

Knowing

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Knowing

by [toomuchplor](#)

Summary

Scott Hunter is just trying to make the most of his closeted NHL career, keep his head down, wait until he retires before he tries find his person.

He doesn't want to know anything at all about these two dumb rookies and what they're getting up to behind the facade of their so-called rivalry... but they're making it really hard for him to ignore them.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are not Scott's problem. That's all there is to it.

Notes

This fic uses a custom skin - hover over French for translation, and keep it turned on if you want the texts to appear as intended.

With thanks to many, as per usual, but especially:

Xen for getting all up in my draft and making this fic so much better, as well as her enthusiasm and cheerleading. Also helping with French and localization stuff in general.

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HR Refuge Hall discord for helping me with several episode-specific and hockey-specific questions as they arose during my writing process.

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

July 2010 - Scarborough

"We really appreciate you coming up for the shoot."

Scott shook the director's hand and smiled. "It's no trouble," he said. He was wearing the CCM jersey; he'd already been through make-up and hair. He was trying not to sweat his foundation off under the brilliant set lights.

"Let's start with stills," said the director, "and then we'll get some video footage."

Scott nodded. This was all old hat now; Scott was headed into his ninth season in the NHL, after all. He still wasn't exactly in his element as a model and brand representative, but he was at least used to having lights and lenses pointed his way. He knew how to hold his mouth, and how to think intense thoughts when someone said something weird like: *a little more face, Scott*.

"Okay, we've got what we need," said the director after about half an hour. "You made that easy, man, we appreciate it. Should have been here yesterday. Let me tell you, never work with teenagers, that's all I'm saying."

Scott decided not to take this as a back-handed comment on his own age; in the real world, twenty-eight wasn't old, after all. It was only in hockey that he was starting to be seen as one of the elders.

He straightened up and skated over to where the photographer had his monitors set up, knowing from experience that they'd let him see some of the shots.

The photos looked good. He watched the scroll of thumbnails — Scott's face, Scott's face, Scott's body and face — as the team reviewed everything again.

Then Scott saw the top few thumbnails on the screen weren't of his face at all.

"Ah," said Scott, amused. "The big new rivalry, huh? That's what you were doing yesterday?"

They'd put the Russian kid — Rozanov — in black, and the Canadian one — Hollander — in white, because corporations liked to make these things as dumb and obvious as possible. The contrast between the two faces was a bit funny, and probably not deliberately so: Rozanov was manly, with stubble and a square jaw; even with his big shoulder pads and youthful athleticism, Hollander was slender, almost androgynous by comparison.

In every photo, though, they were both grinning, laughing like little boys. Rozanov looked like the kid he was, stubble and jawline aside.

"We were *trying* for that," said the director, wearily. "They wouldn't stop giggling."

The photographer rolled his eyes, nodding. He clicked into one of the photos to show Scott, then scrolled through a few more of them. It was frame after frame of these two idiot kids making each other laugh.

Then, suddenly, there was one that was — *different*.

Scott whistled through his teeth without even meaning to: Hollander's dark eyes were dipped low in the shot, but he was looking up at Rozanov through his lashes, almost shyly. And Rozanov was gazing back at Hollander with such eager intensity that it cut cleanly through the boyish slant of his crooked grin.

"Huh," said the photographer, seeming to notice this too. "Wow. Definitely can't use that one."

Scott feigned sudden boredom as he pivoted away and started skating around the rink, hoping against hope that it didn't seem like he'd had his gaydar activated by that stupid photo.

Even though, yes. He really, truly had.

God, stupid fucking teenagers. They'd done it *on camera*.

February 2011 - Nashville

"Here's your room key," said the hotel clerk, sliding the little sleeve over the counter towards him. "And this is your room number." She was well-trained; she didn't read it aloud, because that was a dumb idea when your hotel was hosting every star in the NHL for the weekend, and the lobby was packed with fans and wannabe puck bunnies.

Not that this mattered when Ilya Rozanov leaned over to peek at Scott's card and read it out, full-throated, clear as a bell. "1223," he said, nodding, holding up his own card. "Nice. I am 1221. We are neighbours, Hunter."

"What?" said Scott, stunned that Rozanov was this obnoxious. If *he* wanted to give away where he was staying, that was fine. He didn't have to take Scott down with him.

"You need to turn up your hearing aids," said Rozanov even more loudly, gesturing to his own ears. "I said, *we are next door neighbours*."

"Fuck off," said Scott, looking around in the hopes that nobody was paying attention. "Jesus, Rozanov. Why don't you take out an ad in the paper?"

"An ad in the paper?" said Rozanov, delighted, and Scott realized too late that he'd just given the guy more fuel for his dumb *Scott Hunter is middle-aged* bit. "Hunter, we have internet now. You can get news on your phone, you know? Don't have to read little print. Can make it big for your old eyes, yes?"

Scott grabbed his suitcase and wheeled it towards the elevator before Rozanov could make any more announcements about where horny girls could come harass them this weekend. But Rozanov caught up with him and ducked into the elevator just as it closed.

"Is actually good thing you are losing your hearing," said Rozanov as the elevator started to ascend. "Will be helpful for you when you need to sleep through all the moaning coming from my room."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Scott said, shouldering out of the elevator when the doors opened again. "You're not so shitty in bed that women actually cry, right?"

"Ha," said Rozanov, pleased to have Scott fighting back. "No, they cry because they know they will never have sex like this again."

"That would make me thankful enough to weep too," Scott said, and closed his room door behind him before Rozanov could think of a response.

Scott had hoped the rookies were just having a dumb party when Rozanov skated by the Team North America bench and stage-whispered his room number to Shane Hollander — 1221 — but no such luck.

For an upscale corporate hotel, the soundproofing was really shit.

Scott wasn't *trying* to listen. He was actively trying *not* to listen, in fact. When he first heard Rozanov's door open and close, then the rise and fall of two men's voices, Scott planted his ass on his hotel bed and turned on the TV immediately.

He didn't need to know what passed for exciting illicit gay rookie sex, and he didn't want to waste any energy worrying about how fucking obvious the pair of them were being. They probably had no idea that they were lucky it was Scott rooming next door to stupid Rozanov: he was the last person to consider outing anyone else.

But then the show Scott was watching went to commercial, and it was the dumb Geico gecko, and Scott thumbed the mute button without remembering why he had the TV on to begin with.

Something indistinct, low. Rozanov.

A dildo.

That was Hollander. Gross.

More rumbling that didn't cut through as cleanly as Hollander's indignant-sounding baritone.

Then: *Nooo, Hollander, I want to fuck you.*

Jesus Christ. Scott went to unmute his TV, then realized that this might alert the pair to the fact that Scott could hear them. Fuck.

He left the TV on, then got up and went into the bathroom with the vague idea of taking a shower.

But the vents were connected or something, because his eavesdropping problem was worse now.

—*with Scott Hunter next door*

—like mating call

Nope, nope, nope. Scott went right back out into the hotel room and dug around for his iPod and headphones. Sat on the far side of the room and blasted Arcade Fire for himself. Breathed deep and tried with every fibre of his being not to think about the complete morons thinking they were being discreet, fucking at an All-Star event in a hotel with every top athlete in the league, not to mention a ton of the NHL's top brass and a shit-load of gossipy, obsessed fans.

Finally, the second slam of Rozanov's door reverberated through the corridor outside, and Scott breathed a sigh of relief.

Someone should probably talk to these dumbasses before they outed themselves and fucked their careers irretrievably just because they were horny idiots.

Scott was *not* that somebody.

June 2011 - Las Vegas

He just wanted some air, that was all. The ballroom was stuffy, and there was a really cute cocktail server, and if Scott didn't clear his head a little, he was going to do something really stupid like —

Like make out with another guy, out in the open, on the fucking *rooftop of the hotel that was hosting the NHL awards*.

Scott froze in horror. Rozanov and Hollander.

Again.

He pivoted on his heel and went right back into the building.

Seriously: absolute *idiots*, both of them. They were *not* Scott's problem, but they were definitely their own worst enemies.

October 2013 - Admirals @ Boston

Fuck Ilya Rozanov.

Scott genuinely hoped that the guy got what he deserved.

October 2013 (the next day) - Admirals @ Montreal

For a second, it didn't even make sense: Shane Hollander didn't chirp the other team.

In fact, Shane Hollander made a point of talking to everyone on the other team, even in regular season games where there wasn't a handshake lineup: going down the hallway by the

guest locker room and saying *good game* with a perfect, sportsmanlike nod at every player he passed. He said it in French to the francophone guys on the Admirals' team, like he was an Air Canada flight attendant seeing you off the plane: *good game, good game, bonne game, bonne game, good game, merci d'avoir choisi de jouer contre les Métros* thank you for choosing to play the Metros, thank you for flying with Hollander Airlines.

But here he was, Mr Most Gentlemanly Player himself, holder of the fewest penalty minutes in the Eastern Conference, saying *Hope next time we play, you decide to show up*, and fucking *spitting* on the ice at Scott's feet. He even had a dumb little self-satisfied smile on his boyish face, like a sixth grader who'd just figured out how to bully other kids.

On top of a humiliating loss, it was absolutely too much to take from Shane *'I Have a Dildo'* Hollander. Scott didn't even think, just fired from the hip.

And it fucking *landed*.

Hollander was shit at fighting — hadn't had much practice, probably — but the ref had to pull him off Scott, Hollander still hissing and swinging like a scruffed kitten.

Scott had a split lip and a twinge in his right wrist, but it was nothing compared to the swoop in his guts when his brain came back online and he realized that it wasn't anger he saw in Shane Hollander's wild eyes.

It was terror.

The kid was terrified.

As Scott trudged back to the locker room, ice pack to his mouth, he thought about his smoothie barista — Kip. Wondered, for the millionth time, whether he'd ever gather the nerve to ask him out.

Probably not.

God, he would *never* have the guts, would he?

He wasn't any better than Shane Hollander. He was probably worse, actually — at least Shane was out there *being gay*, even if it was apparently also his deepest darkest secret. Even if he was stupid enough to be fucking that complete asshole, Ilya Rozanov.

Fuck it. Scott was going to nut up and ask Kip out. He was going to do it.

Probably.

November 2013 - New York City

"So, who else is there?"

Kip was naked, which was distracting even when they'd literally just had sex. Scott was barely listening, too busy looking at Kip's legs.

Scott fucking *loved* all the ways Kip clearly didn't have a hockey body. He was like a well-loved sleek house cat among mangy feral farm cats: soft skin and hair, no weird scars, all his original teeth, and these legs that were like. Normal man legs. Hairy and strong but not trained in years of propelling a heavy body at lightning speed up and down the ice. Not lumpy and knotted with tough muscle.

"Hm?" said Scott, realizing he'd already forgotten what Kip was talking about. He tore his eyes away from Kip's feet, which always looked clean and rosy and neat, like they'd never walked through a communal shower in their existence. "Who else is there where?"

"In the NHL," said Kip, dimpling. "Who else is on, you know. *Our* team."

Scott stared dumbly at Kip. "Who else is gay?" he asked, a little shocked. "How the fuck would I know? We can't, like. Shoot the shit about it."

"Duh," said Kip, swatting Scott on the shoulder. "You don't have to *talk* about it to know when someone is, like. Cruising you. You're telling me nobody ever eyed you up during a face-off? I've seen you in your gear, you know. Any gay man standing a foot away from *that* is not going to be able to act normal about it."

"Trust me," Scott said, "it's not sexy when you can smell them."

"I've smelled you in your gear too," said Kip, leering a little, reaching out to jab his finger into Scott's armpit. "It's not a turn-off, okay? It's — manly."

"Gross," said Scott. "Better you than me." He rolled over, back flat against the bed, and stared up at his bedroom ceiling, trying to focus on what Kip was actually asking. "In boarding school —"

—"Sexy sweaty all-boys hockey boarding school—" Kip interjected, breathy and horny and playful.

"Not," said Scott, tucking his arms behind his head, "not sexy, trust me. God. The dorms smelled like — feet. Like old cheese. But also musty. And with like, an undertone of jizz."

"Unh," said Kip, pretending to be into it now, biting his fingertip and dimpling at Scott. "Go on. At your sexy porn boarding school?"

"At my smelly, fart-ridden armpit of a school," Scott said, loudly, "there were definitely, like, weird competitive circle jerks with the kids who were younger, but then as we got older, it was more about calling each other homos and cocksuckers and — worse. You know. They'd do shit like put gay skin mags in a kid's bed if they didn't like him, or stuff a dildo in his backpack and then laugh if he accidentally took it out in class."

"Where the fuck were they *getting* dildos and gay porn," Kip asked, wonderingly. "Is there some very open-minded sex shop in upstate New York that doesn't check IDs?"

"I'm guessing it was the same porn circulating in the school from twenty years ago," Scott said. "There were a lot of mustaches and huge bushes in the photos."

"Oh, so you *perused* the instrument of homophobic bullying?"

"Of fucking course I did," Scott said, laughing. "Shaking and panicking in a toilet stall, using a flashlight, under the cover of night. And then I jerked off about it, and *then* I spent two weeks being afraid someone had overheard me and like, *guessed* I was jerking it over grainy 1970s cock."

Kip was laughing so hard he was nearly tearing up. He wasn't that much younger than Scott, really, but sometimes Scott felt like they'd grown up decades apart: Scott in his weird hockey boarding school with a culture that hadn't changed in fifty years, rural and alone and the only kid who didn't have parents to go home to; and Kip in his loving, accepting New York middle-class liberal home, rainbow pins on his high school backpack, a dad who said, *you're always my Kip, it doesn't change anything* when Kip had come out to him years ago.

"God, I'm so fucked up," said Scott, when he managed to stop laughing. He turned his head on his pillow and kissed the closest part of Kip, which happened to be the tip of his shoulder. "I'm sorry if this shatters some fantasy of yours, but there's never been a moment of my hockey career where I would ever have felt safe eyeing up another player, on or off the ice. And I think that's a pretty universal experience, honestly."

Kip's laughter faded away, his expression settling into something a lot more pitying. "Maybe things will change someday," he said, slowly. He reached across and stroked a line down Scott's forehead, one finger: a blessing. "I can't see the current young generation being quiet about this, honestly. The kids are alright, you know?"

"That was a good movie," said Scott, quietly, closing his eyes. The kids *were* alright, he hoped. And they had Pride Nights, now, and openly gay staff working for the teams... things *had* to change, eventually, right? Someone would be brave and go first. It would have to be someone who wasn't a big star, just enough to cause a small ripple of adjustment that could grow slowly. Or maybe enough players would just come out in retirement, so it would stop seeming like such a big deal. "Yeah, you're right. It'll be some rookie from, like, Norway or — oh, *god*, I forgot."

"What?" said Kip, pulling his hand away, leaning in.

"Well, I don't *know* anything officially. But. I think there are a couple of the younger players that are — ah. I shouldn't say."

Kip frowned. "Yeah, you're right. You probably shouldn't say. If they're not out, I guess it's wrong to gossip about them." He paused. "Can you tell me how you know, without telling me who they are?"

"I overheard them fucking in a hotel," said Scott, grimacing at the memory. "And saw them making out, another time. They didn't realize I could see them, it's not like they were trying to get caught. They're just — around each other. A lot."

"Are they on the same team?" Kip gasped. "Wait, are they *Admirals*?"

"No, no," said Scott, and then made a face. "I really can't say anything else. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," said Kip, subsiding. "Aw, they're fucking, though. That's actually — sweet. And kind of hot."

"It's *so* not hot," said Scott, groaning. "Trust me. It's — it seems like it's just a fucking trainwreck waiting to happen. Like. Hate fucking to the power of a million, and then they're also being so fucking stupid and obvious about it." In the rush of ranting, Scott had forgotten to be cagey, but as soon as he realized, he could *see* Kip's big, smart, college-educated brain putting the pieces together.

"Hate fucking? Holy *fuck*," he said, on a long exhale. "Scott! Are you saying — holy *fuck*!!!"

Scott slapped a hand over Kip's mouth, panicking, and Kip laughed and snorted, ducking away. "Don't say it!" Scott said. "And I don't *know* anything. Maybe they were just... experimenting. Twice. Or three times."

"I'm sorry," said Kip, "I actually need to go into the bathroom for a second to think about this, I'm taking the lube with me, I'll be back in like three minutes," and then he was laughing even harder as Scott growled and leapt on him and pinned him to the bed.

"It's not hot," Scott said, urgently, trying not to laugh too.

"It's super fucking hot," said Kip. "Have you seen Ro—" Scott made an urgent noise of denial — "have you seen *that Russian guy's* ass? And the, uh. *Other guy*. The Canadian guy? Is so pretty. Oh my *god*, he's pretty. And his body is insane! Those ads in his underwear?"

"Okay, I'm getting jealous now," said Scott, on all fours over Kip. "Shut up about them or I'm going to think you want to trade me in for a younger model of gay NHL player."

"Well," said Kip, "geographically-speaking, you still have an advantage. Do you think you can speak in a Russian accent? That might clinch it for you."

"I am top scorer in league," Scott tried saying, in a terrible Soviet villain voice straight out of a movie.

"Never do that again," said Kip, "that was so offensive."

Scott laughed and fell down onto Kip, kissing him, his whole chest warm and liquid and so fucking gone for this guy.

February 2014 - Sochi

Hollander stood up in the middle of the Chinese skater's program and left. He said something awkward about taking a leak, but really, he just booked it.

Carter hooked a thumb at Hollander's empty seat. "He's weird, right?"

"I think they forgot to install the personality chip at the Canadian hockey player factory," Scott joked.

"Nah, he used up all the slots on hockey skills," said Carter, shaking his head, then whistled low as the Chinese skater completed a gravity-defying leap.

Scott gave it a minute to make sure Carter was engrossed in the skating again, then glanced up at the highest tier of the arena, in a direct line of sight from their seats.

Hollander was leaning on one pillar, Rozanov on the other. They weren't rookies anymore; maybe they'd actually learned a little discretion somewhere along the way. Anyone who spotted them might still think it was weird to see the two of them hanging out, but at least they were keeping their distance. Rozanov wasn't facing Hollander, arms folded protectively, scowl visible even at this distance.

It looked, in fact, a lot like Rozanov was pissed off that Hollander had approached him.

And given that this was Russia, Scott couldn't blame the guy.

Eventually, Hollander left Rozanov alone. A few minutes later, he reappeared in the section where Scott and Carter were seated. His shoulders were slumped. He looked like a small sad lamb in his white Team Canada fleece.

He wasn't Scott's problem.

Scott cleared his throat and leaned over a little bit, speaking low. "You okay?"

Shane gave Scott a big-eyed look of surprise, then tried — badly — to cover it up as nonchalance. "Yeah, why?" he said. "I'm fine."

"Nothing," said Scott, and patted Hollander on the shoulder. "Nothing, man."

Hollander nodded, fixing his gaze carefully on the ice, acting like he gave a shit. Acting like Scott couldn't see how his eyes were a little too wet, his lower lip a little too soft.

He wasn't Scott's problem.

But god, Shane Hollander could do way better than Ilya Rozanov.

June 2014 - Las Vegas

"I need to get drunk," Scott told Benny.

"We all need to get drunk," said Benny, who didn't even drink. "Can't believe they gave him MVP."

"Nah. He carried that team to the Cup," Scott said, throwing back the last of his beer. "I mean. They sucked before he joined them."

He looked across the room to see Rozanov in his glory, carrying his stupid trophy around like a newborn baby: rocking it, kissing it, even holding it up on his shoulder to burp it.

It was almost enough to distract Scott from the way he palmed off a hotel room key to Shane Hollander when Hollander came over to offer his stiff awkward Canadian congratulations.

"So *that's* still happening," said Scott, sighing.

"What's still happening?" said Benny, looking around, confused.

"Nothing," said Scott, because he could hate Rozanov all he wanted, but he still didn't want to out the bastard, or let Hollander get caught in the crossfire.

He waved to get the attention of the other Admirals gathered at the table. "Hey, I'm going to get a round of shots, who else is in? On me!"

"It's an open bar, you cheapskate," Carter yelled.

"None for Carter, got it," said Scott, rising.

Scott got drunk.

"Take my phone away from me, Benny," he said to Eric, when he knew he was about half an hour away from leaving an extremely bad drunk voicemail in Kip's inbox.

They were still seeing each other, but things had cooled a lot. Slowed a lot. Scott didn't get to wake up with Kip in his bed, most mornings.

Kip wanted Scott to meet his dad.

Scott was scared: scared to do it, scared what would happen if he didn't do it.

I love you too much to walk away from this, Kip had said, last time they tried to talk about it. *But there's a time limit, Scott. There's gotta be.*

"Tick, tick," said Scott now, head lolling. "Running out of time."

"You calling me old, Scotty?" said Eric, all good nature. "Come on, buddy, let's get you up to your room."

"Keep my phone, though," said Scott. "Don't — don't answer it. Okay?"

"I won't answer your phone," said Eric, heaving Scott to his feet. "You'll get it next time, okay? Next year it'll be you up there."

"Someday my prince will come," said Scott.

Eric just laughed.

January 2015 - Columbus

It was Scott's first year being named an All Star Game captain, and the league was doing a dumb fake draft thing where Team Hunter and Team Pierce had to take turns picking their teams from the list of players. It was, basically, PE class for millionaire sports stars; the only difference was that the last pick in the draft was getting a new car as a consolation prize.

Scott and Jake Pierce were both centers, and both of them had assistant captains on the d-line, so it made sense to nab their wings for their starting line before worrying about depth at center.

Once that was done, though, Scott and Jake were both staring at the names in front of them: both Hollander and Rozanov were shoo-ins for fifth and sixth picks, but in what order?

Luckily for Scott, it was Jake's turn to pick, so the choice was nicely out of Scott's hands. After a short conference with his two assistant captains, Jake made his announcement: "Ilya Rozanov."

"Yessss," said Breezy, who was one of Scott's assistants. It was unclear whether Breezy was celebrating not having to be on Rozanov's team, or looking forward to the chance to slam the motherfucker into the boards during the game.

"Shane Hollander," said Scott, also relieved. Hollander wasn't at his best on a second line, but he wouldn't be a dick in the locker room or spend the whole game chirping the other side.

Do you think they're sad not to be playing together? Kip texted later that day, because he was, in his heart of hearts, kind of a gossip queen. He'd never completely succeeded in pretending he didn't know what Scott had let slip about Rozanov and Hollander.

I'm not sure Roz has any 'feelings' other than spite?? Scott wrote back.

I think they get off on winding each other up in public and then banging it out in private, said Kip. *You're all, like, non-consensually participating in their weird edging and exhibitionism fetishes.*

Thanks for that image, Scott wrote back. *Jesus christ.*

Allow me to replace it with a better image? said Kip, and sent a half-dozen pics of him fresh from the gym, shirtless and sweaty and flexing in the mirror in his tiny shitty Brooklyn apartment.

Scott saved the photos to a locked folder (labelled *real estate ideas*) on his phone, deleted them from the text thread, and finished getting dressed for the mandatory bar schmoozing event happening downstairs at the hotel.

Kip

Kip: Dad says you should consider playing right wing and letting Hollander start at center

Scott: Noted. Heading down now, radio silence for a bit. Love you.

Kip: Love you, Special Agent Hunter

Things were in a good place with Kip lately; Scott had finally met his dad during the previous summer. He'd never met a guy's parent before. It didn't tend to come up when you had random hook-ups in places where nobody knew what the NHL was. Kip's dad was a nice guy, a normal guy, if maybe understandably a little wary of the whole situation.

They went over to Kip's dad's house for dinner every few weeks now, and Scott had mostly stopped dressing like the Unabomber for the car ride over. Kip's dad had a garage in the back of the house, which opened into his backyard. It was private enough.

It had helped, anyway, meeting the guy; Kip seemed happier than he'd been in months. All his loved ones, his dearest people, were finally in on the secret.

"Not a secret," Kip would have said, if Scott used that word. "It's *private*, not *secret*."

The distinction didn't mean much to Scott, who still had regular nightmares of being outed. But it mattered to Kip, so 'private' it was.

Team Hunter was getting ready for the game, and spirits were high in their locker room. Nobody took All Stars too seriously, and certainly nobody was willing to go hard enough to risk injuring themselves or another player in January of the regular season. Scott was trying to be a relaxed sort of captain, though it certainly didn't come naturally to him. He scanned the locker room, checking to see if every player was here.

"Where's Hollander?" he asked Dajenais, the big Montreal defenseman.

"*J'te gage qu'y est aux bécosses* I bet you he's on the toilet," said Dajenais. "He's always on the shitter right before a game when he's up against Rozy. I think he gets nervous."

Scott checked his watch: five minutes. He wanted to give a little friendly pep talk to the team, but it would be weird to do it without Shane Hollander in the room. He sighed and headed to the toilets, where — sure enough — a solitary stall door was closed.

"Hollzy?" Scott called.

"Yeah?" said Hollander, startled. "Um. Just a minute?"

"You okay?" Scott asked. He didn't think JJ had been serious, but Scott didn't know why else Hollander would be shutting himself up in a toilet stall minutes before an All Star game.

"Yeah, yeah," said Hollander, and the toilet flushed. He emerged from the stall with pink cheeks and carefully averted eyes. "I think my, uh, latte this morning? Might not have been oat milk." He washed his hands, still rosy-faced, still not looking up. "Asian thing. I can't have lactose." The last statement ticked up sharply, was nearly a question. Scott had a feeling the actual question was, *Are you buying this?*

"Right," said Scott, feigning a sympathetic wince. "You okay to play? We can call it a lower body injury if you're not feeling up to it. I'm sure we can get the medical guys to sign you off."

"No, I'm fine!" Hollander said, voice pitched just a little too high. He finally looked at Scott and plastered on a forced boyish grin. "Ready to play. Let's go Team Hunter!"

He clapped Scott on the shoulder pads and led the way out of the bathroom.

"Hollander, you forgot your—" Scott started to say, seeing Shane's phone on the countertop, and then realized the fucking thing was unlocked and showing a message. "Oh, *jesus*."

Lily

Lily: we agree...first one to score in game gets to give first BJ tonight 🤪

Thankfully, Hollander didn't seem to have heard Scott calling after him. Scott gingerly flipped the phone screen-down and left it where it was, then paused to wash his own hands before he went back out to the locker room.

Before *every game* against Rozanov?

Kip was going to lose his shit over this.

Hollander scored first.

Scott really wished he didn't know why Rozanov was grinning over it.

July 2015 - Las Vegas

Scott wore his blueberry smoothie socks under his dress socks, which meant his shoes were pinching. He wasn't really all that likely to get an award tonight, but he was pretending the socks were for luck, anyway.

The truth was that the pinch of his feet was the closest he could get to having Kip here with him.

They didn't text when Scott was doing big work things with cameras and press everywhere. It was just smarter not to court disaster.

He was at a table with a bunch of other Admirals, as well as a few Raiders who had wandered over to chat Metro division shit. Thankfully, Rozanov wasn't one of them, but that big moose of a guy Marleau was here. He played defense for Boston and had for years, good enough to hold on even as the team continued to try and trade their way back into a line-up that put Rozanov to the use God intended.

Scott wasn't one for armchair diagnosis, but if he was going to tip off someone in the media about where to start looking for CTE in the NHL, he might start with Marleau.

But actually, Scott reflected, listening to the guy talk, it might just be what Marleau was like: an overly confident dumbass who spent a lot of time loudly telling everyone his thoughts on every subject of conversation, no matter how scant his own knowledge of the thing: from politics, to golf, to Grammy award winners, to —

"No, I'm telling you, Europeans are *weird* about armpits," he was saying now, to general laughter and outrage from the actual Europeans at the table. "The ladies don't shave anything! And those European dudes *like* it that way!"

"Just because the only European women that'll sleep with you are hairy beasts doesn't mean they're all like that," said Dubek, a defenseman from the Raiders. "Have you seen some of these models they have in, like, Croatia?"

"Okay," said Marleau, either missing Dubek's dig or just accepting it as truth, "but Rozy is a dog, right? Like, have you seen the guy in a nightclub? He can get it. Any ten he wants. He just winks at them and they're sliding off their bar stools, panties on the floor."

"That's my cue to go freshen up," said one of the Boston WAGs, rolling her eyes and departing, taking the few other women at the table with her.

Scott wished he could go with the WAGs without it being weird. Failing that, he wished one of the other guys would say something like, *dude what the fuck*, or *that's a gross way to talk about women*. They were responding loudly, some of them even protesting, but in that brotherly way that let Marleau think he was funny.

Scott couldn't be the one to speak up; he couldn't do anything that might make them turn on him, say shit like *what would you know about picking up women, we never see you doing that*.

"Pardon my French," Marleau persisted, ignoring the good-natured razzing. "I'm just saying, he gets the hottest girls."

"Jesus, does he let you watch?" hooted another guy. "Maybe he'd let you have the cuck chair if you're good."

"Very funny," said Marleau. He leaned on one elbow as if preparing everyone for a golden bit of gossip. "But this French Canadian girl he bangs all the time, Jane?"

"Montreal Jane," Carmichael said, nodding knowingly. "He's always texting that chick."

"Yeah," said Marleau, pointing at Carmichael. "So, once I accidentally saw a bit of a nude she sent him — just like, kind of the top of her leg and her hip? She was wearing these lacy panties, they were so hot. You could just see the edge of them. But she had the hairiest legs!"

Scott hastily took a swig of his beer to hide his expression.

"Rozy will fly to Montreal a day ahead of the rest of the team just to get his fill of that hairy chick before a game," said Marleau, shaking his head.

"Maybe she reminds him of Mother Russia," said Carmichael, which made everyone laugh and gave Scott the minute he needed to get a grip.

Lacy little panties.

Kip was going to love hearing about this.

Scott wondered: would Kip would wear lacy little panties if Scott asked?

November 2015 - Montreal

JJ Dajenais had a friend who had opened a new Haitian fusion restaurant called Le Tambour, and he was so excited about it that he invited both teams to come to the soft launch after the Admirals played the Metros.

Oh my god so jealous, wrote Kip when Scott realized he wasn't getting out of it. *Montreal food is next level.*

Scott sent back a heart react, though he wasn't actually feeling it. They'd been planning to FaceTime after the game, which was very transparent code for 'jerk off while talking dirty to each other ' and Scott was sorry to miss it.

But Kip himself seemed unbothered. *I have to get going on this paper anyway*, he added. *If they have that black mushroom rice stuff, have a plate for me.*

Scott sent back a thumbs-up emoji even though Kip always said *that's the most middle-aged emoji, you're so embarrassing, grandpa.*

The place was small, and felt a lot smaller with sixty big NHL players and thirty WAGs jammed into it. Everyone had showed, it seemed like: Scott stood in a corner and scanned the room, running down his captain's checklist of names.

It was good, probably, doing this sort of thing. Scott was a shit captain, really. He never had the guys over for dinner, he didn't know how to talk to the WAGs. Thank god for Benny and his wife and their big house out on Long Island. God knew what Scott would do when Benny finally retired.

"Scottyyyyy," someone was crowing from the direction of the bar. "Get over here! Shots! Shots!"

"Shots, shots, we're sixteen years old now," Scott muttered under his breath, but he plastered on a smile and went over anyway.

Dajenais had a way of bringing everyone into the party, unwilling or no, which had to be the only reason that Shane Hollander was rosy-cheeked and unusually chatty when Scott grabbed

the stool next to his.

"Have you tried the *griot* poutine?" he asked, shoving a plate towards Scott. "Oh my god. They fry the yuca in duck fat. It's so good."

"It looks good," Scott said, taking one of the chunky yuca fries, scooping up some gravy and pork as he pulled it free from the bowl. He took a bite and groaned. God, Kip was going to be crazy jealous when Scott told him about this.

Scott hated and loved this sort of thing; it was a weird private pleasure to imagine Kip being here with him, even if it pivoted directly into an aching regret that the closest they might get would be a cold, congealed Skip the Dishes order to a Montreal Air Bnb on a layover enroute to someplace less NHL-aware.

"This is so not on my performance plan," said Hollander, taking a neat forkful and stuffing his face, then washing it down with beer.

Scott let himself look sidelong at Shane, feeling safe with everyone kind of drunk and hyperactive around them.

God. He was actually so cute.

The narrow elfin face Scott had first seen when Hollander was drafted had gotten squarer, albeit only a little. There was now a shadow of stubble on his jawline, his upper lip. His nose was still perfectly straight, like a knife blade: a rarity in their sport. He also had nascent smile lines next to his eyes, suggesting the guy might actually do more than just play hockey and talk about playing hockey.

And, Scott reminded himself, apparently fuck Ilya Rozanov.

"It's good to cut loose, once in a while," said Scott, shaking himself away from that line of thought. He grabbed another fry, then signaled the (also very cute) bartender that he'd like a beer too. "Good for your team to see you cut loose."

Hollander just nodded, a little tip of his chin, threw back another few gulps of his beer.

"Do you want another, too?" asked the pretty bartender, who had obviously also noticed that Shane Hollander was cute as shit.

"Um," said Hollander, big-eyed, red-cheeked. "No, I — I shouldn't, probably."

"He'll have another," said Scott, intervening with a grin. "Shane here is cutting loose tonight."

"I'm not," said Hollander, strangled, like Scott had just offered him up as a party favor. "No — I really don't want another. Thank you."

The bartender pretended to pout, giving Shane a little dip of his thick lashes. "Change your mind, you know where to find me," he said, and moved down the bar to serve someone yelling for his attention.

Hollander's ears were as red as his cheeks, now. Scott tried and failed not to find this adorable. It was weird, this feeling; Scott didn't ordinarily go for hockey players, which was — a blessing, really.

Maybe it was because Scott knew that he and Shane had this secret in common. Even if Shane didn't realize as much.

Would it — would it be a terrible idea to let him know?

Scott and Kip very carefully didn't talk about this shit anymore, but earlier in their relationship, there had been a few months when Kip mounted a one-man campaign for Scott to come out to just *one* person. Just one!

"Hello?" Scott had protested. "I'm out to Elena, your dad, half your gang at the Kingfisher, that guy in your Expressionism seminar who thinks you're dating one of the Knicks."

But Kip had shaken his head. "Those are all *my* people, babe. I'm saying you need to tell one person from *your* world. You need to find out what that's like."

Scott had huffed, frustrated. "I know what it'd be like. It'd be like kissing my sponsorships goodbye and getting called a degenerate groomer by mouth-breathers across the country. I'm not just *trusting* someone with this secret."

That had set Kip right off. "It's not a secret. It's *private*. And I really think you'd be surprised by how good it feels to talk to someone."

Scott had returned, a little desperately, "I feel great about this! I love you! I don't need to risk everything just to maybe have this magical moment you so badly want me to have."

And they'd had to leave it there, because there wasn't anything else to say that wouldn't lead to a bigger argument.

Now, sitting in a Montreal restaurant with one of only two other queer players that Scott knew of, surrounded by drunk and distracted fellow hockey guys: this was maybe his chance to see if Kip had been right all along.

Scott opened his mouth. Closed it again. Eyed Hollander, a little wobbly on his barstool, fairly openly looking at the bartender's ass in his skinny jeans.

"Hey," said Scott. "Do you wanna get some air?"

Hollander pulled his eyes away from the bartender's ass, a little dozy. "I don't smoke," he said. "Smoking's bad for you."

"I don't smoke, either," said Scott. "I mean — actually get some air. Take a little walk? Clear your head?"

Hollander blew out a lungful of tension and slid off the stool, coming to his feet. "Yeah, yeah," he said. "Good idea."

They got their coats on and made a move. It took a little while to make it to the door, everyone wanting to stop one or the other of them, but finally they were outside on the sidewalk in the brisk Montreal November air.

There were a handful of players and WAGs smoking cigarettes right next to the door, and another larger group further away, not trying too hard to conceal the fact that they were passing around a joint.

"Let's go this way," Scott said, leading them the opposite direction.

"It smells like a skunk out here," said Hollander, waving his hand, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah, that's — that's what weed smells like," Scott agreed, before realizing that Shane honestly thought he smelled a skunk. He tried not to laugh, and failed.

"Oh," said Hollander, looking back over his shoulder. "They really shouldn't be doing that."

"Lucky we didn't see anything," said Scott, putting a hand on Shane's shoulder, steering him further down the block. "Right?"

"Right," said Hollander, though his face was showing his inner conflict about this declaration.

It wasn't until they'd gone another block that Scott felt his shoulders start to come down from his ears. They slowed their pace a little, and Scott shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. "You, uh. Got a couple good goals tonight," Scott ventured. Fuck. This wasn't how to start a coming-out talk.

"Nah," said Hollander, "just — some great assists."

"Yeah," said Scott. "Pike's solid."

"Hayd's awesome," said Hollander. He looked over at Scott. "You're staying downtown, right? I think I might head back home, I live near there. We could share an Uber?"

"Oh," said Scott, and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Was Shane Hollander coming onto him? Did Shane Hollander think *Scott* had been coming onto *him*? Fuck. Scott was so fucking bad at this. How did you talk about being gay? Scott mostly came out to other guys by, like, sucking their dicks. Kissing them in a dark corner. Not — whatever the fuck you did with guys you didn't want to fuck.

"I mean, if you wanted to head back to the restaurant, that's okay," said Hollander. "Just — I'm so beat. I don't normally drink, and I wanted to get in a run tomorrow morning."

That sounded *less* like a come-on. Scott took a risk. "Uh, yeah. No. Let's get an Uber."

Hollander was definitely not coming onto him. The situation was still super weird, but Hollander didn't seem to know it, judging by the way he immediately started telling Scott about his place downtown, how he'd bought the unit next door, how he might knock down the

wall between and combine them someday. But right now he was putting all his energy into this cottage he'd had built in Quebec.

"A cottage?" said Scott, when he managed to get a word in edgewise.

"Oh," said Hollander. "I guess — it's like a cabin? On a lake? It's kind of what we do in this part of the world, everyone has a cottage, and you go there in the summer. Mine is just down the road from my parents' cottage, actually. But I wanted something that was my own, you know?"

Scott wasn't sure if Hollander was just drunk, or if he usually got this amped up talking about real estate, but there was no denying that it was kind of adorable watching him describe the organic feel he'd wanted for the cottage, and how the architect had used charred Japanese wood as a link to Shane's heritage, but also because it was protective against the elements.

They got out in front of Scott's hotel — Shane was only a couple blocks away from his place, he'd walk from here — but then Shane stopped short and grabbed Scott by the arm before they could say goodnight, part ways.

"There are, uh," said Hollander, eyes wide, like a spooked deer. "*Girls*. In the lobby. Wearing your jersey."

Scott looked; sure enough, a gaggle of puck bunnies in red were gathered around a cocktail table by the door, giggling uproariously, drunk, shouting. "Fuck," said Scott. He craned his neck, trying to see if there was a way into the hotel through a parking garage or something. "*Fuck*." There didn't seem to be.

"I mean," said Hollander, "probably you can get by them. I usually just — do you have a hat? Put on a hat and just, like. Run."

"You said you live nearby?" Scott said.

"Yeah, I," said Hollander, stiffly, confused. "I do."

Scott checked his watch. The hotel would be closing down the bar soon. "Can I come kill, like, forty-five minutes there?"

"Uh," said Shane, though not quite in the *this feels sexually aggressive* way Scott might have expected. He looked at his own watch, then dug out his phone and thumbed through some notifications, tilting his phone up protectively so Scott couldn't see his screen. "Um. Yeah. Okay. I... I have a Wii? We could play a round of MarioKart?"

"Yeah," said Scott, his breath pluming out with his relieved exhale. "Yeah, sounds good." Nintendo was the least sexy gaming console. This was just — a captain-to-captain hang. A hockey brother solidarity thing. This wasn't weird.

And maybe, just maybe, Scott would find a way to tell Shane Hollander the secret thing they had in common.

"Okay," said Hollander. "Uh. This way, then."

Hollander's place was immaculate, chic, and masculine. Scott was impressed, though not as surprised as he might have been before he'd listened to Hollander talk about finding the right earth-toned upholstery for his sofa at the cottage.

"Do you want a tour?" Hollander asked. "Or — uh. I have ginger ale. I have...coke?" For some reason, this made him blush.

"Just — water?" Scott asked, still looking around. The place made Scott's Manhattan loft look tiny by contrast. It had *stairs*. "You think you need twice as much room?" he asked, gaping.

"Not now," said Shane, coming back over with a glass of water for Scott, a ginger ale for himself. "You know. Someday. If I have a family?"

"Right," said Scott, studying Shane's expression for any trace of discomfort, finding none. "You don't, uh — have a girlfriend right now?"

"Not right now," said Hollander. "You know how it is. We're on the road so much."

This was Scott's moment. This was it. He should open his mouth and say *Actually... I do have someone*. He stared at Hollander, his throat a knot, and felt the words as they got jammed behind his tongue, painful.

"I don't have a lot of time for dating," Hollander continued, almost like he was reciting a line he'd rehearsed in the mirror. Like he'd said it a lot. "I figure, the right girl will come along, you know? Happened for Hayden."

"Yeah," said Scott, and went over to look out the window at Shane's balcony, his view. There were two deck chairs out there, and an ashtray that had a smear of ashes in it, no butts. Tucked in one corner, Scott saw an abandoned can of coke. "You said you had a Wii?" Scott asked, pulling himself away before he could notice anything else.

His chest hurt. This was the stupidest idea he'd ever had.

"Yeah, I got it for one of the team dinners we had here," said Shane, going over and pulling a couple of remotes from his entertainment console storage. "Mostly we go to Hayden and Jackie's place, but I think it's important to have everyone here sometimes."

"You have the team over?" Scott looked around. The place was bigger than Scott's but it would still be packed if the whole team came in here. The kitchen was pretty tiny. "Just, like, pizza and a few cases of beer?"

"No, my mom and dad drive over from Ottawa and my dad makes a huge pot of chili," said Hollander. "My mom gets a keg from Dieu du Ciel — that's a really good microbrasserie here in town — and we set it up over there, and put a cooler with ice and Whiteclaws out for the WAGs. Pop for the kids."

Scott hadn't ever heard this: that Shane Hollander's parents were doing head WAG duties for him as the captain of the Metros. God, it was really *sweet*. And if anyone other than Shane fucking Hollander had his parents cook for the team, Scott knew they'd be chirped to death about it. But it felt unlikely, somehow, that anyone would rag on Hollander about this. He was too earnest, and good, and way too incredible at hockey.

"That's nice," Scott managed, trying not to frown as his brain struggled to piece together the whole picture. Shane Hollander, Canadian hockey hero, model son, wholesome captain of an original six team.

Hotel rooms and weird pregame sexts. Lacy panties and making out on rooftops.

The right girl will come along and first one to score in game gets to give first BJ tonight.

"Did you want to play?" Hollander prompted him, and Scott realized he'd probably been staring. "If we wait a little longer, those girls will have gone."

"Yeah, yeah," said Scott.

They played a few rounds of MarioKart, then Scott looked at his watch and said something about the time; it was probably late enough to risk the hotel again.

"Can I use your bathroom quick?" he asked, the beer from earlier now making itself known.

"Yeah, just — right there."

Scott went into the bathroom, flipped the lid on Shane Hollander's hotel-immaculate toilet, and absolutely refused to make eye contact with the one thing that seemed out of place in the little powder room.

Sitting on the back of the toilet tank — out in the open like a cat might leave a mouse it had killed — there was a scratched-up gold lighter, with Cyrillic script engraved down one side.

Scott never told Kip how close he'd come to telling Shane Hollander about them. It would only lead to another fight.

February 2016 - Jamaica

"I'm just so sad about my injury," said Scott, flopping down into the sand next to Kip. "If only I could be at the All Star Game in, uh—"

—"Winnipeg," Kip supplied, smugly.

"Winnipeg," said Scott, who really hadn't forgotten, but just liked this little comedy bit they were doing. "It's so unfortunate, I have to spend ten days on this private beach in Jamaica instead, with my hot PhD candidate boyfriend wearing his skimpy little whatever-the-fuck we're calling *this*—"

—"It's a *bathing suit*."—

—"This *excuse* for swimwear," Scott said, wincing playfully like he hated it, "drinking pina coladas and eating papaya and fucking him on every surface of our villa."

"You *could* fuck me on every surface of our villa," said Kip, dimpling, stroking a hand down over his own bare chest. "Except you have to rest that — I want to say shoulder? Elbow?"

"Wrist," said Scott, lifting his right hand up from the sand and flexing the joint in question. "You know what? It feels pretty good today."

"It's a miracle!" Kip shouted, laughing. "Quick, let's get you on a plane to Manitoba!"

Scott tackled him into the beach towel and relieved him of his tiny scrap of a swimsuit, giddy, in love, delirious.

Scott left a very generous tip for housekeeping when they were packing up at the end of the week.

The flight home was nonstop, which meant they couldn't risk traveling together. Scott sat three rows up from Kip, both of them in business class — Scott wasn't an *asshole* — and they used the airplane WiFi to chat back and forth, trading photos of their vacation, making little jokes about finding sand in various places, that sort of thing.

Kip

Kip: I think I have Elena sold on a friend vacation back to the same resort in a few months

Scott: Oh nice!

Kip: Probably after the season ends for you guys

Kip: If you want to come with?

Scott: ... weren't we talking about getting a place in the Catskills in July?

Kip: ...or we could go to Jamaica with all our friends this time?

Scott typed out "all *your* friends, you mean," and then backspaced.

That wasn't fair. It wasn't like Scott had anyone he could bring along. Holly and Eric loved to travel, sure, but he couldn't exactly ask them to come on a beach vacation with his former smoothie barista and pals.

Kip

Kip: Just say you don't want to go

Kip: It's fine

Scott: I didn't say that

Kip is typing...

Scott waited, but no answer came. The three dots vanished.

"It's not really fair when you..." No.

"I don't want to argue about this again..." Definitely no, and a sure way to restart that argument.

Scott sighed, backspaced, and typed again.

Kip

Scott: I love you

Kip: Love you too

Scott: Thanks for nursing me back to health. Wrist feels great 😊

Kip: 💖

Kip: I told you jerking me off was excellent physio

October 2016 - Boston

There was a huge fuck-off billboard in the arrivals area in Boston, and it was filled with a 20-foot tall image of Shane Hollander in his underwear.

Scott probably wouldn't have stopped to look at it, except Ilya Rozanov had stopped wheeling his luggage directly in front of Scott, and *he* was definitely gaping up at the ad.

"Oh," said Scott, when he'd managed to avoid running directly into Rozanov. He glanced around and noticed that there were several other Raiders visible in the vicinity. It made sense; Boston was arriving home after a road trip, and the Admirals were flying in at the start of their own series of away games — starting with the Raiders tomorrow afternoon.

"Watch where you are going," snarled Rozanov. "Time for cataract surgery, yes?"

"Nice to see you too, dickhead," said Scott, pivoting his suitcase, ready to go around Rozanov. He paused for a moment and looked at the huge mostly-naked image of Shane Hollander. "Something catch your eye?"

"No," said Rozanov. "Was checking the forecast." He gestured to the much smaller information screen next to the enormous two-story ad.

"Right," said Scott, and then they both pretended they didn't notice Rozanov adjusting himself in his suit pants. Gross.

Scott left him there, staring at Hollander with his sad Russian semi. There was a team bus to the hotel where they'd be staying, but Scott had a meeting with Gillette and his agent about the new sponsorship proposal and he needed to head straight there. For once, he was thankful for the NHL's dumb travel dress code.

Somehow, though, he wound up in the taxi queue behind Rozanov anyway.

"Don't you have like forty obnoxious sports cars?" Scott groaned when he realized this.

"You think I trust airport valet with my Spyder?" Rozanov asked, appalled.

"Stupid question, never mind," Scott said, and shuffled in behind Rozanov as the taxi queue got tighter and more aggressive in true Boston style.

Rozanov was already steadily ignoring him, headphones on, leaning on the handle of his suitcase and hunching over his phone.

Scott tried to ignore him right back, he really did. But then he thought about how Kip would light the fuck up if Scott had some fresh Hollander-Rozanov gossip to share, and — if memory served — Boston had actually played Montreal last night, so...

Scott shuffled a little closer and glanced over Rozanov's shoulder.

Sure enough, the text thread Rozanov had open was with Jane — the hairy lacy-panties French Canadian chick Marleau had mentioned.

Scott tipped his head and squinted lightly, made out the last text sent from Jane:

See you in a couple weeks

Rozanov seemed to be having some trouble composing a reply. As the queue slowly shuffled forward and Scott caught glances of the screen, he saw Rozanov type and then delete several different responses.

seems like long time, no?

And:

do u like the hotel in boston where u stay

And:

do u have any allergies

And, confusingly:

do u like tuna

All of these were rejected, though Scott couldn't begin to guess why. They were actually kind of surprisingly cordial texts, considering the source. Scott hadn't really thought about that before: that Rozanov might give any kind of a shit about Hollander's feelings, let alone what kind of food he liked.

The queue shuffled forward again, and Scott lost sight of Rozanov's phone when he huffed and shoved it into his jacket pocket briefly. They were nearly at the front of the line.

Then, just when Scott had given up on getting anything worth telling Kip, Rozanov pulled his phone out again, typed hastily, and sent the message:

Jane

Lily: next time we fuck, you are on top, I want to watch u bounce on my dick

Okay, yeah. That was more like what Scott would have expected of him.

Rozanov put his phone away, scowled over his shoulder at Scott one last time, got in a cab, and disappeared.

November 2016 - New York City

On Thanksgiving Day, Scott and Kip had the fight they'd been carefully avoiding for nearly three years. They had it in tight, teary voices, crowded together in the basement of Kip's childhood home, wary of Kip's entire family — chosen and blood — gathered eight feet above their heads, waiting for the two of them to come back upstairs with the folding table they'd been sent to find.

It was nothing that triggered it. Or rather, it was Scott bonking his head on a beam, and Kip laughing at him, and Scott not laughing along with him, and then Kip saying *I wasn't laughing because you were hurt, why would you say that* and Scott saying *I don't know why you say half the shit you say anymore* and Kip saying *what the fuck is that supposed to mean*, and it had gone on from there until it was jagged, sharp little stabs of sentences, things like:

"—being the *thing* you're ashamed of—"

and

"—pushing me towards this perfect life you have in your head, and it's fucking *childish fantasy*, Christopher!"

and

"—so afraid to risk anything at all, like you don't have millions in the bank, like you don't have millions of fans—"

and

"I can't keep doing this."

And, finally:

"We can't keep doing this."

Scott left the basement and walked right out the front door, so fucking thrown that he left his baseball cap, hoodie, everything. So thrown that he didn't even remember he'd driven over

until he was in a cab on the way back to his loft.

That was the start of the worst time in Scott's life since his parents died.

December 2016 - New York City

Scott was playing the best hockey of his career, maybe. It was the only time he felt right, being on the ice. He spent every other waking hour feeling like someone had skated over his guts and left him like that, shredded, bleeding, messy.

On the ice, he was grim, joyless, but also ruthless.

"You want to come out to our house for Christmas?" Benny asked in the locker room after they crushed North Carolina. "You got other plans again this year?"

The look on Benny's face suggested he could guess that Scott's other plans — the ones that had kept him from Benny and Holly's house the last two years — were emphatically fucked. Benny probably thought Scott had split up with the woman he was fucking. Benny probably thought Scott had been fucking a married woman or a movie star.

"Nah, I'm okay," said Scott. "Got plans."

"Oh yeah?" said Benny with a tight smile, like he was trying really hard to swallow Scott's bullshit. "Who with?"

"Just — training stuff," said Scott. "This is our year."

It had to be their year. Scott had given up fucking *everything* for hockey. Hockey was going to fucking well *give back*, now. Scott was bringing home the Cup.

December 2016 - Boston

Before the game in the guest locker room, an unexpected text:

Kip

Kip: Did you see this????

Kip: LINK >> [Is Rose Landry Dating NHL Star Shane Hollander?](#)

Scott hovered his thumbs over the keyboard for a stunned minute, his heart thrumming so fast his jaw ached. Before he could come up with anything to say, Kip texted again.

Kip

Kip: Just saw you are in Boston tonight and that made me think of our fave secret couple. Do you think she's a beard or are they in a polycule now???

Kip: Sorry that was probably weird for me to send out of nowhere

Kip: Fuck, I hope this doesn't fuck up your game

Kip: I'm sorry if this fucks up your game

Scott hurried to answer before Kip worked himself into an even bigger lather.

Kip

Scott: You're not fucking anything up

Scott: Just surprised to hear from you

He quickly snapped and sent a photo of his holey old blueberry smoothie socks. That was probably dumb to do. He didn't care.

Kip

Kip: You're still wearing them?

Kip: No wonder you've been on fire lately

Kip: I thought maybe you were doing better without me to distract you

Scott shook his head as if Kip could see the gesture.

Kip

Scott: Opposite of that. I'm a fucking mess.

Scott: I miss the fuck out of you, babe

Scott: Sorry I've got to get on the ice

Scott: I know this doesn't help anything

Kip: Sorry

Kip: Fuck

Kip: I fucking miss you too

The Admirals won, but really only because Benny was a machine in the net, and Rozanov was the biggest fucking mess on ice he'd ever been: sloppy, unfocused, missing passes and taking shitty ill-planned shots.

After the game, Scott couldn't hold back, giddy with victory and with the knowledge that Kip had texted him, that Kip thought of him.

That Kip missed him, too.

"Hey Rozy," Scott called. "Maybe you need to go fuck a movie star too, seems to be working for your buddy Hollander."

He'd honestly expected Roz to take a swing at him over this. Scott had maybe even wanted that, wanted to feel how fucking different he was from Ilya Rozanov and his horny, sordid hook-ups, the seediness of whatever Rozanov was doing to Hollander. Scott wanted to feel virtuous, lit up with how fucking much he and Kip loved each other, how much they endured to keep finding each other through all the shit the world threw at them.

What he got was Rozanov spitting wearily on the ice and looking up at Scott with his huge blue eyes, his downturned cupid's bow mouth. "Maybe," he said. "Yes. Maybe you are right."

And he skated away, shoulders low.

December 25, 2016 - New York City

They FaceTimed on Christmas Day, Scott in his lonely apartment, Kip crammed into his childhood bedroom. They'd been texting sporadically for a couple of weeks, alternating between silly, frothy exchanges about nothing, and slower, more painful conversations about how fucking hard it was to be apart.

"I'm sorry I kept pushing you," Kip said now, hugging a Power Rangers pillow to his chest. "I know I get impatient. I just — hit a wall, you know?"

"No," said Scott. "No, Kip. It was me. I get so scared. I let my fear be the only thing in the room. I have no right to make you live like this."

There was a long pause as they both digested this.

"Do you think," Kip said, then stopped. "Actually, no. I don't want to be the one to say this. You have to be the one to say it."

Scott took a deep breath. "I'm living half a life."

"Yeah," said Kip, so softly, his voice breaking over that small syllable. "My love. Yes."

"I want to stop doing that," said Scott, gaining momentum. "I don't want to be scared. I don't want fear to be the biggest thing anymore."

Kip nodded, blinking fast.

"How I feel for you is so much bigger than anything bad that might happen," said Scott. "Kip."

Kip sniffed. "And?"

Scott's heart was pounding, his breath like a knife. "And. I'm going to find the sunshine. I'm going to do it. I just — need a little time to figure it out. But I *will* figure it out, if I know it's to be with you. For real."

Kip nodded again. "Yeah, okay. I can — I can maybe work with that."

"Yeah?" said Scott, hearing his own voice pitched so high, it was almost ridiculous. "Can you?"

"Let's see how it goes," said Kip. "I'm willing to see how that goes."

January 2017 - Tampa Bay

Hollander and Rozanov were hanging out at the hotel bar.

That was weird enough that everyone else from the Eastern Conference kept looking over and making little *what the shit* faces at each other.

Hollander and Rozanov were *giggling* together at the bar.

It threw Scott directly back into that photoshoot when they'd first been drafted, those photos of the two of them snickering and grinning at each other on the ice.

"So weird," said Carter, glancing back over his shoulder towards the bar. "Have you ever seen them that close to each other without one of them slamming the other into the boards?"

"No, never," lied Scott. "Well, we all gotta grow up someday."

Carter looked personally offended at this.

"Not you, Peter Pan," said Scott, clinking his bottle against Carter's. "Don't worry, baby."

Kip called after the game, and Scott didn't retreat to his room to take it, or text that he'd call back later. He just ducked into a quieter part of the hotel bar and took the call.

"Hey, babe," he said, feeling daring as fuck.

"Oh my god," said Kip. "What the actual fuck is *up* with Hollander and Rozanov? Did you see that kiss on the ice?"

"Hey," said Scott, "I scored a couple goals, too."

"Sorry," said Kip, "I didn't notice, there was way too much repressed gay lust on the ice. It was clouding my view."

"At least some of that was coming from me, to be fair," said Scott. They hadn't fucked, still, since they had made up. Kip was setting the pace. Scott was mostly being patient about it.

"So are they actually getting along? Like, are they being friendly? Do you think Rose Landry knows that her boyfriend is having a little gay Florida fling this week?"

"Oh my god," said Scott, "you're such a drama queen."

This made one of the passing players turn his head and pull a face at Scott, who just winked back. Let him think what he wanted.

"I bet she knows," said Kip. "Rose Landry seems cool. I bet she has given that boy a hall pass to get railed until he cries. She's an ally. She's a friend to prostates everywhere."

"Okay," said Scott, shifting as his pants got noticeably tighter, "this is getting kind of intense. Either you need to stop talking about this, or..."

There was a pause.

"Or," said Kip. "I pick 'or'."

Afterwards, Scott went for a walk, needing to burn off the afterglow a little. The sun was setting and the night was warm. He stood and listened to the waves crashing down on the beach, then spotted two figures seated in the sand, maybe sixty feet away.

He glanced around, made sure nobody else was paying attention, then snapped a quick blurry zoomed-in photo, fired it off.

The response was almost instantaneous, a flurry of texts.

Kip

Kip: OH MY GOD

Kip: !!!!

Kip: IS THAT WHO I THINK IT IS

Kip: HALL PASS. I KNEW IT.

Scott laughed and shook his head, walking back towards the hotel, leaving Shane and Rozanov to it.

Watching the sunset together.

April 2017 - Los Angeles

"Turn on the game," said Kip when he called, sounding wrong.

"My game's not for a couple hours," said Scott, going for the hotel TV remote anyway.

"Pacific time, remember?"

"Not *your* game," said Kip. "Boston at Montreal. That game."

Scott found the game, and saw right away: paramedics on the ice, the rink cleared except for a blue-uniformed figure on a spinal board, and two refs holding back Boston's number 81.

"Holy shit," said Scott. "Do we know if he's okay? That's Hollander down, right?"

"That's Hollander down. We don't know anything yet," Kip confirmed. "Scott, they got a close-up of Rozanov's face a second ago. The guy looks wrecked. God, didn't his dad just die, too?"

"Is Roz the one who hit Shane?" Scott asked, confused.

"No, no, it was Cliff Marleau," said Kip. "Hayden Pike tried to rip his head off already. But Rozanov won't go to the bench. He's just — staying."

"Fuck," said Scott. In a flash, he remembered the two of them on the beach, at the bar in Tampa. Kissing on a rooftop. Snickering in still photos when they were teenagers. "Oh, *fuck*."

The paramedics got Hollander off the ice, the crowd applauded, and the commentators said a few slightly stilted things about how this probably ended the Metros' run at the Cup this season.

"Good news for Scott Hunter and the Admirals, I guess," said one of them. "This almost certainly means they'll have an easy ride through round one of the playoffs."

"Oh, fuck you," said Scott at the same time as Kip.

"God," said Kip, breathless. "Can you imagine? If that were you down there?"

Scott could imagine it all too well. Kip couldn't even come to the hospital to see him. He couldn't call anyone to find out how Scott was. Nobody in the whole Admirals franchise would know who Kip was or that he should be informed. He'd just be...trapped. He'd be in hell.

The kind of hell Rozanov was going to have to skate through for at least three more periods, not knowing if Hollander was okay. Not knowing if he was going to lose him.

"I think I need to go," said Kip, softly. "I think I need to go lie down. I feel sick."

"Me too," said Scott. "Kip. I love you."

"Yeah," said Kip, and hung up.

The Admirals' medical team coordinator wasn't in the office — it was after work hours in New York, of course — but Scott just texted a couple of people until he got a cell number for him.

"This is Scott Hunter," he said, when the guy — Joe — picked up.

"Uh — hi?" said Joe, startled-sounding. "Is there — aren't you playing in LA tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm calling from LA," said Scott, "but I wanted to ask you how I change my emergency contact. Right now I think it's Holly Bennett? But I want to change it."

"There's a form," said Joe, flummoxed. "I can email it to you."

"I have to get to the arena and I want this changed effective immediately," said Scott, shaking his head. "Listen: write this down. Got a pen?"

"I — yeah. Hang on. Yes. Got a pen."

"My emergency contact is Kip — Christopher, his full name is Christopher — Grady. I'll text you his phone number. He's the one you guys need to call if something happens to me. Got it?"

"Uh, yeah, I'll — tomorrow, I can send you the form, okay?"

"No," said Scott. "Tonight. Please change it now."

"Scott, is something — are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Scott, though he realized now that his hands were shaking. "Please make that change."

"I will, uh. I will take care of that right away."

"Is there — do you write down, like. His relationship to me?" Scott asked, even as his breath got faster.

"Yes," said Joe. "Usually, yes, that's on the form. Should I put — friend?"

Scott swallowed hard. Joe had figured it out, then. "No," he said. "He's my partner. My romantic partner." He was going to throw up. Fuck.

"Got it," said Joe. "I'll make a note of that. On your file. Which isn't — public knowledge. It's internal use only, for the medical team."

"Okay," said Scott, in a guilty grateful whoosh. "Thanks, Joe. Sorry to bug you."

There was a bit of a pause, and then Joe said, "It's my pleasure. Genuinely."

April 2017 - New York City

Elena at least waited until Kip went to the bathroom before she said it. She was comfortable on Scott's couch, drinking Scott's wine, calmly and effortlessly destroying Scott and Kip at Ticket to Ride between sips.

"You're not winning any prizes with me for coming out to your team's medical director, just so you know. That's not what Kip needs."

Scott felt this was undervaluing his gesture significantly, but also knew that Elena pretty much only put up with him because she loved Kip. "I'm working on the rest," Scott said, instead of arguing. "After the playoffs, I'm going to come out to my team. I just — I can't be a distraction for them right now. But win or lose, I'm going to tell my guys. About me, and about Kip."

"Yeah, I heard," said Elena, with — okay. Some justifiable skepticism, maybe.

"I'm coming on the second annual friends trip to Jamaica," Scott added, even though Elena had heard this already too. "I even booked the same flights. Adjacent seats!"

"Wow," said Elena. "And I thought romance was dead."

Scott sighed and sagged back into the couch cushions, pretending to shuffle his train cards. He had twenty of them, and only two pinks. He needed five pinks if he was going to complete his route. "You won't be happy until I'm on my knees giving him a blowjob at center ice, will you?"

"Babe, do I need to keep reminding you? I'm not the one you're trying to make happy," said Elena. "Are you drawing cards or what?"

"If you keep going, you'll have more cards in your hand than trains on the board," said Kip, returning from the bathroom. He squeezed into the space between Scott and the couch back, hooking his chin over Scott's shoulder, shamelessly looking at his cards. "Why haven't you taken that blue route yet?" he asked in a stage whisper. "If you don't grab it now, Elena's going to block you, see?"

"Oh shit," said Scott, seeing, and hastily claimed the blue route.

June 2017 - New York City

Game three, semi-final series against Boston, and it was looking more and more like a sweep. It was the third period and the Admirals were up by three goals. Overtime seemed less and less likely by the second.

Scott came off the ice and chugged gatorade, his lungs burning with exertion. In the box next to him, Rozanov was in a similar state, panting with his mouth open. He looked exhausted, not just in the playoffs way — bearded, haggard, losing muscle — but in a way that showed up in the purple smudges under his eyes, the whites of his knuckles when he pulled his gloves off.

"Good hustle," said Scott, leaning over to shout at him. Usually he wouldn't bother to try and say nice things to Rozanov, because it was like trying to cuddle a feral cat. All you'd get for your trouble was rabies.

But Scott felt for the guy. He'd been visibly off his game since Hollander's injury knocked the Metros out of the wildcard spot for the playoffs. And he just looked so fucking *done*.

Rozanov used his glove-free hand to give Scott the finger.

Nice.

Scott looked up in the stands out of habit, sighted Kip and Elena and Kip's dad immediately. Gave a little wave.

Scott looked back over to see that Rozanov had clocked this.

"My family is here," Scott said, though Rozanov hadn't asked, would never ask.

"I thought you were sad orphan," said Rozanov.

"I thought *you* were a sad orphan," said Scott, and great. Now they were chirping each other for *this*?

"I am," said Rozanov, jamming his mouth guard in, tugging his glove back on, hopping over the boards for the shift change. "Saddest orphan in NHL. I win. You lose."

"I'm so glad you're gonna win at *something*, you motherfucker!" Scott hollered after him as he sped off, grinning like an idiot even as one of the refs skated over to warn him to shut up.

Goddammit. Scott was starting to *like* Ilya Rozanov. This was all Shane Hollander's fault.

June 2017 - New York City

[Drafts Folder]

To: admirals_team_priv@theadmirals.com

From: shunter@theadmirals.com

Subject: A personal message

Hi everyone,

I'm writing this as we head into the finals, but I'm planning to send it as soon as the series is over, one way or another. No matter what happens between me writing this and sending it, know that I'm super proud of all of you.

There's something I've wanted to say for a long time, and maybe it's chickenshit to put it in a group email instead of telling you to your faces, but at least this way you can all react in your own way, in private.

Here goes: I'm gay.

I'm telling you this now for a lot of reasons, but mostly because I owe it to my partner to be honest with my hockey family about who I am and what's most important to me.

I don't feel the need to tell the whole world at this time, and I'd really appreciate it if you could respect my privacy. This isn't a secret, to be clear. It's just not a public thing for me right now.

Anyway, I wanted you all to know who to blame for my lucky blueberry socks. He says he's trying to find me new ones but I'm pretty sure it's scientifically necessary to keep wearing the old smelly ones. Especially if I'm sending this after we — never mind.

Don't want to jinx us.

You've got my number if you want to talk. Thanks for reading.

~ Scott

p.s. His name is Kip and he makes the most bomb-ass fettuccine, you're all invited over this summer to try it out

[Message deleted.]

Late June 2017 - Las Vegas

Scott had wanted Kip to come to Vegas, obviously, but Kip was determined to write three chapters of his dissertation over the summer and he had gotten an RA position that meant long hours anyway, especially when he had to make up for the planned week in Jamaica next month.

Maybe it was also his way of saying *that's enough of the spotlight for now, thanks*, which Scott could definitely understand.

Kip had had to move in with Scott almost immediately after the Stanley Cup kiss heard around the world; it was less than twenty-four hours from Scott slipping him the tongue on the ice at the Garden, to some fucking lunatic chasing Kip up the steps into his shitty Crown Heights walk-up.

That was just the tip of the crazy-town iceberg; Scott wasn't exactly complaining about Kip sleeping in his bed again on the regular. But they could both have done without the online harassment, the shitty media commentary from the right. And the weird tense meetings with the NHL's marketing department that were a mix of performative allyship and tentative requests for reassurance that Scott wasn't going to start posting selfies in fetish gear to his official Insta.

"Does this mean you won't take that sponsorship offer from the bespoke nipple clamp guys," Kip had said playfully, during one of the moments where they were finding the humor in their fucked-up situation.

"I'm a man of the people," Scott had said, pinching Kip's tit. "Mass-market nipple clamps or nothing."

"So brave," Kip had said, a little too seriously, and did that thing where he looked at Scott like he had hung the moon.

It was all worth it.

Obviously.

"Hunter," said someone in a low voice now, as Scott turned away from the bar with his beer. It was Ilya Rozanov, looking serious for once. "Congratulations," Rozanov said, nodding at

the trophy plaque Scott had tucked under his arm.

"Oh," said Scott. "Thanks."

"I wanted to say," said Rozanov, glancing around like a reflex, "it was good. What you did."

"Yeah," said Scott. "I mean. Thank you. But I didn't do it to be good, or whatever."

"Yes," said Rozanov. "You did it for Kip. You said in your speech."

Scott nodded. It was still so weird to hear other players say Kip's name.

"You are keeping playoff beard?" asked Rozanov, gesturing to his own clean-shaven face.

Scott palmed his short beard. He hadn't thought about it, much. Kip liked him with a beard. He liked having beard burn on his thighs. "Probably," he said.

"Is good look on you," said Rozanov, and his eyes did that little dart around them again before he added: "Hot."

"Thanks," said Scott, thrown. "Uh."

"Not my taste, of course," said Rozanov, dismissive.

"Yeah," said Scott. "You're not a fan of beards, I remember." He just barely resisted adding *like Rose Landry* to the end of his sentence.

"Anyway," said Rozanov, a little muscle flickering in his jaw. "I buy you a drink. To thank you. I think what you did will make a difference."

"It's an open bar," said Scott, "and I literally just got a beer."

Rozanov's tongue clicked, a crooked smile appearing on his lips. He moved to lean on the bar next to Scott, looking around the room. "You Americans are so rude."

"Maybe you're just spending too much time with Canadians," Scott dared to say.

Rozanov shot him a quick darting look, his smile faltering for an instant before blooming back, even bigger. "Not nearly *enough* time," he said. He pushed off the bar and walked away without another word, hand already in his pocket, pulling out his phone.

Scott watched him stalk out of the room, seeking privacy, and relished it when he took his own phone out and texted Kip a selfie. No hiding.

Wish you were here. Miss you. Love you.

The answer was swift: a selfie of Kip on their couch, glasses on, hair pulled back with the little headband he wore when he did his bedtime skincare routine. Cozy and dear and so fucking perfect.

Love you too. Can't wait til you're home.

July 2017 - Jamaica

"Oh my god," said Kip, sitting up on his beach lounge by the pool, pushing his sunglasses up on his head. He was holding a trashy sports magazine, one he'd bought at the airport in New York purely because there was a flattering paparazzi photo of him on the cover. "Did you see this?" He shoved the magazine at Scott, pointing at the bit of text that had caught his attention.

***Big swing for hockey's worst team?** Ilya Rozanov was spotted in the Ottawa airport by an eagle-eyed fan last week. The long-time star of the Raiders had a poor showing at the end of last season with a semi-final shut-out by the Admirals. With one year remaining on his starter contract, it looks like the Russian phenom is looking north of the border for his next move. The Cens have the salary cap space to nab this top player, but the jury is out on whether there's room for Rozy's notoriously big ego on the bench of the NHL's bottom-ranked team.*

Scott looked at the grainy fan photo of Rozanov in the Ottawa airport: tank top, shorts, baseball hat, sunglasses. Hiding in plain sight. Probably fucking terrified at the idea of being noticed.

"Ottawa is close to Montreal, right?" said Kip.

"Pretty close, yeah," said Scott. His chest was aching, just a bit. He sighed and passed the magazine back to Kip. "Have I told you how glad I am that you aren't a dumb hockey player?"

"Yeah," said Kip, not really listening, rereading the little article. "I have all my original teeth and everything. Sexy."

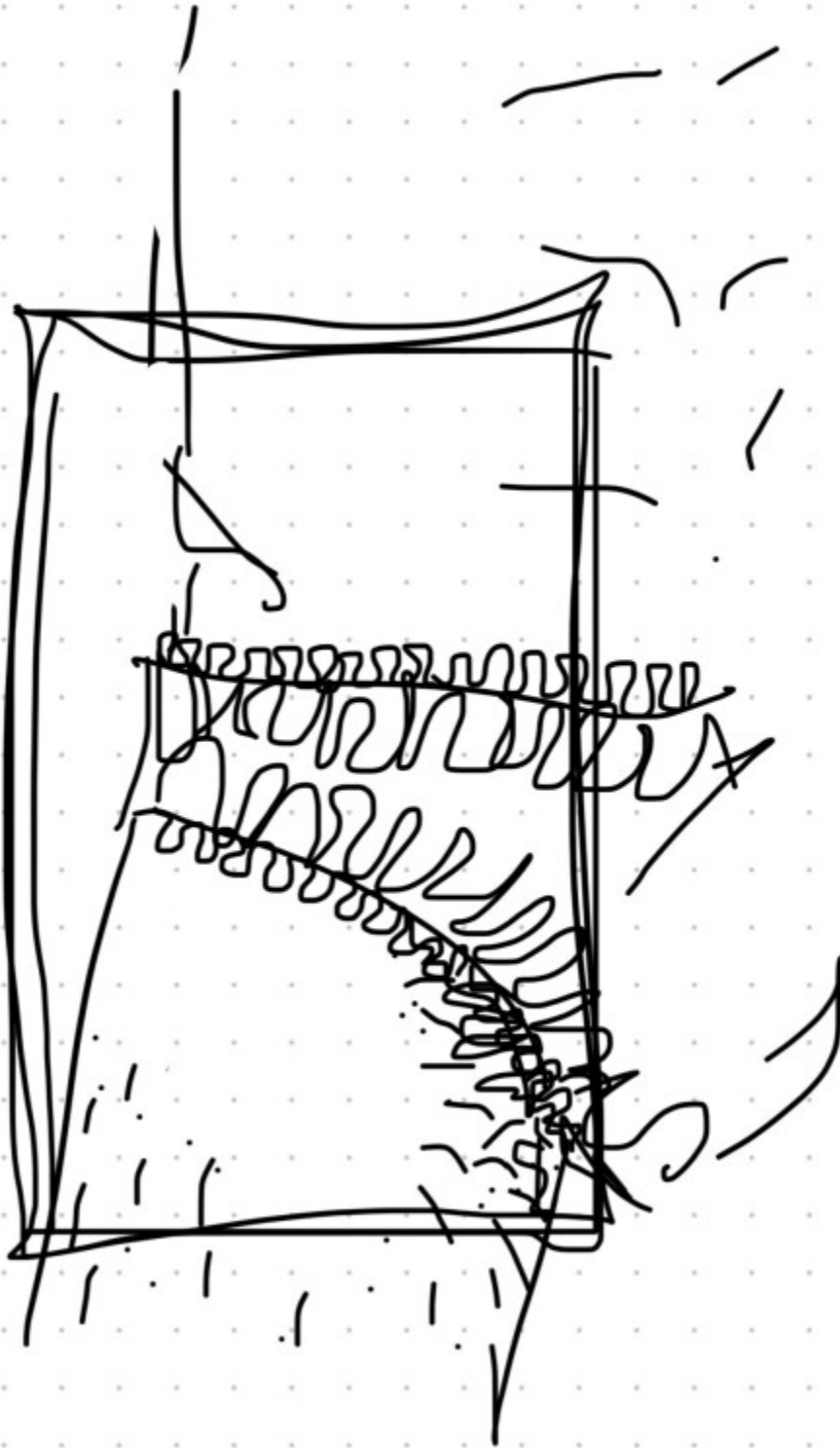
"Lucky me," said Scott, lying back on his deck chair, grinning. "Lucky, lucky me."

End Notes

As you have probably noticed, portions of this fic diverge from the Game Changer book, which obviously mirrors bits of the plot I've used here. This is partly because I wanted to explore the continuity mismatch with the TV series where the Skip relationship gains more than three years in its chronology as contrasted with the book. Canon is a framework, not a prison! So here we are.

Along the same lines, I have been creative with what bits of TV canon, book canon, and real world NHL structures I have incorporated. In particular, I wanted Hollanov to have a more extensive (and filthier) texting history. This led to Xen helpfully sketching me a diagram of what Shane could text Ilya that might be mistaken for a photo of a woman if you are a dumb enough guy.

Lo!



(This may or may not be leading to a sextra about Shane wearing panties.)

Thanks for coming along on this unexpected Skip journey with me.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!