

Learning Curve

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Learning Curve

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Summary

The first thing Ilya's brain processed was the text in the search bar.

normal amount of touching while watching a movie

how to initiate intimacy without being awkward

is asking "is this okay" too much

Shane accidentally leaves his laptop open. Ilya discovers an extensive Google search history on how to be a good boyfriend.

Ilya conducts a very thorough performance review.

Notes

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

Ilya shoved the cottage door shut with his shoulder, grateful for the wall of warmth that hit him. Outside, the cold was already gnawing at his fingers, and the glass bottles under his arm were slick with condensation. He'd gone on a mission for the fancy carbonated water - the kind Shane swore had the "right mouthfeel," a phrase so pretentious Ilya had physically cringed. But here he was with it, because Shane liked his ginger ale to taste less like a drink and more like an aggressive explosion in your mouth.

The place was perfectly cozy. The lights were turned down low, and everything was in that state of order that Shane pretended happened by accident but actually required the precision of a museum curator. Ilya kicked his shoes into a haphazard pile by the door, a small act of rebellion, and dumped his jacket on a chair. "Shane?" he called out, more from routine than any expectation of an answer.

From down the hall, the sound of running water answered. Probably a shower. Or, knowing Shane, he was washing his hands for the third time because he'd brushed against a thought that felt vaguely grimy.

Ilya grinned to himself and went to stash the bottles in the fridge, where they belonged. His reward for being a beverage sherpa was at least ten minutes of doing nothing on the sofa. He collapsed onto it, throwing an arm across the back like a king surveying his beige kingdom. Which, lately, he kind of was.

That's when he saw the laptop.

It was open. Deliberately placed on the coffee table, not just left there, but positioned. Next to it sat a notepad with a list written in neat handwriting.

Ilya squinted.

Shane did not leave things open. He closed browser tabs with the solemnity of a priest concluding a mass. He logged out of everything, powered devices down, and treated digital privacy like it was a full-time defensive strategy. An open laptop was less a piece of electronics and more a cry for help.

Ilya leaned forward. Just a peek. Boyfriend privileges probably covered this, right?

The screen was not locked. The universe had apparently looked at Ilya, shrugged, and said, *"You know what? Have this."*

The first thing his brain processed was the text in the search bar.

how to know if your partner needs space

He scrolled.

how often should couples text when living together

Ilya looked from the screen to the notepad. A bullet-point list marched down the page:

Ask before problem-solving

Compliments (be specific)

Physical affection - don't hesitate

Don't schedule affection??

Eye contact

Relax shoulders

The laptop screen, ever the enabler, had begun to dim. Ilya nudged the trackpad and it brightened obediently, revealing a tragic parade of open tabs along the top.

how to be more confident during intimacy

Ilya let out an impressed whistle. "Bold."

how to relax during dates

how long is too long to hold eye contact

normal amount of touching while watching a movie

Ilya pressed his lips together into a quivering line.

is it okay to ask for reassurance often

what if i think too much during sex

That last one made Ilya pause, the smile on his face softening into something fonder. He could picture Shane hunched at this very table, trying to solve intimacy. To break it down into actionable steps and key performance indicators, the same way he analyzed game tape. Of course Shane, who needed a playbook for everything, would seek out instructions for something as wonderfully messy as being close to another person.

Ilya was a committed voyeur now, too invested to turn back.

how to initiate intimacy without being awkward

is asking "is this okay" too much

what do you do with your hands (serious)

"What do you do with your hands. Serious," Ilya read aloud and clicked back to the main search page. The "people also ask" section was downright cruel in its accuracy.

He shook his head. *Shane Hollander*. A man who could orchestrate a power play under immense pressure, who could anticipate an opponent's move three steps ahead. And here he

was, quietly researching the fundamentals of human connection like it was a new software update he hadn't installed yet.

The sudden silence from down the hall was deafening. The shower had shut off.

Ilya jolted upright, scrambling his features into what he hoped was a picture of casual repose. He closed the notepad with care, placing it back at its original angle. The laptop was the real dilemma. Slamming it shut felt like a confession of guilt, a bridge too far. He was a mischievous gossip, not a vandal. He left it open as a testament to his crime.

Shane padded into the room a moment later, hair dark and damp, the sleeves of his soft hoodie pushed up to his elbows. His cheeks were flushed from the steam.

He stopped short when he saw Ilya on the sofa. "Oh. You're back already."

"Evening walks aren't a marathon," Ilya said lightly. "Got your fizzy water."

A small smile touched Shane's lips. "Thanks. I was just, you know." He gestured vaguely behind him.

Ilya patted the cushion beside him. "Sit."

Shane hesitated, but he sat, sinking into the sofa with a sigh.

Very calmly, Ilya said, "You're researching me."

The color drained from Shane's face, leaving the post-shower pink looking suddenly stark. His eyes darted to the coffee table and back, panic flashing behind them. "I - what?"

Ilya tipped his chin toward the evidence. "Your laptop. It's a snitch."

Shane's eyes followed the indictment. He saw the open screen, the notepad beside it. His entire body seemed to wilt. "Oh."

Ilya let the agonizing silence hang just long enough to be truly excruciating, then let his voice soften around the edges. "You made bullet points."

Shane groaned. "I meant to close it. I just got distracted and then I... never mind."

Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, Ilya let the grin he'd been suppressing finally break free. "No, no. Please. Continue. I am *very* interested in my mid-season evaluation."

"Don't make fun of me." Shane mumbled.

The quiet plea in his voice actually managed to slow Ilya's teasing roll. He tilted his head, studying the curve of Shane's spine, the vulnerable pink tip of one ear. "I promise. Only good feedback."

Shane lifted his head, his expression a hilarious mix of misery and reluctant amusement. "You're annoying."

"Maybe," Ilya said, scooting closer until their shoulders brushed. "But I am also subject matter expert, according to your research. So." He nudged Shane gently. "Question one. What do you do with your hands?"

Shane elbowed him, but he was fighting a smile.

Ilya gestured between them with a businesslike hand. "Let us begin. Performance review. Category one," he announced, his tone that of a slightly bored executive. "Attentiveness."

He reached out, hooking a finger into the soft fabric of Shane's hoodie sleeve, and tugged him closer until their knees bumped together. "Excellent," Ilya declared. "You are observant. You ask follow-up questions. You remember my coffee order, despite fact that it is crime against coffee beans."

"It is not a crime," Shane muttered, his focus on the finger still looped in his sleeve.

"Category two: Affection." Ilya leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to the very corner of Shane's mouth. "Strong marks. However, could benefit from more energy."

"What does that even mean in a review - "

Ilya kissed him again, cutting off the question. This one was slower, landing properly on Shane's lips. "Like that," he murmured, pulling back just a hair. "See? Improvement. You're a quick study."

A helpless sound escaped Shane, and his hands coming up to fist gently in the front of Ilya's shirt. The kiss deepened, turning warm and languid, Shane's movements careful and considerate, as if he were mentally checking items off a list even now.

Ilya hummed his approval into the kiss before pulling back just enough to speak, his breath mingling with Shane's. "Category three: Kissing technique."

Shane went rigid, his eyes flying open. "You *cannot* have a category for that."

"I can. I have." Ilya cupped Shane's face, his thumbs sweeping in gentle arcs along his jawline. "Notes: No dental interference. Excellent pacing. You are great at reading and responding to cues." To demonstrate, he kissed him again, a long, thorough kiss that had Shane sinking back into the sofa cushions. Ilya followed him down, bracing a forearm beside Shane's head.

"One note for development, however," Ilya added thoughtfully, brushing the tip of his nose against Shane's. "You think too much."

Shane laughed, the sound breathless and trapped between them. "I don't know how to turn it off."

"Like this," Ilya whispered, and kissed him again, deep and slow and lingering. His hands slid to Shane's waist. "You don't have to do anything. Just... stay here."

And Shane did. Ilya felt the exact moment the tension bled out of him - the release in his shoulders, the exhale against his mouth, the way his body softened and settled. When they finally parted, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's, eyes closed, breathing softly.

"Category four," Ilya continued. "Emotional support." He wrapped his arm around Shane and pulled him in, shifting them until they were chest-to-chest, Shane's head tucked perfectly under his chin. "You care too much," Ilya stated, his fingers tracing idle patterns on Shane's back. "It is tiring. Also, ironically, your best quality."

Shane swallowed, his voice small against Ilya's collarbone. "I just want to be... good. At this. At *us*."

All the playful pretense melted away then, slipping off like a discarded coat. Ilya pressed a lingering kiss to Shane's temple.

"You don't have to get a degree in this, Shane," he murmured into his soft hair.

"I want to be good at it," Shane repeated.

Ilya shifted, drawing back just enough to look at him. He cradled Shane's face again. "...you already are."

For a second, Shane just searched Ilya's eyes, as if looking for the footnote, the qualifier. Finding none, a smile broke through. It softened his whole face. He didn't say anything, just tucked himself back into the space against Ilya's shoulder, fitting there perfectly.

Ilya rested his cheek against Shane's hair and thought that if Shane ever felt the need to grade himself again, Ilya would just have to keep demonstrating his perfect score.

End Notes

I thrive on validation like a plant thrives on... y'know, forgetting to water it for three weeks and then getting a sudden deluge. Help me thrive through your kudos/comment 🌱

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