

You are my Penguin

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You are my Penguin

by Anonymous

Summary

Shane and Ilya's first photoshoot post-coming out. It goes as well as you'd expect it to.

—

Then Ilya whispers, right into the shell of his ear, “Now we look like penguins.”

And it’s not at all what he expected to hear. He makes a strangled sound, his hands flying down to cover Ilya’s own on his waist. “What?”

Ilya rocks them side to side, small and deliberate, like they’re waddling. “Penguins are romantic. They mate for life. You are my penguin.”

Notes

This is entirely self-indulgent and just something I did for a little fun to take a break from my current WIP. A friend suggested I do a domestic-Hollanov, and i couldn't resist. So, this monster was born. I hope you guys enjoy it! :)

The greenroom smells like starch and makeup powder and somebody's expensive cologne that's trying too hard, and Shane can hear the shoot happening on the other side of the door the way you hear a party you're not inside of yet, laughter in bright little bursts, footsteps, the soft click-click of a camera test firing which makes his eye twitch with every click.

He's been in rooms like this a hundred times. He's walked into brighter ones, louder ones, rooms that wanted pieces of him.

This one is different, though. It doesn't just want *pieces*. This one wants the *whole* thing.

That's the problem. Because Shane's *whole* thing is a six foot three Russian menace with the humor and attention span of a *child*.

Said problem is sitting on the edge of the couch like he *belongs* here, shirt half on, tie draped around his neck like a ribbon someone forgot to finish tying, hair still the tiniest bit damp at the temples because he decided to get ready literally half an hour before they had to leave the house.

"*The photoshoot is for us, Shane. They cannot do it without us.*" He'd said, when Shane had nearly had a coronary watching Ilya strip to get into the shower and while he wasn't *wrong*, Shane feels getting ready should have been a top priority and not something shoved until the last second.

Then again, when you can grin at your husband and somehow make the world rearrange itself to accommodate you- getting ready whenever you please is, in fact, a luxury.

He's watching Shane with this calm, amused patience, like Shane's nerves are a weather system passing through, like he's seen storms before and knows they burn out.

"You look like you are going to fight door. Keep looking at it all nervous," Ilya says, nodding at the closed door. "You want me to hold you back? Like security?"

Shane gives him a look. His hands are already sweating, already betraying him, palms damp against the crisp fabric of Ilya's shirt where they'd navigated. He's holding it open, trying to help, trying to be useful, trying to keep his brain from sprinting off a cliff. "I don't want to fight the door," he mutters, even if some illogical portion of his brain can rationally agree the sight of the door does make him a bit agitated.

Ilya's eyes flick down to Shane's hands, the way his fingers pinch the cloth too tightly, the way the knuckles are pale. "Fine. You look like you want to bite someone."

"I don't bite," Shane lies, and it comes out too fast, and the lie tastes like metal in his mouth because he absolutely does bite, just not like that, not in public, not when there are cameras waiting to turn their love into a headline with clean fonts and sharp edges.

Ilya's smile blooms like it can't help itself. "Mm," he says, very thoughtful, like he's in on a secret Shane isn't (which, he's not, Shane is very aware of the bite mark on his shoulder), but

it seems his husband is willing to take pity on him, at least in this moment. “Good. Then you will kiss. Is more brand-friendly.”

Shane’s throat tightens around a laugh he doesn’t want to give away yet. He steps closer anyway because distance is where the nerves live, because proximity is the only thing that makes his body believe the truth: this is real, he is allowed, he is not doing something wrong by wanting. He starts buttoning Ilya’s shirt with careful, deliberate hands, the little pearl buttons slick under his fingertips, the fabric cool and smooth, the familiar intimacy of dressing someone you love pressed right up against the unnaturalness of doing it with a crew outside the door.

Button. Pull. Smooth.

Ilya goes still in that attentive way he does when Shane is doing something for him, like he’s trying to memorize it. Like he thinks he might need it later. Shane hates how tender that makes him. Shane loves how tender that makes him. It’s a stupid, exquisite problem.

“You are shaking,” Ilya says, not accusing, just noticing. His voice is soft, almost bored with it, but Shane can hear the concern masked beneath the neutralness.

“I’m not shaking,” Shane says, and his hands betray him and shake.

Ilya huffs a laugh, leans forward just enough that his knee bumps Shane’s thigh, warm contact through two layers of clothing that still somehow makes Shane’s stomach drop like a snapped elevator cable. “Okay,” Ilya relents, dipping his head forward in a nod. “Then your hands are doing... little dance.”

Shane snorts despite himself, a sharp sound that tries to stay professional and fails. His shoulders loosen a fraction, the tension slipping like a belt unbuckled one notch. He buttons another button, then another, and it hits him, sudden and dizzying, how insane it is that he gets to do this in the open, how his entire life has been built on keeping certain things locked behind his ribs and now here he is, fingertips at Ilya’s sternum, literally closing fabric over the heart he’s been orbiting for years.

His heart. His husband.

The words still feel like something he could drop; that could shatter like glass if he spoke it too many times.

“Ilya,” Shane says before he can stop himself, and it’s not a warning, it’s not even really a sentence, it’s just his name, the way you touch a bruise to remind yourself it’s real.

Ilya’s gaze lifts. Steady. Warm. There’s that ridiculous calm again, like he’s already decided the world can’t take this from them. “Da?”

Shane wishes he could feel the same way, too. For so many years this has been *their* thing. *Their* secret. And it’s worked. It’s been- well, not *perfect*, but close enough and he’s afraid the moment they accept the world into it *entirely*, it will change.

Shane swallows and forces the thoughts down. The air feels thick and clammy against his skin, and his pulse is loud in his ears. “You’re...” He laughs once, breathless, because the only way to say it is going to sound too big for a room with folding chairs and bottles of water lined up like props. “You’re acting like this isn’t fucking terrifying.”

Ilya’s mouth quirks. “Is pictures,” he says. “We stand. We smile. We pretend we are not obsessed with each other. Is not terrifying.”

Shane’s laugh slips out again, uninvited, cracking him right down the middle. “We’re not obsessed.”

Ilya’s brows lift, pure innocent theater. “No?”

Shane gets the last button through the hole with a little too much force. Heat crawls up his neck. “Shut up.”

Ilya leans back, satisfied, like he’s won something. “See?” he says. “You are laughing. I am very good husband.”

“You are a menace,” Shane says automatically, and the words come with heat, fondness, a bite softened into velvet.

Ilya’s grin goes wide, bright and boyish, the kind of glee that makes Shane’s chest go painfully full. “Da,” he says. “Tell everyone.”

Shane reaches for the tie before his nerves can regroup. He slides it up, folds it, starts the knot with muscle memory and stubborn focus, because if he thinks too hard about how many people are about to witness them, how many lenses are about to capture their hands, their mouths, the way they look at each other, he might bolt, he might laugh too loud, he might cry, he might do something messy and human like throw up or pass out.

He’s already having a minor panic attack, so. This should be fun.

Ilya watches his hands with a lazy sort of appreciation, his mouth drooped in a languid smile.

“Too tight?” Shane asks, quiet, because he can’t help checking, he can’t help caring. He adjusts, thumbs brushing Ilya’s collar, and that tiny touch lands like a match struck.

Ilya’s eyes go half-lidded for a second, like he’s tasting it. Then he says, dead serious, “Make it tight,” and the way he says it is absolutely filthy if you’re Shane and you have spent years learning the language of Ilya’s tone.

Shane’s breath stutters. His face goes hot and his grip on the tie tightens as his fingers spasm. “Ilya.” He hisses, paranoid eyes darting around to make sure they were alone. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to this *not* being a secret.

“What,” Ilya says, all innocence. “Is winter. Keep throat warm.”

Shane lets out a laugh that’s half strangled, half real, and he hates himself for how quickly he folds, how easy it is for Ilya to peel the fear off him one joke at a time, like taking off armor

piece by piece until there's just... skin.

He finishes the knot, smooths it down, and then he just stops, hands still on Ilya's chest, fingertips resting over the neat line of the tie, the buttons, the place where Ilya's heart is beating. Shane can feel it if he presses. He can feel it even without pressing. He can feel everything.

Outside the door, someone calls their names. A muffled, cheerful, "Two minutes!"

Two minutes until the world looks at them.

Shane's throat tightens again, but this time it isn't panic. It's this strange, aching gratitude, the kind that makes your eyes sting even when you're trying to stay composed. He looks up at Ilya and Ilya is already looking at him, like Shane is the only thing in the room that matters, like the cameras can line up in a firing squad and it still won't change what's true.

"You know," Shane says, low, voice catching on the edges, "I say it all the time, but..."

Ilya's expression shifts, softening in a way that feels private. "Say again," he murmurs, almost gentle. Almost reverent.

Shane's chest tightens. His fingers curl around the tie without thinking, the strip of silk suddenly a handle, a tether, an excuse. "I love you," he says, simple as breath, and the simplicity is what makes it hit, what makes his stomach flip like he's thirteen and terrified and brave at the same time.

Ilya's smile is so bright it's stupid. It's dazzling. It's the face of a man who still can't believe he gets to be loved like this. "Da," he whispers. "I know. I love you too."

Shane's nerves spike anyway, because love always does that to him, because love is a doorway and stepping through it still feels like stealing, and he will never not feel like he's stolen someone else's luck to be able to deserve to be loved by *this* man. He tightens his grip on the tie and tugs Ilya forward, not hard, just enough to pull him off that couch and into Shane's space, into the small, warm radius where Shane can breathe.

Ilya comes easily, like he wants to be pulled, like he's been waiting. His hands slide to Shane's waist, steadying him, grounding him, and Shane feels his own heartbeat slam against his ribs like it's trying to get out.

"You're a *menace*," Shane repeats, mouth hovering over Ilya's, words pressed into the last inch of space between them.

Ilya's eyes crinkle. "Your menace," he corrects, smug and soft all at once.

Shane kisses him.

It's not a performance kiss, not a show kiss, not something choreographed for cameras. It's quiet, warm, familiar, the kind of kiss that says I'm here, I'm not hiding, I'm not running, and when Shane pulls back he keeps his forehead against Ilya's because he doesn't want the distance back yet, not even for a second.

Outside, the knock comes. “Guys? Ready?”

Shane exhales, a shaky little laugh against Ilya’s mouth. “We’re ready,” he calls, then drops his voice again, just for Ilya, just for this small pocket of them. “If you make one more joke out there, I’m going to-”

Ilya’s grin goes lethal with delight. “Kiss me again?”

Shane’s eyes roll, helpless and fond, and his fingers flick Ilya’s tie one last time like a warning he doesn’t mean. “Menace,” he whispers.

Ilya kisses the corner of his mouth, quick and sweet. “Da.”

Then the door opens, and Ilya takes his hand, squeezing it, and they walk out together like their brand of love has never been a secret.

The set is all soft whites and tasteful neutrals, a fake living room staged to look like a magazine’s idea of intimacy, couch angled just so, a throw blanket draped in what Shane was sure was meant to replicate natural, but absolutely looked *staged*- a mug that has never held coffee in its life.

There’s a whole crew hovering at the edges like satellites pretending not to stare, lights humming overhead with that low electric breath, and the photographer is already talking when they walk out, voice bright and brisk, hands moving, the kind of person who’s used to turning humans into images.

“Okay, perfect, perfect,” she says, clapping once like she’s starting a play. “So we’re going to do a few combinations. Standing, then seated, then a couple close-ups. Ilya, right here. Shane, just to his left. Great. Great.”

Shane steps into position and his heart does that annoying thing where it tries to climb his throat and live there, but Ilya is beside him, easy and solid, like gravity came in a suit. Ilya leans in just enough that his shoulder brushes Shane’s, a casual touch that still lands like a reassurance.

“Smile,” the photographer says, raising the camera. “Warm. Natural.”

Ilya’s smile is instantaneous, the same wide, unguarded grin he had in the greenroom, the one that looks like he’s getting away with something just by existing. Shane tries to match it. Tries to be normal about it and not be obvious he’s three seconds away from a complete mental breakdown.

He can be natural.

He makes it approximately two seconds before his eyes snag on Ilya’s tie. The knot has shifted slightly off-center, the tiniest tilt, barely a flaw, barely anything, but Shane’s brain has already latched onto it like it’s a life-or-death situation. He reaches up without thinking, fingers sliding to the silk.

Ilya's gaze flicks down to Shane's hand and then back up, delight sparking like a match. "Again," he murmurs under his breath, voice pitched for Shane only. "You cannot stop touching me."

Shane's mouth twitches. "Your tie is crooked."

"My tie is perfect," Ilya says, then, louder, to the room, like he's making an announcement: "My husband says I am crooked."

Shane's head snaps up and his eyes widen, though his fingers never leave the tie and he has the smallest, most manic desire to strangle his husband with it, but quickly smooshes it down because of all the witnesses.

"I didn't say you were-"

The photographer pauses behind the camera, a slow blink like she's recalibrating. "Okay," she says carefully, cutting Shane off, "we're going to keep the chatter to a minimum, guys. Just look at each other. Soft. Romantic."

Shane nods immediately, contrite, professional, trying to be good because being chastised at his big age does *not* feel good. He drops his hand, forces his shoulders to settle, forces his smile to become something calm.

Ilya turns his head and looks at him with that infuriating, open affection, but Shane can see *right* through the faux innocence and he has to fight himself from bracing for whatever the fuck is about to leave Ilya's mouth.

Then Ilya leans in and whispers, "If you pull tie again, I will make noise."

Shane tries to hold it. He does- but *fuck*. His entire body goes hot in one fast wash, his skin burning like he'd stayed in a tanning bed a few minutes too long. "Ilya," he hisses through his teeth, refusing to turn and look at his husband because he knows he'll crack.

The photographer's camera clicks, then stops. "No talking," she calls, but there's a smile tugging at her mouth now, like she can't help it.

Ilya's grin deepens. He doesn't stop looking at Shane. "Do you think I can make vein in her forehead bigger if I talk more?" Ilya whispers, just loud enough for Shane to hear.

Shane's laugh pops out, sharp and helpless. It's not loud, but it's so obvious in the otherwise quiet room. He *tries* to cover it by clearing his throat, but his face is already betraying him, warmth in his cheeks, the corners of his mouth refusing to behave.

Now all he can see is the forehead vein, and it's making being *professional* really hard.

"Okay," the photographer sighs, voice shifting into negotiation. "Switching tactics. Let's do this. Shane, hand on Ilya's chest. Like you're straightening him up. Cute. Yeah. That's good."

Shane's hand lands on Ilya's chest and the contact is a grounding. The fabric is smooth, warm beneath the lights, Ilya's heartbeat steady under Shane's palm like a drum he's memorized.

Shane's fingers slide to the tie again on instinct and he's immediately aware of it, as if the entire universe just zoomed in on his hand.

Ilya's eyes crinkle. "You see?" he murmurs. "You cannot stop."

"Stop smiling like that," Shane mutters without moving his lips much, trying to keep it private. "We're supposed to be serious."

"Who says," Ilya whispers back. "We are married. Is illegal to be serious."

Shane's shoulders shake with another laugh, smaller this time, but it's there, and the photographer makes a little sound of defeat, the kind that's half exasperation and half reluctant joy.

"Alright," she says, dropping the camera slightly. "You know what? Fine. If you can't be serious, then don't. Let's lean into it. I want you two to do whatever you're doing, but just... do it slower. Give me moments. Give me eye contact. Give me that thing that keeps happening when you forget I'm here." Then, under her breath but Shane still very much heard her- "exactly as you guys have been since walking in here."

Shane swallows, feeling a little bad about not being able to hold it together. They agreed to come here and do this- the very least they could do was take it serious.

The instructions (chastising, to Shane) lands like permission to Ilya, and he lifts his brows at Shane, pleased. "See," he says softly. "They want us."

Shane rolls his eyes but can feel the corner of his mouth pull into a helpless smile. He can feel the surrealness like a buzz under his skin. A decade of flinching away from cameras, a decade of perfect angles and careful distance, and now a stranger is saying, yes, do the love part, the love part is the point.

Shane's fingers smooth the tie again, careful, almost reverent, bringing the knot back to center, tightening the line so it sits right. His thumb brushes Ilya's collarbone on accident and Ilya's breath catches, quick, like his body is still surprised by tenderness.

The camera starts clicking again, rapid and rhythmic.

"Beautiful," the photographer murmurs, half to herself. "Shane, keep your hand there. Ilya, look at him. Not the lens. Him."

Ilya obeys with a kind of eager devotion that makes Shane's stomach flip. He turns fully toward Shane, eyes soft, smile bright, and it hits Shane all over again how obscene it is that he gets to be looked at like this in public, that this is allowed, that this is being documented instead of hidden.

Shane's hand slides from the tie to Ilya's lapel, flattening a crease, then back to the tie again because he's apparently incapable of leaving it alone.

Ilya laughs, quiet, warm. "You are *obsessing*," he murmurs.

Shane's eyes narrow, even as his mouth betrays him with a smile. "I am *not* obsessing."

"Yes you are. You make me pretty."

"You are already pretty," Shane says automatically, and the words come out like a reflex, like a truth his body knows before his brain can filter it.

Ilya goes still for a fraction of a second, smile faltering into something softer, something that looks like it might turn serious.

Shane feels it too, the potential weight, the sudden quiet in the space between them, the way a real moment tries to land.

Ilya opens his mouth, probably to say something sincere, probably to let the softness deepen into something that might make Shane's eyes sting.

Shane panics. Not panic-panic, not fear, just that old instinct to dodge intensity with humor, to keep the moment from getting too sharp. He tugs the tie lightly and says, "If you get emotional on me, I really *will* bite."

Ilya's serious expression cracks like thin ice. He laughs, helpless, shoulders bouncing, eyes squeezing shut for a second. The photographer makes an audible little "oh my god" sound, like she can't believe them, like she's both exhausted and delighted.

"Perfect," she says, grinning behind the camera. "That. That's it. Do that again."

Ilya looks back at Shane, still laughing, cheeks flushed. "You threaten me," he says, breathless. "In front of everyone."

"I'm innocent," Shane says, deadpan, because that is what the internet, and the fans, and the interviewers and even their friends always assume. That Ilya corrupted him. That Ilya *defiled* him. Ilya's threatened, on several occasions, to tell them about Shane's impromptu Halloween trip with a butt plug, but Shane had threatened withholding sex and, miraculously, Ilya stayed silent.

(Even if they both knew Shane could never, *ever* withhold sex.)

Ilya completely *loses* it. Full grin, bright laugh, head tipping back a little like he's trying not to be too loud. Shane's chest aches with affection so sudden it's almost ridiculous, like his heart is trying to climb out of his ribs and go settle right beside Ilya's where it knows it belongs.

The camera keeps firing, clearly enjoying whatever the fuck it is they're doing.

"Okay," the photographer says, softer now. "Now seated. Ilya, sit. Shane, sit close. Act natural. As if this was any ordinary Friday night, and you were at home alone."

The instructions were... a bit vague, but very, *very* dangerous. Because if they were at home on a Friday night? The couch would *not* be sat on.

They sit on the couch, though, and it's staged and fake and somehow still intimate because Ilya immediately angles in toward Shane like he's magnetized, knee brushing Shane's, shoulder leaning in, and Shane's hand lands on Ilya's thigh without thinking, fingers pressing lightly through the fabric.

"Chin down a touch, Shane," the photographer says. "Ilya, tuck in, yeah. Great. And Shane, can you... adjust his tie again?"

Shane's laugh escapes. "She's enabling you."

Ilya beams at the photographer like they've become co-conspirators. "She understands love," he declares.

Shane reaches up, fingers sliding to the knot, and this time he does it slowly, deliberately, the movement almost tender. He straightens the tie, smooths it, then leaves his hand there a second too long, fingertips resting at Ilya's throat, feeling the warmth, the pulse.

Ilya's smile softens. His eyes go heavy with affection. For a breath, it looks like he might say something real again.

The room quiets around them, camera clicking slower, like everyone senses it.

Shane feels his own chest tighten, that familiar swell that scares him because it's too big, because it makes him want to say stupid things like, "*I would burn the whole world down for you*," because that kind of love is a weight you're not supposed to carry in public.

Ilya's mouth opens.

Shane, helpless, desperate to keep it light, murmurs, "If you get sentimental, I will tell *everyone* how you cried watching Marley and Me."

Ilya's eyes widen in mock outrage. "You are monster."

Shane smiles, so soft it feels like it belongs to someone braver. "Your monster."

Ilya laughs again, bright and delighted, and he leans in until his nose brushes Shane's cheek like an almost-kiss, like a promise. Shane's hand slides down from the tie to cup the back of Ilya's neck, thumb pressing once, grounding himself in the warm reality of him.

"God," the photographer says quietly, almost to herself, voice gone soft with it. "You guys are ridiculous."

Shane glances toward the lens, cheeks hot, still smiling like an idiot. He forgot, for a moment, where they were- just leaned into the natural comfort of Ilya's proximity. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," she says, lifting the camera again. "This is the best part. Just keep doing... whatever the hell this is."

Ilya turns his head and grins at Shane like he's won again, like he's always winning because Shane keeps handing it to him. He nudges Shane's shoulder with his own and whispers, "We

are doing professional.”

Shane’s laugh is immediate. “We are not.”

Ilya’s eyes gleam. “We are authentic,” he says, very pleased with himself.

Shane looks at him, really looks, and the love hits like gravity, heavy and sure, no avoiding it no matter how much they joke. His fingers find the tie again, because of course they do, and he tugs it just enough to pull Ilya closer, not even for the cameras this time, not for anyone, just because he wants him.

“You’re impossible,” Shane murmurs, brushing his nose against Ilya’s.

Ilya’s smile turns soft at the edges, warmth settling in his eyes. “Da,” he whispers back. “But you keep me.”

And the camera keeps clicking, catching the way Shane’s hand lingers, the way Ilya’s smile never dims, the way they can’t seem to find seriousness without tripping over laughter first, like love is too bright to look at straight on so they keep squinting and joking and touching anyway, domestic in a room built for spectacle, making it real just by being themselves.

The photographer doesn’t even bother pretending she’s in charge anymore, not really. She just keeps rotating them through setups like she’s moving furniture around a room that’s already full of sunlight.

“Okay. Standing again. Let’s do full-length, then we’ll do some movement. Walk toward me, slow. Like you’re... I don’t know, walking into a party and you’re the hottest people there.”

Ilya’s eyes go bright, and a bad feeling settles in Shane’s stomach because he wasn’t kidding. His husband is a *menace* and the look has Shane’s spider-tingles going haywire.

They both rise off the couch, and Shane smooths his own jacket automatically, trying to yank his professionalism back over his shoulders, trying to remember who he used to be before he allowed Ilya to crack him open, find every single hollow part in his core, and fill him with this disgusting mushiness he can’t control.

He takes a deep, controlled breath and slowly exhales it through his nose. He can do this. He can be poised. He can be composed. He can be the version of himself that used to survive cameras by turning into a statue, and he can do it even when his husband is being ridiculous.

It’ll be fine.

Ilya steps up beside him and murmurs, “Party. Yes. I will dance.”

“No,” Shane says instantly, eyes flying to Ilya’s in panic because he knows Ilya absolutely *will* dance. “You won’t.”

Ilya’s grin turns criminal. “You cannot stop me. I am free man.”

Shane shoots him a look that's supposed to be stern. It lands somewhere between fond and doomed. "Just *walk*."

Ilya nods very solemnly, like he's taking an oath. "Yes. I walk."

The photographer lifts her camera. "Alright. On three. One, two, three."

They start forward. For exactly two steps, Ilya walks like a normal human being.

On the third step, Ilya pivots his hips in this exaggerated, ridiculous runway strut, shoulders rolling, chin lifted like he's auditioning to become Canada's next top model. He even flicks his hand like he's throwing kisses to an invisible crowd.

Shane's brain short-circuits.

It's like a fuse blows somewhere deep in his chest and suddenly his composure goes out the nearest window. His mouth opens on a laugh he tries to swallow, but it bursts out anyway, loud and bright, surprising even him. He bends forward a little, one hand flying to his face like he can physically hold the sound back.

The crew snorts. Someone actually laughs out loud near the lights. The photographer lowers the camera and pinches the bridge of her nose like she's praying for patience. "Ilya."

Ilya stops mid-strut, turns, completely unrepentant, grin so wide it's basically a confession. "What? Is movement. You wanted movement."

"I wanted... intimate movement."

Shane *really* wishes she would be more specific about how she wants them because Ilya weaponizes the language gap and picks and chooses what he wants to hear and *intimate* is way too broad of a word.

Ilya considers that, very seriously. Then he steps behind Shane, slides his hands around Shane's waist from the back, and suddenly he's pressing in close, chin near Shane's shoulder, body warm, presence filling Shane's space.

Shane goes still for a heartbeat, laughter dying down into something softer. His stomach flips and his shoulders drop, instinct winning out over perseverance. For a second, it's almost too tender, and he feels bad for judging Ilya too harshly just a second ago and thinking him incapable of hearing- "be intimate," and not taking it literally.

Then Ilya whispers, right into the shell of his ear, "Now we look like penguins."

And it's not at all what he expected to hear. He makes a strangled sound, his hands flying down to cover Ilya's own on his waist. "What?"

Ilya rocks them side to side, small and deliberate, like they're waddling. "Penguins are romantic. They mate for life. You are my penguin."

Shane's laugh comes back full force, and it's not the guarded kind this time. It's the kind that cracks him open. He twists in Ilya's arms, trying to glare at him, but his eyes are wet with laughter and his cheeks hurt and the glare melts on impact.

"You are unbelievable," Shane manages, breathless.

"Da," Ilya says proudly. "I am gift."

A gift, indeed. Shane knows exactly what he's doing and he can't even be annoyed with it. Ilya saw Shane's anxiety and his panic and rather than forcing him into a stiff, awkward photoshoot; he chose to rather do what he does best, and that was make Shane laugh. Feel comfortable.

The photographer groans and Shane watches as she scrubs at her forehead- the vein even more prominent, now. Then she tries again. "Okay. Okay. Let's reset. No penguins. Please. Just... hold hands and look at each other."

Shane nods, still smiling like an idiot. He reaches for Ilya's hand, fingers threading together, warmth meeting warmth. He can feel his own pulse in his fingertips and he can't tell if it's the lights or the happiness making him feel like he might float.

They face each other. The photographer lifts the camera again. "Great. Soft smiles. Shane, tilt your chin up a touch. Ilya, bring your forehead close but don't touch. Perfect. And... hold."

Ilya leans in, forehead hovering near Shane's, eyes on Shane's mouth for a split second before lifting to meet his gaze. Shane's breath catches. The room quiets as if they, too, can sense the sudden tension while the camera keeps clicking, slow and steady.

It's sweet. It's surreal. It's the kind of intimacy Shane never thought he'd get to have under bright lights without fear.

Ilya opens his mouth. Shane braces, instinctively, for sincerity.

Ilya whispers, instead "If you blink, you owe me five dollars."

Shane's eyes widen. "What?"

"I am betting on your weakness," Ilya murmurs, eyes gleaming with delight. "You blink so much. Like little baby deer."

Shane bites his lip so hard he tastes copper on his tongue, fighting down the sudden blurble of laughter that surged up in his chest. He jerks back with the effort, hand still in Ilya's; the tie he *just* fixed now definitely crooked again because Ilya can't stop moving like a menace powered by chaos and joy.

The photographer drops the camera, exasperated. "Oh my god."

Ilya looks at her with innocent eyebrows. "He blinked."

Shane wipes his free hand down the length of his thigh, hating how clammy it was, and turns apologetic eyes on her even as he tries to keep fighting his laughter, “I am so sorry. He’s sabotaging me.”

Ilya leans closer, like he’s sharing a secret. “I am making you happy.”

And Shane... Shane can’t even argue that. Because it’s true in the simplest, stupidest way. His body feels light. His chest feels open. The old fear that used to clamp down on him around cameras is still there, somewhere deep, but it’s been drowned under something louder: laughter, love, the fact that he’s standing here holding his husband’s hand and nobody is telling them to stop.

So, Shane was right. Ilya *was* doing this to, in some odd way, *help* Shane.

The photographer sighs, then smiles despite herself. “Alright,” she says, voice softening, surrendering. “Fine. We’re doing candid. Just... keep doing what you’re doing. I’ll chase you with the lens. Shane, if you adjust his tie again, I swear to *god* I’m making you redo this whole photoshoot.”

Shane snorts, and doesn’t bother asking her how she thinks that time will go given how swell this one’s went. He instead focuses on the tie with a pout. “But it’s already crooked.”

Ilya turns his head slightly and says, loud enough for the crew, “He is obsessed with my throat.”

Shane’s face goes *flaming* red and he immodestly drops his hands, caught. “Ilya!”

“What?” Ilya says, delighted. “Is true. You keep touching here.”

Shane reaches up and smacks Ilya lightly on the chest, trying to be stern, trying to look offended, but his hand lingers, and his mouth betrays him with a smile that refuses to leave.

“Stop,” Shane mutters, laughing. “Stop talking, *please*.”

Ilya leans in like he’s about to behave. Like he’s about to be good. Then he says, very solemn, “Okay. I will be silent. For... eight seconds.”

Shane’s laugh spikes again, incredulous. “Eight seconds?”

Ilya nods. “Is record.”

The photographer is laughing now too, which feels like a miracle. The crew is smiling openly. The whole set has shifted from tense professionalism to something looser, warmer, like everyone in the room has decided this is the story: not perfection, not posed romance, but two idiots in love who can’t stop touching and joking like the world isn’t watching.

“Okay,” the photographer says, lifting the camera. “Ilya, put your arm around him. Shane, lean into him. And I want you both to look at the lens like you’ve got a secret.”

Ilya wraps his arm around Shane's shoulders, tugging him in close. Shane goes easily, cheek nearly brushing Ilya's shoulder, their bodies fitting together like muscle memory. Shane's hand, traitorous, rises to the tie again, smoothing it. Fixing it. Tethering himself to Ilya despite the instructions *not* to.

Ilya laughs, soft and pleased, and looks at the camera with that exact expression, the one that says the secret is Shane, the secret is always Shane.

Shane tries to hold the "secret" look. He really does.

Ilya whispers, without moving his lips much, "Our secret is penguins."

Shane can't hold back any longer.

He laughs so hard he actually has to bend at the waist, one hand still clutching Ilya's tie like a lifeline, and Ilya's laughter crashes right in with his, big and bright and victorious, like this was the plan all along: to make Shane laugh so hard he forgot everything except the ridiculous, impossible fact that he's here, he's safe, he's loved, and he's allowed to be happy out loud.

The shutter fires in a rapid burst.

The photographer, still laughing, calls, "YES. Yes. That. That's the shot. Keep going!"

And Shane, breathless, cheeks aching, eyes shining, looks up at Ilya like he can't believe this is his life and then remembers, oh right, it is. It's his husband. His menace. His *joy*.

His to keep, forever.

He tugs the tie again, pulls Ilya down just enough to steal a quick kiss at the corner of his mouth, and mutters against his smile, "You're going to get me fired."

Ilya kisses him back, grinning. "Impossible," he whispers. "I am married to you. They not fire me. You are permanent."

Shane laughs again, full and free, and for the first time in his life the camera feels like it's capturing something instead of taking it.

The laughter leaves a residue in the room, like champagne foam clinging to the edges, people still smiling as they reset a light, someone muttering about how "that one was gold," Shane still catching his breath with a hand half-curved around Ilya's tie like he's afraid if he lets go the whole day will blink out, a dream you wake up from and immediately mourn.

The photographer lowers her camera and exhales, long-suffering but pleased, like she just got handed something real and now she has to be the adult about it.

"Okay," she says, clapping her hands once, sharp. "Okay. That was incredible. You two are ridiculous. Now we're going to do one set that's... not ridiculous."

Shane's smile falters into something wary. "Define not ridiculous."

“Serious,” she says. “Intimate. A little tense, like there’s... history in the air. Like you’re about to kiss but you’re holding yourself back because the world is watching.”

Somebody behind the monitor makes a soft, interested sound. The room subtly quiets. The crew leans in without meaning to. Even the lights feel brighter, suddenly, like they’re waiting. They don’t have to pretend- is the thing. They have history, they’ve had secrets, they’ve denied themselves and held themselves back for years and, so, this one is easy. This one is familiar. The denying? The withholding? The pretending?

Shane spent years pretending he wasn’t in love with this man.

Ilya’s hand stays at Shane’s shoulder, warm and steady.

The photographer points to a mark on the floor. “Shane, stand there. Ilya, right here. Close. Closer than you think. Good. Now, no talking. No jokes. Just... look at each other. Let the moment build. Let it sit.”

Shane’s eyes flick to Ilya automatically, expecting the familiar grin, the inevitable whispered menace that’s going to sabotage him.

Instead, Ilya goes still.

Not stiff. Not tense in a nervous way. Just... *still*. His shoulders square. His mouth settles. His eyes shift into something that isn’t playful at all, something quiet and intent, like a door shutting softly behind them. His hand slides from Shane’s shoulder to the side of Shane’s neck, thumb resting under Shane’s jaw with careful pressure.

Shane feels the change in his body like a switch flipped. He always forgets that when Ilya wants to be, he can be intense, and serious, and zap all common sense from Shane’s brain with a simple *look*.

His laughter dries up in his throat and his breath catches as the air between them thickens, suddenly heavy with all the things that usually get disguised under jokes.

The photographer lifts the camera, and her voice drops too, like she’s sensing the shifted atmosphere and decided *this one* she likes. “Yes. That. Hold that. Ilya, keep your hand there. Shane, don’t smile. Just breathe. Just... let him look at you.”

Shane tries. He does. But Ilya is looking at him with that same intense, raw devotion he’d looked at Shane with in their wedding day and it just- it feels too much.

It feels like every stolen glance in gym rooms and airports and shadowed hallways has been collecting interest, compounding into this, into a gaze that feels like it has hands. Ilya’s eyes trace Shane’s face slowly, not darting, not performing, lingering at his mouth, his cheekbone, the little crease by his eye like he’s memorizing it for later, like he’s making sure nothing about Shane gets lost.

Shane’s stomach drops.

Heat crawls up his spine, slow and inevitable, coiling under his skin. His palms go damp again and his mouth goes dry. His body, traitorous as always, reacts before his brain can file the moment under “professional.”

The photographer’s shutter starts up, a quiet, rhythmic clicking.

“Good,” she murmurs. “Good. Now bring your foreheads close. Don’t touch yet. Almost.”

Ilya leans in by inches, controlled and steady, and Shane’s whole world narrows to the space between their mouths. The scent of Ilya’s cologne, the warmth of his breath, the firm line of his hand on Shane’s neck, thumb shifting once like he’s testing the pulse there, finding it, holding it.

Shane’s chest tightens.

His brain flickers with the absurd thought: there are people here. There are cameras. There are lights. There is a crew and a monitor and a photographer chasing their faces like this is art.

And still, Shane’s body doesn’t care. It just wants.

It wants closeness. It wants the pressure of Ilya’s mouth. It wants the weight of Ilya’s attention like a hand on the back of his neck guiding him somewhere private.

Ilya’s eyes lift to meet Shane’s again, and there’s no joke in them, no escape hatch. Just something dark and steady and devastatingly tender, like he’s saying without words, *I am in love with you. Fuck the cameras, fuck the people, fuck the performance. It’s you. Always only you.*

Shane swallows hard. He can feel the pulse in his throat under Ilya’s thumb.

The photographer’s voice is barely more than a breath. “Yes. Yes. Shane, let your hand come up. Touch his tie. Slow. Like you’re about to undo it.”

Shane’s fingers rise almost against his will, finding the silk at Ilya’s chest. The tie is warm from Ilya’s body, the knot perfect and tight, and Shane’s fingertips brush it.

Ilya’s breath shifts in a soft, subtle inhale that Shane feels more than hears, like the air itself changed density.

Shane’s mouth parts. His hand slides up the tie, slow, deliberate, and the movement feels obscene in front of the entire room, feels like an intimate secret being translated into something visible. Shane’s thumb grazes the knot.

He feels Ilya’s grip at his neck tighten just a fraction, not rough, not forceful, but there, present, a quiet claim that makes Shane’s skin prickle.

The photographer keeps shooting, faster now, like she can sense the electricity.

“Hold,” she whispers. “Hold. Stay right there. Let it burn.”

It does.

The heat in Shane's body flares sharper, pooling low, tightening his stomach, making his thighs feel too aware of each other, making the space between them feel like a ledge he's standing on. He can't smile. He can't laugh. He can barely breathe.

Ilya leans closer until their foreheads nearly touch, and then he finally lets them meet, a soft press that feels like a promise and a warning at the same time. His hand at Shane's neck shifts, fingers spreading, anchoring him, keeping him close.

Shane's hand grips the tie a little tighter.

His voice comes out rough, barely there. "You're not... you're not joking."

Ilya's mouth hovers near Shane's, close enough that the words brush Shane's lips when he answers. "No," he murmurs. "Not now."

The room disappears.

Or maybe it's still there, but Shane's body doesn't believe in it anymore. All he believes in is Ilya's attention and the tension tightening between them like a drawn bow, the careful restraint, the way Ilya's gaze flicks to Shane's mouth and stays there like he's starving.

The photographer's voice is a quiet command. "Okay. Now... almost kiss. Don't. Stop right before."

Shane leans in. He feels Ilya lean in too. He feels the micro-second where their mouths almost meet, where Shane's whole body begs for the contact, where the lack of it makes his skin feel too tight.

His breath shakes.

Ilya's thumb presses once under Shane's jaw, a steadying touch that also feels like permission.

Shane's grip on the tie tightens, and he can feel himself tipping, tipping, tipping, caught between the urge to keep it professional and the fact that he's married to this man, that there's a ring on his hand, that the world has already seen them laugh, already seen them kiss, and maybe wanting doesn't have to be hidden behind humor anymore.

Ilya whispers, so low it's only for Shane, "You are burning."

Shane's eyes flutter closed for half a second, helpless. "You're doing it on purpose."

Ilya's mouth curves, not into a joke, but into something softer, darker, intimate. "Da," he admits. "For you."

The shutter clicks in a rapid burst, hungry.

And Shane, standing in the bright spill of the lights with a hand fisted in Ilya's tie and Ilya's hand cradling his throat like something precious, finally lets himself stop holding back the way he used to, lets himself lean in just that last inch, lips brushing Ilya's with a slow, controlled kiss that still feels like it could set the room on fire.

It isn't even for show, and that's the worst part. Shane's offering them this little peak into his life, into the raw, marital intimacy between them and it's supposed to be private, supposed to be their's- but he can't help it.

The kiss is tense and warm and devastatingly real, and when Shane pulls back he's breathing harder than he should be from a single kiss, eyes bright, skin hot, heart punching at his ribs like it's trying to get out.

The photographer lowers the camera slowly, eyes wide.

"Okay," she says, a little stunned now, voice gone soft with awe. "Okay. That's... that's the cover."

When they got their copy of the magazine, Shane had been confused as to why the cover photo was, mysteriously, absent. Ilya swore he had nothing to do with it- said vein lady must have accidentally sent them the wrong copy.

But two days later, when they were in the locker rooms after practice and heading to the showers- Shane saw the crudely cut photo of him and Ilya taped inside Ilya's stall. It was perfectly framed right in the center, bright and bold and so fucking *normal* it made Shane's breath catch in his chest.

Because it was normal. He thought he would hate it, would feel upset and offended a photo so intimate was being released to the public but; it was perfect.

Heads tilted, lips pressed together. One hand on the tie. Another hand at the side of Shane's cheek. Bodies pressed together so close, not even a breath of air could pass between them. It was so intimate, so beautiful and *natural* that a part of him was kind of glad the world got to see this. See them outside of who they are on the ice. Outside the personas. Just him and his husband, normal and in love.

When Shane glanced up, tears in his eyes (and it was so silly so get so emotional over the fact that his husband had a photo of them in his stall- but Ilya had literally went through great lengths to hide it and do this secretly that it just made Shane feel that painful type of love that was overwhelming in the best way possible), he found Ilya leaning against the doorframe to the showers. The Russian's mouth curved into a soft, pleased smile and one single eyebrow raised- as if daring Shane to comment on it.

Instead, Shane lifted a hand to his own chest, tapped it twice, and hoped Ilya knew what he meant, and that he never forgot it.

You are my heart.

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