Ilya says, leaning closer still, pressing against Shane's back. He feels Ilya's own erection through their clothing. He freezes when Ilya nips his ear. "Maybe, but I am not the one who gets all horny over coffee."

Shane's trying to breathe through his nose to steady his nerves, but he just sounds like he's out of breath. Maybe he is. His chest hurts. Why *is* he horny in front of his stupid coffee?"

Ilya's tugging down his sweatpants before he can think too hard about it, and Shane's leaning against the counter with his arms folded, dropping his forehead down to rest against his arms.

"Ah," Ilya says suddenly, coming back to press against Shane's bare ass. "I told you kitchen lube would come in handy."

Shane closes his eyes. "I hate you."

"You do not," Ilya says. His fingers rub over Shane's hole, spreading him open with an ease that has come with so many years of love and trust between them. "You love me."

Shane grits his teeth when Ilya pushes inside of him. He pushes back into it, trying to take Ilya impossibly deeper. He hates how good this feels. He hates that there's a mess on the counter from his stupid fucking hobby that isn't a hobby and he's bent over it getting fucked like this is the most natural thing in the world.

His thoughts fizzle out when Ilya's hand moves to his front, to stroke him in time with the thrust of his hips.

Shane cries out as he comes over the cabinets, his toes curling against the hard floor.

Ilya's hands dig bruisingly into Shane's hips as he follows soon after, his forehead dropping against Shane's shoulder as he comes deep inside of him.

"You're cleaning this up," Shane says.

"Worth it."

The second sign is the notebook.

Shane flips it open one early morning to find that he's run out of space; the margins are all full, and the thing is covered front to back with his notes, all neat and color coded and bullet-pointed. He stares at the last filled up page for a long moment, pen hovering uselessly over the paper with no blank space to be found. The notebook is thick now, spine bent, pages dog-eared and smudged with coffee fingerprints.

He closes it, shuffling to the junk drawer to find another notebook, mysteriously the exact same kind.

He hesitates, then writes *Espresso* on the front page, but this time, he underlines it twice.

"You have sequel," Ilya says later, peering at the new, fresh notebook.

Shane stiffens. "It's not-"

Ilya smiles. "I know. Not a thing."

Shane glares at him. "You're enjoying this."

"Yes," Ilya agrees cheerfully.

The third sign is the comment from outside.

It happens at a casual team thing, it's nothing official, just a few of their teammates and them hanging out, food and drinks and easy conversation. Someone asks Shane how he's enjoying his off-season.

"It's nice," Shane says. "It's good. Quiet."

"You getting into anything?" Another guy asks. "Any hobbies you've picked up?"

Shane shrugs. "Not really."

"Oh come on," the guy says. "Rozanov says you've turned into a barista."

The laugh that follows is friendly. Teasing. Harmless.

Shane smiles reflexively.

On their way back home, Shane's quieter than usual.

Ilya notices because of course he does. He always notices.

"You are thinking," Ilya says.

"I'm fine."

"You are lying."

Shane exhales. "It's just," he shakes his head. "Nothing. It's nothing."

Stupid, he thinks. *Stupid* is what it is.

Ilya doesn't push him, he just reaches over and squeezes Shane's knee from the driver's seat. He spares Shane a glance, but Shane keeps his eyes fixated on the dark road ahead of them.

But that night, Shane stands in the kitchen long after the espresso machine has cooled, staring at it like it might accuse him of something.

Barista.

He doesn't really seem to mind the word.

The fourth sign comes the morning Shane doesn't make any coffee, in the way Ilya watches him carefully.

He wakes up late, feeling groggy; his body feels heavy and slow in a way he doesn't like. He stumbles into the kitchen and reaches for the machine, and then stops. He doesn't know why. He makes regular drip coffee instead.

Ilya wanders in shortly after, hair messy and stuck up in different directions and he pauses when he sees the counter.

"No espresso?" He asks.

"Didn't feel like it," Shane says.

Ilya looks at him for a long moment as if contemplating. "Okay." Then he pours himself a cup of drip coffee without another word, drinking it in silence.

Shane hates that reaction more than if he would've just made a comment.

The next morning, the machine is still there, untouched and waiting; almost intimidating with its presence. Shane stares at it.

He feels ridiculous and exposed and like he's on the edge of something and doesn't know whether he should step forward or back.

Ilya appears behind him, quiet as ever.

“You do not have to prove anything,” Ilya says softly.

“I know.”

“I love you when you are bored,” Ilya continues. “I love you whether you’re good or bad at things. I love you when you talk too much and even when you’re quiet.”

Shane turns, startled. “Where is this coming from?”

Ilya shrugs, holding his mug to his lips. “You look like you need reminder.”

Shane’s chest tightens painfully.

He reaches for the beans.

He makes espresso, and it isn't his best, but he drinks it anyway. Ilya watches him with an expression that’s warm, steady, and devastatingly patient.

It’s not a thing.

But it’s no longer *nothing*.

Shane starts making espresso for Ilya without thinking about it.

This is how it begins: one morning, Shane pulls a shot that’s much better than usual. It’s balanced, rich, something he could be proud of if he just let himself be, and instead of drinking it himself, he reaches for a second mug.

He doesn't even look at Ilya as he sets the mug down on the nightstand next to him while he blinks his eyes open slowly. It’s still early, the sun hasn’t quite risen high enough in the sky for much light to be in the room, but it’s enough for Shane to see the expression on Ilya’s face as he moves to sit up.

Ilya blinks at the mug.

“This for me?” He asks.

Shane shrugs. “If you want it.”

Noncommittal.

Ilya looks up at him for a few seconds longer than necessary, then grabs the mug and takes a sip.

It’s good, really good.

Ilya doesn't say anything at first. He just reaches out and hooks a finger into the waistband of Shane's sweatpants, a casual, affectionate gesture that still manages to make Shane's shoulders tense.

"Thank you," Ilya says quietly.

Shane takes the mug from him and sets it back down on the nightstand. Ilya opens his mouth to say something, but Shane's crawling into his lap before he can.

They kiss, they touch with slow and exploratory fingertips. Ilya reaches between them to stroke them both together.

He guides Shane's hand down to help, and it's quick and dirty and Shane gasps into Ilya's mouth as they both come together with only Ilya's spit to make it easier.

"It was good," Ilya says after. "You are getting good at this."

It starts to become a pattern. It starts simple.

Shane makes coffee, Ilya drinks it. Sometimes they push themselves up onto the counter. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they exist in a companionable silence that feels earned rather than empty.

Shane keeps going with his notes. He tweaks ratios. He changes grind size based on humidity like this is all normal shit for him to know.

He still insists this isn't a thing.

"It's relaxing," he says one afternoon when Ilya points out, casually, that Shane hasn't missed a morning of coffee making in weeks.

"Relaxing like meditating?" Ilya asks.

"Relaxing like... It gives my mind something to focus on. Something to do."

Ilya hums. "You have many things to do."

Shane looks at him pointedly. "This one is quieter."

Ilya files that information away.

The next escalation is small, but deliberate.

Shane comes home from the gym to find the counter wiped down, the espresso machine cleaned so thoroughly that the stainless steel is *sparkling*, and the grinder is emptied and brushed out. Everything is reset and immaculate.

"What happened here?" Shane asks.

Ilya looks up from the couch. "I clean."

"You cleaned my..." Shane trails off. *My*. "The machine?"

"Yes."

Shane hesitates. "You didn't mess with the settings at all, did you? I had them perfect. They can't be moved. I will have to go through my notes and find them again. Oh no, please tell me you didn't."

Ilya looks absolutely offended. "I am not a monster."

Shane exhales the breath he had been holding. He feels relief flood him. "Okay. Thank you."

Ilya tilts his head. "You like it clean."

"I like it consistent."

"Same thing."

Shane pauses and then smiles. "Yeah. I guess so."

Ilya's mouth curves, pleased. Not because he's right, but because Shane admitted to it.

The third part happens on a day off.

No training. No obligations. The kind of day that Shane used to dread, used to hate because it left too much room for his brain to wander.

He's halfway through dialing in a shot when Ilya wanders into the kitchen barefoot, wearing one of Shane's t-shirts like it's always been his.

"You are making coffee again," Ilya says, observantly.

Shane's eyes catch on his shirt. His brain short circuits and resets for a minute like he hasn't seen this man naked and in his clothes a million times before. It's new every time. It's overwhelming.

He shakes it off and glances at the clock. "It's ten."

"You do not usually drink espresso at ten."

"I'm testing"

"Testing what?"

Shane frowns at the scale in front of him. "Consistency"

Ilya leans against the island, putting his chin in his hand. "You are already consistent."

Shane snorts. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Ilya says. “You do same things every time. Same order. Same careful steps.”

Shane looks up. “You pay attention.”

“Yes.”

Something in Shane’s chest aches.

He pulls the shot, it still isn’t perfect, but it’s damn near close. He hands it to Ilya without thinking twice about it.

Ilya drinks it, then reaches out and cups the back of Shane’s neck, his thumb pressing against the base of his skull lightly.

“This is very good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

He leans in and kisses Shane, and Shane leans into it with eagerness.

His fingers grip at Ilya’s shirt, *his* shirt, and he’s overcome with the sudden desire to tear it off of him.

He pulls back just enough to take a breath. “I need you,” Shane says. “Like right now.”

Ilya gives him his little smirk, like he was doing this on purpose. Like he’s a walking sexual deviant whose only purpose in life is to turn Shane on every minute of every day.

“Kitchen lube,” Ilya says, moving out of Shane’s grasp to dig in the junk drawer. “It has come in handy many times now.”

Shane wants to tell him his kitchen lube is fucking stupid, but it’s definitely saved them many trips and time, and anyway, Ilya’s already grabbing his hand to lead him toward the couch.

He shoves Shane down over the armrest and moves behind him, rubbing himself against Shane’s ass through his sweatpants.

“This espresso thing is like aphrodisiac.”

Shane turns to look at him over his shoulder, startled. “Where the hell did you learn *that* word?”

Ilya isn’t looking at him, he’s instead looking down as he tugs down Shane’s pants.

“Internet.”

Shane turns back around and buries his head in his arms. “You are actually becoming a sex demon.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, and Shane jerks when he feels the cool rub of Ilya’s lube-sicked fingers over his hole. “Maybe.”

Ilya pushes into him without being gentle. Shane adjusts to the stretch, letting out a long moan when Ilya is fully seated inside of him. “Fuck me,” Shane says. “Hard.”

Ilya obliges. He fucks into Shane with a sense of urgency, rough and hard, and the quick slap of their skin makes Shane’s head spin with pleasure.

His arousal rubs against the inside of his sweatpants, bunched just under his ass, pressed up against the couch. It’s quick and loud, and Shane’s crying out Ilya’s name as he comes in his pants so quickly he would be embarrassed if it didn’t feel so fucking good.

Ilya pulls out of him and he feels warmth across his ass as Ilya comes there, stroking himself through it with gritted teeth.

As much as Shane loves when they make love, he *really* likes it when Ilya gets rough with him.

“We really are like teenagers sometimes,” Shane says, too sex-drunk to get up from where he’s splayed out over the armrest of the couch.

“You are the one who comes in your pants.”

The equipment upgrade comes next.

Not the *big* one. Not yet. Just a better tamper, heavier in Shane’s hand, perfectly weighted.

It appears on the counter one morning like it’s always belonged there.

Shane squints at it. “Where did this come from?”

Ilya doesn’t even look up from his phone. “Internet.”

“You bought this?”

“Yes.”

Shane picks it up, surprised by how it feels in his hand. “This is nice.”

“I know.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

Shane studies it, then sets it down on the counter. He doesn’t argue, doesn’t joke, he only nods once.

Later, he writes a small note in the margin of his notebook: *new tamper; more even pressure.*

Ilya sees it from over his shoulder and smiles to himself.

The problem Shane has with *things* is that things can be taken away very easily.

Shane doesn't articulate it like that, not at first, but the thought sits in the back of his head, heavy and persistent like a low-grade injury he keeps skating on. He notices it in flashes: the way his chest tightens when the machine hiccups, the way he checks the counter before bed to make sure everything is clean, the way he feels oddly put-out when Ilya is late coming home and misses the window when Shane makes his coffee in the evenings.

He tells himself it's stupid.

He tells himself it's just a routine.

He tells himself this is way better than spiraling.

That part, at least, is true.

The comment that finally tips things isn't even cruel, that's the worst part of it.

They're out with friends, nothing fancy. It's a casual dinner, as they usually are. Someone asks Shane how his retirement planning is going, half-joking, because that's the stage of life they're getting close to: successful but aging, and pretending not to notice the latter.

"I'm not retiring," Shane says.

"Relax," someone laughs. "I just meant what are you going to do when you're done?"

Shane opens his mouth. Closes it again.

Across the table, Ilya is watching him with open curiosity, like he's genuinely interested in Shane's answer.

"I don't know," Shane says finally.

"Rozanov will be a coach," someone says. "You?"

"Barista," someone else jokes, smiling. "You've got the setup already, yeah?"

There's friendly, harmless laughter, and Shane smiles because that's what he's good at.

The silence stretches taught between them on the way home.

Ilya doesn't fill it.

That's how Shane knows it matters.

At home, Shane heads right for the kitchen without even taking his jacket off. He doesn't turn on the overhead light, only the soft glow under the upper cabinets. The espresso machine gleams at him, polished, familiar.

He stares at it in silence.

"You okay?" Ilya asks quietly from behind him.

Shane exhales. "I'm fine."

"You are thinking."

Shane laughs, but there's no humor in it. "You always say that."

"Because you always are."

Shane rubs his hands together, he touches the zipper of his jacket, he runs a hand through his hair. He feels restless, like ants are under his skin. "It's just.." He trails off. Stops.

"Nevermind."

Ilya waits, silently.

The thing about Ilya is that he doesn't rush silence. He never has. He never steps into it demanding an answer. He waits, patiently, for Shane to come to him. For Shane to come back out of it on his own. He lets it stretch until it becomes safe instead of threatening.

"It's stupid," Shane says finally. "I don't want to be that guy."

"What guy?"

"The guy who needs something else because he's afraid he won't be good enough anymore." Shane swallows. He stares at the espresso machine and fidgets with his zipper. "I don't want this to be a fallback. This isn't a fallback"

Ilya steps closer to him, close enough that Shane can feel him, solid and steady at his back.

"This is not fallback," Ilya says. "This is you liking something."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is simple," Ilya says. "Maybe not easy."

Shane turns, frustration sharp on the heels of something terrifying. "What if I stop being good at hockey? What will I do then? Who will I be?"

Ilya doesn't hesitate. "You will still be you."

"That's not.."

"I know," Ilya says. "It is scary anyway."

Shane purses his lips. His eyes burn. "I don't want to need this."

Ilya reaches up, cupping Shane's jaw with one strong hand, his thumb warm against Shane's cheek.

"You do not need this," he says. "You want it."

The distinction lands like a punch.

The next morning, Shane doesn't make his espresso.

It isn't because he's busy or because it's too late, it's because he wants to prove something to himself.

He drinks plain drip coffee and hates it; it's bitter and watered down and doesn't even taste very good. He hates how empty it feels, and he hates that he keeps glancing at the espresso machine like he's betrayed it.

Ilya notices, as he always does but he doesn't say a word.

That's worse than him saying something, Shane thinks.

Three days pass.

Three days of Shane being quieter than usual; three days of Ilya letting him work through it without interfering; three days of the damned espresso sitting on the counter untouched.

On the fourth morning, Shane wakes up early and doesn't fight it. He slips out of bed, leaving Ilya warm and asleep, curled around the space he had just taken up. He heads down into the kitchen, turns on the light, and draws in a deep breath to steady himself.

He weights the beans and grinds them. The steps ease the knot in Shane's chest.

Ilya appears in the doorway halfway through this process, his hair messy, his eyes soft.

"You are back," he says.

"Yeah."

Ilya steps closer, into Shane's space. He wraps his arms around him from behind and rests his chin on Shane's shoulder. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't have to.

Shane hands him the mug without looking.

Ilya drinks it, then kisses the side of Shane's neck, his lips lingering there against his skin.

"I like mornings with you," he says quietly.

Shane swallows. "Me too."

Ilya sets the mug down on the counter. Shane leans into his embrace and closes his eyes. "You know," Ilya says. "No matter what you do or don't do, I will love you."

His lips are soft against Shane's neck, and Shane tips his head to the side to give him better access.

"I know," Shane says, softly.

He turns in Ilya's arms, his back pressing up against the counter as Ilya crowds into his space with a smile. "I like your espresso."

Shane hums and pulls Ilya closer by hooking his fingers into his sweatpants. They kiss. It's soft, warm, pliant. Shane melts into him as Ilya's hand touches the side of his face.

His own hands slide down into Ilya's pants, gripping his slowly hardening length.

"I also," Shane says, swallowing thickly when Ilya's lips roam away from his, down over Shane's jawline. "Like this."

He punctuates his words with a squeeze, and Ilya bites the skin between his neck and his shoulder.

Ilya guides Shane to the island, away from the espresso machine and the mess he's made of the counter there. He pushes Shane up onto the counter and Shane wraps his legs around him and buries his hands in Ilya's hair.

Every press of their lips together has Shane trying to rub against Ilya, but Ilya's hands are holding his thighs in place as he explores the inside of Shane's mouth. Like it's new. Like he's never been in there before.

Shane thinks he might die there, on the counter.

Ilya pulls back, his pupils blown wide, and Shane glances down to see the tent in his own sweatpants. He smiles.

Maybe the espresso he makes *is* an aphrodisiac.

Ilya is quick to pull his pants off with his briefs, dropping them onto the floor, leaving Shane bare against the cold countertop. He faintly thinks about it, but it drifts back out of his head the minute Ilya's mouth wraps around him.

Shane curls around him, holding Ilya's hair as Ilya swallows him down. He's loud, slurping, sucking, humming, and Shane has an almost out-of-body experience when he comes down Ilya's throat.

He's pretty sure he yells.

Ilya comes back up, licking his lips, pressing a kiss to Shane's lips. "What about.." Shane trails off when Ilya grabs his hand and places it on the front of his sweatpants.

"Too late."

Shane laughs against his mouth. "Oh, so *you're* the teenager coming in your pants now."

Ilya bites Shane's lip.

That afternoon, Shane adds a new line to his notebook.

Not about grind size, not even about timing.

Just a single sentence at the bottom of the page:

This makes me happy.

He doesn't underline it, he doesn't put a star next to it, but when Ilya sees it later, over Shane's shoulder, he smiles like he's just been told something very important.

The upgrade doesn't arrive with any dramatics or fanfare, there's no announcement or dramatic unveiling. Shane just comes home from the gym one afternoon, tired in the pleasant way that means his body worked but didn't betray him and he finds the kitchen... Different than he left it.

Not rearranged or disrupted, just *different*. It takes him a minute to realize what has changed.

The espresso machine is the same as it always is, but there's a brand new grinder beside it. Shane stops in the doorway when he sees it, taking it in slowly like he's testing for traps, like someone is going to jump out and laugh at him for being so thrilled about a stupid little espresso making tool.

"Ilya?" He calls, unsure.

"In here," Ilya answers from somewhere upstairs.

Shane backs out of the kitchen and heads up the stairs, walking into the bedroom to find Ilya sprawled out across the bed with his phone with one ankle hooked over the other. He looks up at Shane's expression and smiles, already amused.

"You saw it."

"You bought me a new grinder."

"Yes."

Shane crosses his arms. "You bought a *nice* grinder."

“Yes.”

Shane opens his mouth and then closes it, briefly deciding how to assess the situation. “You didn’t ask.”

Ilya sets his phone aside and sits up, his expression turning attentive. Shane ignores the way that makes him feel. “Do you want me to ask?”

The question is sincere, not defensive. There’s no teasing laced into it.

Shane hesitates.

That’s new, too.

“No,” he says. “I just…” He gestures vaguely. “It’s a lot.”

Ilya nods. “It is investment.”

“Why?”

Ilya doesn’t answer right away. He gets up, crosses the room, and stops close. Close enough that Shane has to tilt his head back slightly to meet his eyes.

“Because you keep waking up very early,” Ilya says. “Because you look calm in the mornings. Because you care about this.”

Shane exhales. “That’s not a reason to spend so much money.”

Ilya smiles. “It is to me.”

Shane looks away, overwhelmed in a way that isn’t entirely unpleasant but still leaves him feeling a little off-balanced. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” Ilya says. “I want to.”

There it is again. The distinction. Choice, not obligation.

“Okay.”

Ilya’s smile widens, not triumphantly, just pleased. “Okay.”

The new grinder changes things for Shane.

It’s not magic, and the change isn’t super dramatic, but the consistency improves. The noise level drops and the process smooths out. Shane notices it right away, even though he pretends he doesn’t.

He is still insisting this isn’t a thing. He just does it while dialing in shots faster now, while flipping pages in his notebook with a practiced ease, all while defaulting to making two cups

every time.

Ilya's involvement deepens in small but incredibly deliberate ways: he learns when not to talk; he learns which questions Shane likes and which ones break his focus; he starts setting out mugs in the morning without being asked. Sometimes, he just sits on the island and watches Shane in silence.

Shane realizes one morning, mid-pour, his eyes on the steam, that Ilya has rearranged his schedule; not in a grand way, but just enough that he's always present when Shane makes espresso.

"You don't have to be here every time," Shane says.

"I want to be."

The first time Shane makes coffee for someone that *isn't* Ilya, it's an accident.

Hayden drops by unexpectedly, knocking on the door like it's normal for him to show up in the afternoon on a random day of the week for no reason. Shane offers him coffee without thinking about it, and then freezes.

"Uh," he says, uncomfortable. "I mean, I can..."

"That fancy coffee you're always making?" Hayden asks, amused. "Sure."

Shane makes it extra carefully, his hands tense the entire time. He wants it to be perfect; he doesn't want to mess it up, not for Hayden. He watches Hayden's face as he takes the first sip.

"Oh," Hayden says, his eyebrows shooting up. "Wow, that's *really* good."

Shane feels a warm, sudden burst of pride blooming in his chest. From the doorway, Ilya watches them, his eyes soft and his expression unreadable.

After Hayden leaves and it's quiet again, Shane leans back against the counter and exhales, rubbing his eyes with both hands.

"That was stupid," he says.

"What was stupid?" Ilya asks.

"Caring that much about the stupid coffee. I just didn't want it to suck."

Ilya steps closer, sliding a hand into Shane's. "You care about many things."

Shane squeezes Ilya's fingers. "Yeah."

He doesn't say: *and that's okay*.

He doesn't have to.

The real shift happens on a Sunday.

They have no plans or obligations.

Shane wakes up late, tangled up with Ilya in bed, sunlight already flooding the room through the curtains. For a moment, he considers skipping the espresso entirely. He wants to stay in bed here, with Ilya, warm and lazy. Instead, he nudges Ilya awake.

"Hey," he murmurs.

Ilya squints at him. "You want coffee."

"Yeah."

They move slowly with unhurried motions. Shane makes the espresso while Ilya leans against him, his arms wrapped around Shane's waist and his chin resting on Shane's shoulder. His body is warm and familiar in a way that puts Shane at ease.

Shane hands a mug to Ilya, who takes it and presses a kiss to his neck.

"You are happy," Ilya says.

Shane considers that statement.

"Yeah," he says. "I am."

That afternoon, Shane does something small but significant: he clears out a cabinet.

He moves unused dishes out, reorganizes, and makes space. He doesn't tell Ilya about it, just... Does it. Makes room for his things, for this part of his life that seems so small and insignificant but is taking up so much space.

Ilya notices the noise and pauses in the doorway to the kitchen.

"You made room," he says.

Shane shrugs. "Figured it made sense. It was cluttered."

Ilya watches him for a long moment, and then nods, satisfied.

"It does."

That night, Shane adds another line to his notebook:

I like that he likes this.

He hesitates, then flips back a page and adds a small star next to an earlier note.

He doesn't cross anything out, he doesn't even tell himself this is temporary.

He lets it exist.

It's snowing in Ottawa.

Not aggressively so. It's not the kind that snarls traffic or turns everything into a chore. It's just enough that the world outside their house looks softened at the edges, like a painting, like someone took their time with it.

Shane only sees it's snowing because Ilya points it out.

"You like this kind of snow," Ilya says, peering out the window. "It is decorative."

Shane snorts from where he is in the kitchen, hovering near the espresso machine. He feels like he spends more time messing with it than he does doing much else these days.

"That's not a thing. Decorative snow. What does that even mean?"

Ilya turns to him, eyebrows raised. "You say this a lot about things that are absolutely things."

Shane doesn't answer, he's busy grinding beans. He doesn't really need to check anything anymore, it's all muscle memory. A set of steps that he knows how to follow perfectly down to the exact measurements. The routine has settled into his muscles, into the shape of every morning.

The espresso machine is no longer new. It has a faint scratch on the side from when Shane dropped a mug and it shattered into little tiny porcelain projectiles. The grinder is a little louder than it was when it was brand new. Shane's replaced one of the gaskets already, proud of himself for figuring it out on his own without calling anyone.

He pulls the shot cleanly, steam curling up into the kitchen.

Ilya wanders over barefoot, snuggled up in one of Shane's old hoodies. He leans against the island, close but not in the way.

Shane hands him a mug and he accepts it without a word.

They drink in comfortable silence while Shane thinks about their next game day. About how many months have passed since he started doing this *thing* that isn't a thing.

How many more years he'll keep doing it.

They're hosting a get together later.

It's nothing big or formal, just a few of their teammates and friends. There's no pretense, no expectations. Shane once got weird about that too - people in his space. People seeing his life with curious eyes. People knowing what he does in his spare time outside of training and game days.

Now it just means he spends most of the day cleaning everything.

Ilya is cutting vegetables on the island while Shane wipes down all of the cabinets and surfaces, clearing space and putting things away. They move around one another easily, a practiced choreography of almost-touching and gentle redirections.

"Do you want me to move this?" Ilya asks, gesturing towards Shane's neat little area of coffee making tools.

Shane shakes his head. "No, it's fine there."

Hesitation doesn't proceed that answer, not anymore.

He doesn't really care if anyone perceives his hobby anymore.

Ilya smiles, small and satisfied, and goes back to chopping.

It's late when everyone leaves. The dishes are stacked in the sink and Shane stands at the counter, rolling his shoulders. The house is quiet again, the lights dimmed, the sound of cars driving by outside is muffled by snow.

Ilya dries the last pan and hangs it up.

"Good night," he says, meaning *that was fun*, meaning *we survived being social*, meaning *I'm tired but happy*.

Shane hums, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah."

Shane fiddles with some beans, weighing the option of grinding them and making espresso this late at night.

"You don't usually drink it this late," Ilya says.

Shane shrugs. "Decaf. We have a game tomorrow."

Ilya laughs. "You're a changed man."

"Careful," Shane says. "I'll deny it."

They stand together as Shane prepares everything, Ilya watching him quietly as their shoulders brush. There's no audience, no performance, just the quiet pleasure of Shane doing something he's good at. Doing something he *enjoys* that isn't just hockey.

Ilya leans over and kisses the corner of his mouth.

Shane realizes, quietly, as he sips his coffee and watches Ilya do the same, that he isn't so weird about this anymore.

That this is definitely a thing.

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