

[SEPT 14, 2016, 8:49 AM]

The ice is slick and bright, with no flaws at all. Red and blue markings beneath the surface lie untouched, their color a stark contrast to the white. The boards have been painted over.

There's no evidence of pucks, sticks, or players. It's a clean slate for a new season.

Footsteps, accompanied with a gentle thump of a hockey stick, approach the ice. A man, six foot and four inches, naturally brown skinned, and all geared up in blue, carefully opens the door to the ice. He inhales deeply, admiring the view. As he exhales, his dark eyes watch his own breath make tiny clouds.

Laughing, he kicks his feet over the ledge and onto the ice with a soft scraping noise. The player relaxes his grip on the stick and lets it fall to the ice with a loud clap that echoes around the empty arena. He then moves the blade to inspect the ice for dents or cracks.

Nope. It's *hard* ice. *Top notch* ice. *Million dollar* ice. He smiles, but not too wide.

"Angel Juan Manuel Holguín Sheppard, what are you doing?" A voice scolds with his full name, jokingly.

"Checking out the ice. I gotta make sure it's good and hard before I take it." Angel responds with a wink. "Isn't that right, Dylan, *mi gringuito*?"

"Don't call me that, Sheppy." Dylan responds, voice falling flat. He's not in gear, instead wearing a hastily put together outfit-- sweats and a hoodie, with the Wanderers' team logo plastered all over him. He stuffs his hands into his pockets.

Angel laughs and skates away backwards, keeping his eye on him. "Dyl, I'm just being honest."

"...You know, I, um, think I pulled a muscle." Dylan quickly changes the subject and avoiding eye contact. "I can't practice today, Sheppy. I'll be at the apartment. Get a ride from the Russian or something."

Angel frowns, watching his teammate walk away. *Lazy*.

Sighing, he skates back to the boards and dumps the bag of pucks on to the ice. Angel shoots one. It misses the net. The puck makes the first dark smear of rubber on the boards. He shakes his head and instead skates in circles, humming to himself.

It seems for a long while that Angel has the fresh ice all to himself-- who wants to go to an optional practice right after winning the fuckin' King Cup, anyways? But another player soon joins Angel, hopping over the short wall.

He's much shorter than Angel, suited more for speed than power. Dark brown curls stick out from underneath his helmet. He skates to a slow stop next to Angel.

"Hey, Zhenya." Angel greets, patting his back. "Is Jakey here, too?"

"Ah, no. Just me. Jakey Goldstrom too good for practice, yeah?" He mumbles back, giving Angel a tight lipped smile. "And I tell you, you call me Yevgeni. Not Zhenya."

"But we're friends!"

"No, we're not, Tiger." Zhenya says, holding back a laugh. He skates away, carrying a puck on his stick down the ice to go in for a shot.

"Whatever. Can you drive me home?" Angel asks loudly, stretching his arms with his stick behind his back.

"Boyfriend ditch you?" Zhenya asks back instead of giving Angel an answer. He roofs the puck in the net and skates back, a dorky grin on his face.

"Dyl's not my..." Angel starts, then shuts his mouth. He takes a deep breath, knowing full well that he's red as a tomato. "Shut up, Z, honestly."

"Will I be best man at Karr-Sheppard wedding?" The smaller teases, trying to stick his rancid glove up Angel's nose. Angel swats it away, scowling.

"Sheppard-Karr!" Angel corrects.

Zhenya blinks a few times, trying to process what Angel just said. Angel does, too.

"Did I just say that?" Angel mumbles, biting his lip.

"...I can drive you." Zhenya answers Angel's first question instead.

[SEPT 14, 2016, 11:02 AM]

"Why Dylan, anyways?" Zhenya asks, breaking the silence in the car. "What do you see in him?" Angel drums on the dashboard with his fingers, not quite sure how to answer Zhenya's question. There's just something about Dylan Karr that makes Angel gravitate to him. He can't answer with a yes or no, so he stays silent instead.

"I always think..." Zhenya starts, voice becoming low and accent becoming thicker. He sheepishly continues. "I thought he hates you. So why you like him?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just desperate." Angel shrugs. He leans on the window and stares at the open road.

"Explains a lot. Dylan's not handsome." Zhenya says, simply. "Skinny nose. Weird chin. You're out of his league, Tiger. You don't bother with him."

Angel turns his head and furrows his eyebrows at the other. "That's a little bit mean."

"He's mean to you." Zhenya pulls in next to a small townhouse and pulls the parking brake roughly. He sighs. "You never noticed? He's always hitting, always calling you bad things. Hates you."

The other shakes his head, hops out of the car, and walks around to the back to retrieve his bag. "That's part of hockey, Yevgeni. What does he even call me?"

Zhenya mumbles something, dropping his head. He twists his mouth, like the word was sour.

"What?" Angel frowns. He closes the trunk and goes up to the driver seat window.

He rolls down the window slowly. "You like Dylan, yeah?"

"Maybe?"

"He, um..." Zhenya hesitates. He opens his mouth and closes it a few times.

"What?" Angel presses.

"Whenever you call him a *gringo* or something like that, he calls you..." Zhenya lowers his voice and mumbles the word again, completely incomprehensible. "Under his breath, I mean." Angel stares at him. He knows that Zhenya would repeat himself louder if he asked, but he just lets it go. Forcing Zhenya to say something he doesn't want to would just make the entire situation uncomfortable for the both of them. Angel is pretty sure he knows what Dylan's calling him, but, like, Dylan can't mean it in *that* way, right?

"Okay." Angel says, dismissing him. "Thanks for the ride, I guess. Bye."

"Um, bye." Zhenya says, giving him that signature Zhenya Usula fake smile. "I see you later."

Angel just nods at him and walks up to the steps without looking back. Keys fumble in his hands as they shake uncontrollably. They drop. He's nervous. There's that rushing feeling in his veins.

He picks up the house key and tries to jam it into the lock. He misses, instead scraping the metal of the keyhole. The small, scratchy vibration of the key makes Angel cringe. Why is this so hard? It's a key and a keyhole. Angel tries again, gentler, and finally unlocks the door.

"Dyl, I'm home." Angel calls into the house. He kicks off his slippers and dumps his bag by the door. "Where are you?"

"Watching some baseball." Dylan calls back, voice muffled. "Come here, Sheppy."

"There's an Expos game?" Angel asks, approaching the large couch. He approaches the living room, but the couch is empty. "Where are you?"

"Here!" Dylan's voice calls, this time much closer.

"Wh--"

A huge force slams into Angel's back, making him fall onto the ground, yelping. Although smaller, Dylan managed to pin him down to the carpet. "Boo!"

"You piece of shit." Angel manages to curse the other, between shaky breaths. He manages to push Dylan off of him and straddles his hips, his hands trapping his wrists. *Is this really happening?*

Dylan stares back at Angel, eyes wide and lips slightly parted. Angel could feel the steady rise and fall of his chest.

"Dylan?" Angel murmurs, releasing Dylan's wrists from his hold and moving his hands to Dylan's shoulders. He leans in a little bit closer. "Can I?"

The other furrows his eyebrows, not sure what Angel is asking of him.

A voice in his head nags. *Do it. Just fucking do it, Angel.*

And so he does: A gentle kiss, on the mouth.

Angel holds his position there, sharing breaths and each other's heat, lying on the floor.

"No," Dylan mutters, striking Angel with such strength that Angel simply flops over, off of the other. He stands, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, and looks the other way. "You're disgusting. We can't-- no, Sheppy."

"What?" Angel softly says. His eyes strain hard to read Dylan's face. Sounds of the Expos game are drowned out by the silence Angel had created with a single touch. His vision blurs and darkens as he tries to stand and meet his eyes. He falls to the ground again. "Dyl?"

His head turns at his own name. Angel hears a short, sharp exhale-- a laugh? His hands clench into fists. Blue eyes, cutting like razors, burn right through Angel. "Don't 'Dyl' me, Sheppard. Fuck off. This is wrong, you know it's fucking wrong."

And so, he's left on the floor, alone. Forgotten, maybe. There's something dripping down his face. Blood? Tears? Both? Doesn't matter.

Zhenya was right.

[SEPT 15, 2016, 5:59 AM]

Angel's sleep is unsteady. He wakes at any small noise. A car roaring by, the wind blowing, an owl crying.

He's already awake when the sun rises.

The distinct sound of the front door creaking open jolts Angel into an alert state. He grabs his autographed Expos baseball bat as a weapon, but he cringes a little, imagining the expensive collectible breaking.

There's three soft knocks-- more like taps, really-- on his bedroom door. "Angel."

"...Jake?" Angel whispers, nearly hissing. He carefully places the bat back onto its stand. "Come in."

The door opens and the older player slips through. He closes the door behind him with his back, taking a deep breath. "Did you read any of my texts?"

"No, why?" Angel says, still sitting on his bed. He rubs his eyes.

"Do you even remember texting me?" Jakey asks, concerned, rather than his usual exasperation.

"No," He murmurs, frowning. He pulls a blanket to his shoulders, tightly wrapping himself up.

"You said you wanted to stay with me again because of whatever Karr did." Jakey says, lowering his voice. "And last night, your sister called me to make sure you have a ride to the airport."

"Airport?" Angel repeats, yawning. He kicks his feet off the bed and waddles to his closet, grabbing the first hoodie he sees. He drops the blanket and slips the hoodie on. "I thought preseason starts here."

"Oh. You don't know." Jakey lowers his voice further, to a whisper. "You've, um, been traded to San Francisco."

If this was yesterday, Angel would've freaked out. He's just won the cup with his father's old team-- he's not supposed to *leave*, he's a *legacy*. But right now, a permanent escape seems ideal.

"Angel?" Jake waves his hand in front of his face.

"Fuck," Angel slips out. He turns to him. "Fuck."

"What?"

Angel pulls the shorter into a tight hug, squeezing him so hard that his back pops.

"Angel, you're..." Jakey wheezes.

He puts him down, trying not to smile.

Jakey coughs, holding his chest. "Thanks."

"I'm... I'm gonna miss you, Goldie." Angel says, weakly. He frowns, just now realizing what a new start will mean. He'll only be able to see him face-to-face up to twice a season. They're going to be separated for the first time in Angel's career. Jakey took him in as a rookie and acted as a mentor his first years on the Wanderers, and now he's gone.

"I'll miss you, kid." Jake says, softly, sadly. He pulls Angel in and embraces him, but this time, it's a little bit gentler. "Find someone that'll make you happy over there, yeah?"

The innocent feeling of warmth that washes over him is horribly familiar to Angel-- it's almost like a kiss from his mother. He holds Jake close, stuffing his face in his shoulder. Angel's heart skips a beat.

To match with his, he thinks. He sighs, gripping him even tighter. Jake's arms feel like home: he doesn't want to let go, but he must in order to move on.

"Thank you for everything." Angel says. "I'll see you when the season starts."

"Don't go easy on your old man when the time comes, huh?"

"...I'll board you the first opportunity I get."

[OCT 1, 2011, 6:43 PM]

It's so loud in the locker room. Way too loud. Angel's chest is tight. The air feels thick. He pulls at his hair and leans forward on his own knees.

"Angel," A soft voice greets, reminding him of his late father. It hurts.

He looks up anyways. Jakub Goldstrom looks nothing like Biel Sheppard, but his voice-- Angel tries not to shake as his new captain tries to calm him.

"Angel, look, the entire city already loves you. Just get out there." Goldstrom says. He places his hand on his shoulder. "You're a legacy. You're meant to be here. You're a tiger."

"Yeah." Angel nods, even though he has no idea what the hell Goldstrom is saying. "Tiger."

"Deep breaths." He says. "You're good at hockey. You'll be fine."

Angel doubts both of those statements, but appreciates the warmth he feels from Goldstrom's sincerity and welcoming.

[SEPT 15, 2016, 9:48 AM]

The San Francisco airport is dark, the sounds of a few layover passengers shuffling about accenting the silence. The high ceilings and open space feel almost unsafe, scratching at Angel's slight agoraphobia.

Behind him, Angel pulls along a large suitcase. *Fragile: Handle with care*, a tag on the suitcase warns. A large, royal blue duffel bag hangs off his shoulder, his name and the number forty-eight embroidered on one side and the Wanderers' shield on the other.

He spots two familiar faces, sitting on the bench and having some sort of argument.

"It's temporary, Tomek." The taller and older looking man mumbles. He grabs the other's shirt collar and pulls it over his head. Tomek easily escapes his grip and slaps the other's arm. "He's not gonna live with you forever. Unless you two, like, agree on it."

"Hey, Matti, you know what else was temporary? My broken leg." Tomek says, his voice flat. He tugs on his shirt to fix the creases. "I don't skate as fast anymore."

"Shut up, that's got nothing to do with him." Matti says. "I played with him in Sweden during the lockout. He's not that bad, I promise."

"Who's not that bad?" Angel finally breaks in, stopping right next to the bench.

The two look up at Angel, who, in complete honesty, looks like shit. He's got stubble that's grown past the point of a shadow, bags under his eyes, and bags dragging behind him. There's a dark bruise on his temple. Angel gives a half-ass smile.

"Your roster photo looked way cuter." Tomek says, breaking the silence.

Angel only stares at him, surprised at his forwardness and maybe possibly a little freaked out. The silence returns.

"Uh, yeah." Matti coughs and he stands to greet Angel. He puts his hand on his face, inspecting the new bruise on his temple. "Fuck, man, you told me that stuff happened, but I didn't think..."

"Matti, stop, honestly, I'm fine." Angel laughs it off, but there's a sharp edge on his voice. "Just a bad roomie."

"Well, your new one's not a dick." Matti says, and hugs him. Then, lowering his voice, he continues. "You're safe with him, okay? He likes you already, Angie."

"Thanks, Jake--" Angel stops. He winces. "...Matti."

"It's... It's not a problem." Matti pats his shoulder, albeit a little hesitantly, and motions to the person behind him. "So, this is Tomek Trčka. Team calls him Turk."

"Um, nice to meet you." Angel holds out a hand. Tomek nods and shakes it, and his palm is warm, a shocking contrast to Angel's cold, dry hands. Angel shivers.

"Nice to meet you." Tomek nods again, his eyes squinting and his lips dropping into a frown. Angel drops his hand-- well, it was more like he forcibly takes his hand back from Tomek-- and turns back to Matti. "Can we get going?"

"Sure. Race you there." Matti stands and swoops out the door, leaving the other two in the dust.

"Do you need help with that bag?" Tomek asks as the two begin walking after Matti.

"Yeah, please." Angel sighs as the weight is taken off his shoulder. He rubs the spot the strap was digging into.

Tomek effortlessly slings it on his shoulder and gives Angel another small smile: a subtle, but observable pinch at the corners of his lips. Angel notices how the beauty mark on the right side of Tomek's face also raises with the smile. It's very slight and hard to see amongst his freckles, but Angel still takes note of it.

Angel shakes his head, knowing that he's caring too much. That flutter he feels-- it's all too familiar.

The shorter leads the way to Matti's SUV, his stride bouncing, almost like a skip. Angel laughs softly, but makes sure only he hears it.

Find someone that'll make you happy, Jakey had said. Dylan comes to mind. Dylan's loved him, stayed for him, fought for him. And yes, Angel was happy with him. *Was*. Until it turned out Dylan didn't really love Angel, not even as a friend.

Angel may have accidentally loved Dylan Karr in another time, but this is now, and Angel knows better. If the thing Angel had with Dylan wasn't real, then how much more is it going to hurt when it is? *Find someone that'll make me happy?*

Angel wonders if someone like that even exists.

"What's wrong?" Matti asks, turning his mirror to see Angel. He keeps his head forward, eyes back on the road. "You're making that face."

"I don't know. I'm just thinking about Montreal. My, uh, my roommate, I mean." Angel says, slouching into the cushion of the back seat. His seat belt rubs against his face, making his stubble burn. He doesn't mind. He's had worse happen to him.

Tomek glances back at Angel from the front passenger seat, eyebrows furrowed. The concern hurts more than it comforts.

"You mean your boyfriend?" Matti snorts, obviously disapproving.

"God, no. Never." Angel sighs. Relief or regret, he doesn't know. He pulls his phone out and pulls up his conversation with Dylan, scowling at the heart icon next to his name.

"What happened?" Tomek asks.

"Well, for starters, I was traded here." Angel dryly responds instead of sharing. He squints at his phone, reading a new text from Dylan.

Dylan: I'm so sorry about everything I freaked out okay? It'd be all cool if you just forgive me and we just start new and forget everything

Angel's face burns and he feels his blood heat with anger. But, at the same time, a part of his mind is screaming to forgive him. He contemplates the possibility that he is wrong about Dylan.

"Angel?" Matti snaps him back to reality. "Årud to Angel, do you copy?"

"Huh?" Angel looks up from his phone.

"We're here."

"Oh. Yeah, hang on." Angel says, then directs his attention back to his phone. He sends Dylan a message, making his final decision.

Angel: You're a piece of shit :)

He switches his phone off and climbs out the car, half grinning, half grimacing. A new start where he can't turn back? Where he doesn't even know if the people are trustworthy? Where he has to rebuild his entire identity and reputation?

Perfect. It's just what he ordered.

[SEPT 15, 2016, 12:36 PM]

Angel follows Tomek into the spare room, staying silent. They haven't exchanged words since Matti dropped them off, and Angel isn't planning on it.

The shorter drops the duffel in the corner, sighing, then heads to the bed.

Tomek seems to want to keep Angel talking for a while.

Angel parks his suitcase next to the duffel. As he looks up, he locks eyes with Tomek.

He doesn't know if Tomek's trying to give him flirty eyes, but Angel still blushes.

"So, um," Tomek starts. "You had a crush on a guy? Are you gay?"

"Why's it matter?" Angel snaps. He shakes his head, urging the pink to leave his cheeks. His heart's racing, his head pounding. He wants to scream *yes, I'm very gay* and *please love me*.

"Just curious about you. You don't have to tell me, I just want us to know each other better."

Tomek yawns and sits up on the bed. He smacks his lips and his eyes begin to droop. "Here. I'll start. I'm trilingual. English, Czech, Vietnamese. I have an older sister who's in med school. My shoe size is eleven and a half."

"Oh." Angel murmurs. His face defiantly blushes again, thinking about that stupid saying about shoe size. *When's the last time... Ew, Angel, stop it.* He flops down on the bean bag behind him, trying his best to hide his embarrassment. "Um, I know Spanish and French. And English. My sister is my agent. I'm, um..."

"Are you okay?" Tomek cuts him off, frowning. "You really don't have to if you don't want."

"I'm fine! Let me finish." Angel says, rather defensive.

"Okay." Tomek nods, trying to hide his amusement. He lies back down on the bed again, eyes on him.

"Well, um, when I was only four years old, I realized I was--"

"Wait," Tomek cuts him off once again. "Sorry."

"What, you don't want to hear my story?" Angel says, fake sad, but he feels like a puppet. His mind is blank and he's mildly aware of his mouth moving. He knows this. He's trying to distance himself, trying to not get attached.

"I do, it's just that I barely hear you." Tomek peeks at him from the pillow his face is half-stuffed in. He doesn't look tired, he looks sleepy-- which, by the way, are two very different things. Sleepy is cuter.

Angel takes a deep breath, hating himself for thinking of Tomek in that way. *It won't end well. It can't. He's just another Dylan. You'll get traded. Again.*

Tomek continues. "Come here and tell me."

Angel's breath flutters and he squeezes his eyes shut, avoiding Tomek's bright bronze gaze.

Angel knows he just met him and everything, but Tomek seems so warm and familiar and...

...What the hell am I doing?

"Oh, I have to, um, go out and make a call." Angel excuses himself and leaves the room before Tomek could say anything.

He leans himself on the wall, and he slides down slowly, shaking. "Fuck."

After a minute, Tomek sits down next to him, cautious. His voice is full of worry as he says,

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pushed you. I just... I jumped the gun, sorry. Again."

Angel stays rather silent, his soft breaths being the only noise in the small walkway.

His chest burns, the scars searing once again. It's strange-- he's never felt this out of it before, not since his teenage days.

"Do you want me to leave?" Tomek asks, avoiding Angel's eyes.

Angel, conflicted, says nothing. He wants to be alone to think, but he's afraid that if Tomek leaves him, his own thoughts will torment him to madness.

Tomek stays by him anyways, not looking and not pressing.

[NOV 9, 2014, 8:52 PM]

Angel is dragged off to a small restaurant on the edge of Lycksele by a moody Matti Årud.

Matti, still holding Angel's hand, yells something in Swedish into the building.

Angel's eyes widen and he tries to tug his hand away from Matti. He doesn't appreciate the stares from a few locals.

"Kasper, my brother, kindly give us two a booth?" Matti greets a cook emerging from the kitchen, voice sweet.

"Ah, of course, Mattias, brother. Only the best for you and whoever this beautiful man is, yeah? Boyfriend? Husband? A keeper, Matti, yes." Kasper laughs. He picks up two menus and leads them to the back. "Mister Stranger, glad you are helping to expand our Lapp population, yeah? You see, Matti's past loves, not so willing. But you--"

"Kassi, it doesn't work like that, *skitstövel*." Matti says and shoves his brother away, who is still rambling. "Angel, please excuse him. He's gross."

Once Matti and Angel are settled and Kasper has finally left, Angel drops his menu to glare at Matti.

"What?" Matti says, trying to hold a straight face.

"What the hell is this?" Angel says.

"This is the family restaurant. Kasper's my brother. I know all the people in here. It's fine, you're fine." Matti says. He's very amused at himself, obviously uplifted by this home base of his. "We spoke in English in front of you for a reason."

"Yeah, totally. That's rad." Angel says, mostly to himself. He then slowly asks, "Uh, why were you mad earlier?"

"We lost a game we were leading for fifty-nine minutes, first of all. And I had... Other things on my mind." Matti drops his menu and starts picking at his fingers out of anxiety. "My girlfriend. The lockout. Axelsson."

"Axelsson... You and him. Something happened?" Angel says, not sure if his words made sense. They were very close just a week ago, but Matti had just stopped talking about him.

"My girlfriend, she found out... But she doesn't know about him... Me?" Matti answers the jumbled question with a jumbled answer. "What really happened, you know?"

Angel can only blink, unsure of what he means. He doesn't ask any further questions, seeing as it clearly upsets Matti to even think about. Quietly, Angel attempts to change the topic.

"Um, well, I just moved out of Jake's guest room. Found a cheap city house with two rooms, with Dylan."

Matti nods. "Karr? Fighter boy?"

"That's the one." Angel snorts.

"Can't believe they're still signing instigators and enforcers." Matti says, quietly. "Especially him. Picking fights with smaller players. Fighting has a place in hockey, but not in the way he does it."

Angel shrugs. "It's hard to be six foot."

"It's easy to have respect for the game." Matti spits back. "You watch out. I don't trust him, he'll hurt you."

"How about you and Axel?" Angel offers. He's sneering, mocking. "I said the same thing about him, but you still went to that bar with him."

A silence falls over the two again. Matti looks back at the menu. Angel only orders a water to drown the sudden realization and guilt in his stomach.

[SEPT 16, 2016, 8:28 AM]

The smell of strawberries pleasantly wakes Angel up, along with muffled conversation. He recognizes Matti's distinct, honking laugh among the voices-- there's definitely more people than just Tomek and Matti in the kitchen. Angel frowns, not wanting to introduce himself to his new teammates. He needs more time to mentally prepare.

He climbs out of bed, stretching and yawning along the way, then smacks his lips. Fuck, when did he get into bed, anyways? He doesn't remember when he retired for the night. The last thing he remembers was himself nearly crying in the hall outside.

Angel lets out a "huh." There's a note taped to his door.

good morning Angel my angel! I made pancakes for breakfast!!!!

Our girls Khai Harper (Your new captain) and Skyler Iwata (your new daughter) are coming over

and the swede. unfortunately (jk)

Hope it's not weird I carried you to bed yesterday. didn't expect you to sleep so long. you're not as heavy as i thought, too.

xoxo Turk

Ps. put pants on

Angel laughs very softly. He pats the note, then walks toward his big luggage bag. It's not as heavy as he remembers.

He opens it to find nothing.

Angel frowns, but quickly realizes that Tomek had put his clothes in the drawers for him already. However, the duffel remains untouched and there's a note on it, too.

Hope you don't mind i didn't put this away for you too, figured that i'll just do it on laundry day.

xoxo Turk

He takes a very slow inhale and closes his bag. Tomek's doing so much for him. Carrying him to bed, putting his stuff away, cooking breakfast.

It's such a shock, much different than he was used to. Like cold water to sleepy eyes.

Angel wipes his face. Why did he let himself be treated like shit? Why did he let Dylan use him as a punching bag? Why is Tomek being so *fucking* nice?

There's a firm knock, knock, knock on Angel's door, accompanied with a stern "Angie."

"What is it?" Angel says, a slight grumble to his voice. He pulls on his jacket and opens his door to a very tall Swede. There are crumbs in his beard. Angel leans in close and gently brushes them off.

"Your pancakes are getting cold." Matti answers, voice completely level. He stares at him until Angel's mouth flutters and he lets a laugh slip through.

"Dammit, Matt," Angel says, wheezing. He lets himself be hugged by the taller.

"I'm serious about the pancakes, though. Come on." Matti lets go of him and leads the way out.

Sounds of pans and glasses clinking and voices chatting become clearer as Angel walks farther from his bedroom, his haven.

He takes a deep breath before looking up to meet the eyes of his new teammates.

He immediately recognizes the Blades captain, Harper-- well, *Khai*-- when he looks up. Her eyes are a burning, almost golden color, a beautiful and sudden contrast to her dark skin. She has a slight smirk on her full lips, like she knows something that Angel doesn't.

Angel shifts his gaze to the other Blade sitting next to her on the couch, which he vaguely recognizes from last year's NHA entry draft. She's a little leaner, but there's no doubt that she's muscular. Long, black hair is tied up in a bun atop her head, keeping the strands away from her face as she stuffs her mouth with Tomek's pancakes.

Angel realizes why Tomek said Skyler will be his "new daughter." She looks like she's sixteen. And acts like she's twelve.

"Ooh, I know you." Skyler's eyes brighten as she looks up to see Angel. Her mouth is still filled with half-chewed strawberry pancake. Angel grimaces as she says, "Angel Sheppard, Defenseman of the Year, King Cup Champion."

Angel glances towards Khai as a plea for help. She nods, but does nothing.

"And," Skyler pauses to chew. Angel closes his eyes to avoid seeing the pancake pulp in her mouth as she continues. "Drafted second overall in 2011. Personally, I think you should've gone first, even though you basically had already signed with Montreal. Just saying, like, in my opinion."

"Skyler, have a drink." Matti gently interrupts, handing her a glass of water. He then motions Angel to step into the kitchen, who gratefully accepts the invitation to leave. Matti lowers his voice, so only Angel hears. "How're you feeling?"

"What do you mean?" Angel scoffs at the question. "I'm fine."

Matti sighs and turns to slide a pancake on a plate from the pan. He turns the stove off with a click. "I mean, how are you coping? Are you feeling better? With the trade, I mean."

"Yeah, I'm doing well. I didn't die." Angel leans on the counter, frowning. "Why are you so worried about me? You used to be so chill."

"Well, you used to be so *happy*, Angel." Matti quietly says, his back still to Angel. He walks back towards the main room with the plate still in his hands.

"What?" Angel pushes himself off the counter and tries to catch the back of Matti's shirt, but the soft fabric slips from his fingers. "Wait, Matti."

Matti stops. He places the plate on the counter. "I'm sorry. I need to think." He says, then he continues to walk. Matti gently shuts the door behind himself, but only after he waves a small goodbye at his other teammates.

Angel just watches, with no idea how to react. After a second, he just tries to push it out of his head and focus on his pancake. He takes a bar stool and sits at the counter, across from the two ladies, half listening to their conversation as he eats.

"No, Khai, really, being first overall is stressful." Skyler laughs, lightly slapping Khai's shoulder. "Stop projecting your bitterness on to me."

"I went two hundred and fifth overall. I am not bitter." Khai states, matter-of-factly. "You have it good. You don't have to prove yourself, everyone's been watching you since Juniors."

"You were in the Olympics."

"So?" Khai rolls her eyes. "I wasn't even put on the playing lineup until half the tournament was over."

"Yeah, but at least you led the US to a gold medal." Skyler rolls her eyes back at Khai.

"Shut up." Khai murmurs. "I did not lead them at all. I was just there. Stop flattering me, you're still not allowed to drive my car."

"Worth a try."

Angel zones out, the muffled conversation failing to distract him. What Matti had said to him reenters his mind.

You used to be so happy.

It's a pessimistic echo of Jake's words, which seems so long ago. They had both observed what was true: that Angel was not well. They just told him in different ways.

Jakey, a request; Matti, an observation.

"Angel?" A voice gently pulls him from his haze. "Angel, they're going."

Blinking, he refocuses his vision. The first thing he sees is Tomek's hand on his. He pulls his hand away and rubs at his eyes. "Yeah."

The corners of Tomek's mouth deepen into a frown, and he watches as Angel walks around to the other two.

"It, um, was nice to meet you both." Angel softly says, then shakes their hands, repeating their names: "Khai, Skyler."

Skyler gives him a big smile before walking out the door, but Khai's is hesitant.

She lingers for a bit, almost studying Angel, before nodding. "It's good to see you, Sheppy."

Angel's shoulders tense. *Sheppy*. When's the last time someone called him that?

The taller looks away, an strange look on her face. Confusion? No, consternation.

Angel brushes it off. It doesn't mean anything.

It's just a feeling.

[SEPT 16, 2016, 10:52 AM]

Tomek has his hockey stick out in the living room, passing pucks to himself and working on his control. It's relatively quiet, the only sounds standing out being Tomek's breathing and the scuffing sound of the blade on the training board.

Toe drags, backhands. Basic dribbling to a few fancy tricks. It'd entrance anyone watching, and Angel is no exception.

Tomek takes a deep, exasperated breath and glances at Angel. His face softens suddenly, and there's a shadow of a grin on his lips.

"What?" Angel says, almost offended.

"Are you hungry?" Tomek places his stick and gloves down on the board gently, and he walks into the small kitchen.

"...Not really," Angel replies, but it's a lie. He hasn't eaten a real meal for almost twenty-four hours-- he couldn't bring himself to even finish his pancake this morning because of his overwhelming guilt.

"Okay." Tomek grabs something out of the fridge, then sits on the opposite end of the couch, legs crossed on the cushion, facing his teammate. He peels open his little prepackaged salad. Angel intently watches as Tomek prepares his salad, pouring the toppings and dressing in. He stabs a leaf with the plastic fork, then looks up at Angel.

"Are you hungry?" Tomek asks again, trying not to laugh as he offers Angel the salad.

Angel shamefully takes it. "Thanks."

Tomek nods, and pauses before asking, "Are you feeling well enough to go for some training?" Angel munches on the greens, noting how Tomek's not trying to pry anything out of him. Being extra nice. "I mean. Sure."

Tomek looks at him thoughtfully, and Angel stares back. It seems like a long time, long enough that Angel had counted to twenty of Tomek's several freckles. Tomek shakes his head and laughs.

That wasn't weird.

"Um, yeah. I can drive us to the arena." Tomek mumbles, waving his hand in dismissal.

He begins to stand, when Angel slips out a "Wait."

Tomek pauses and turns his head to him. "Yes?"

"I, um. I wanna talk." Angel says, soft, poking at his salad. "About what happened in Montreal." Nodding, Tomek sits down, this time next to Angel. Angel ignores Tomek glancing at the bruise on his temple.

"I... I freaked out when I arrived here. I had the idea that I was supposed to be the Montreal Legacy, the dream I had since I was just a kid. I was supposed to finish what my dad started in the 90s, y'know, Biel Sheppard." Angel lets Tomek mull over that for a bit as he continues eating.

Tomek's eyes widen. "Oh. Yeah. Biel Sheppard, the one who... in the old stadium fire?"

"Yeah. That's why I felt like I was needed in Montreal, 'cause he never had a chance. Then, we actually won the Cup, and everything..." Angel trails off, taking a breath. "I got too confident in myself. I thought I was always right. I got traded because of that. And I got this-- this bruise." Tomek frowns, and his hand moves slightly, wanting to reach out to Angel, touch him, tell him that's he's safe now.

Angel still flinches.

"I'm sorry." Tomek murmurs, withdrawing his hands. He shifts his body away from him. "You-- you didn't deserve any of that. You're more than your father's child, you..."

There's a long silence, with the occasional, awkward crouton crunch. They don't look at each other. There's no need to.

"Tomek," Angel starts, long after his salad was finished.

"Yeah?" Tomek turns to look at him, but Angel's staring out the window, to the streets of San Francisco. Thoughtful.

"Why did you change your mind about me?" Angel says. "You were talking about me to Matti like I was gonna be a burden. Even if this is temporary."

"Because..." Tomek starts. He carefully chooses his next words. "Because I realized you're human, too. And you hurt, you feel. I saw you, I realized you're a real person."

Angel's chest tightens at that. He laughs, trying to bury his feelings. He glances back at the other, then drops his gaze, quieting. *Fuck.*

Tomek is speechless, studying Angel's face, but breaks only a few moments later. "Who gave you that bruise?"

Angel squeezes his eyes shut. He doesn't even want to think about it, even though it just happened. He doesn't want to think about him.

"Angel?" Tomek's voice quivers, with regret or fear, he doesn't know. "I'm sorry."

"My roommate. It was my roommate." Angel forces himself to say, teeth clenched. "I thought he was perfect. That he was a good person. I thought-- I thought he loved me."

"Angel..." Tomek says, voice barely a whisper. It's desperate, an apology, even though Tomek has only helped Angel.

"Why the *fuck* am I telling you this?" Angel takes fistfuls of his own hair and he stands, almost violent, breathing hard. He doesn't look at Tomek. "Why are you being so nice? Why the fuck do I-- ...fuck. Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Tomek. I just want to prove them wrong so *badly*."

Tomek watches as Angel sits back down, his face in his hands. He offers an open arm to him.

"Is this okay?"

Angel peeks at him, and nods, letting Tomek pat his back and pull him into a hug.

"You can prove all of them wrong." Tomek murmurs as he squeezes his arm. "And I'll help you do that, Angel."

Angel stuffs his face into his shoulder and he takes a deep breath, letting himself get lost in Tomek's presence. His strong, comforting grip, tight around his body. Freckles dotting his neck and arms, seemingly having fallen like leaves from his face. His slightly sweet scent: a combination of his shampoo, his cologne, the strawberries on his breath. Angel almost cries again, smothered by beauty. He doesn't let go for a long time.

Angel lets himself finish his thought in his mind: *Why the fuck do I fall in love so easily?*

[DEC 9, 2001, 7:32 PM]

After Angel's mother had lit the first candle on the menorah and she, Eva, and Angel all prayed together, Angel immediately asks if he and Eva can open the presents from Uncle Finn.

His mother forces a smile and nods, too tired to scold the two children.

Angel goes for the large box with his name written on it with large blocky lettering. There's a card attached, and even though Angel's a bit rude for his age, he politely opens the card first before the present.

Dear Angel,

In the box is one present from your Dad he had meant to give to you in July, your birthday, so I'm giving it to you now. Also in there are some presents from me as well! Have a good Hanukkah and Merry Christmas, my boy, tell your Mom she has a present too.

Love,

Uncle Finn

Angel looks around, quickly finds a smaller box labeled "Maria," then hands it to his mother. Despite her feelings, she manages to smile.

Angel returns to his own present. He rips off the paper and opens the box to find a whole load of pencils and sketchbooks from his father and a new pair of skates from Finn.

Angel squeals, happy, then looks to Eva. She's scanning through a brick of a book and grinning. She's wearing new shoes already. Angel is glad she's happy too, even if he does think books are silly and new footwear besides skates are useless.

Meanwhile, Angel and Eva's mother, Maria, is shocked. She takes the ring out of the box, glances over it once, and throws it back in. She closes the box and stands up to find stamps to send it back. She doesn't even read the note, she doesn't want to. It was Biel's ring, still charred from the fire.

[SEPT 16, 2016, 2:38 PM]

"Khai, I gotta talk to you right now!" A voice yells after bursting through the doors on the other side of the small arena. "It's Kit, I gotta-- I gotta talk!"

Khai takes a very deep breath, hearing the very distinct sound of flip-flops flapping on rubber floor, echoing in the empty practice arena. She glances at Angel and rolls her eyes.

Angel mouths a "What?"

Kit arrives on the bench next to Angel, his chest heaving. "I literally ran from the house to here because--"

"Don't you live in Palo Alto?" Khai interrupts. "We're in Ohlone City."

"--I left my lucky jock here, have you seen it?"

"What the fuck?" Angel says.

"No, Kit. have you checked all your pockets?" Khai says. Her expression is patient. She's definitely dealt with Kit before, several times.

Kit relaxes and lets out a little laugh. He pulls out a wad of off-white fabric from one of his many pockets. "Oh, Khai! You know me so well."

"Fuck," Angel says. He grimaces at the sight and the smell.

"What would you do without me, dear Kitchi Lopes?" Khai teases, waving her hand at him.

"I would lose my jock, that's for sure!" Kit punches her arm.

The two older players share a laugh. Angel cringes and turns away.

"So, uh... How's the Matt-Man? You talked to him, right?" Kit asks.

Khai inhales, a little too aggressively. She turns, hops the boards, and leaves Kit with Angel.

"What the fuck?" says Angel, louder than his previous attempts to question the scene that had unfolded before him.

"Wait, who the fuck are you?" Kit says.

[SEPT 16, 2016, 2:44PM]

When Kit leaves Angel and Khai on the ice alone together, a silence falls over the arena. Khai had rejoined Angel on the bench. She looks completely calm, helmet and gloves off. Her eyes are closed and she's leaning on her stick, a knight with her sword. Angel could've sworn she was sleeping. She speaks, slow. "Angel, you played in Sweden in the 2014 lockout, right?" "Gee, you know a lot about me." Angel laughs, trying to brush off the fact she didn't use his last name. It feels too personal. And her mood changed entirely-- she's not the Khai at breakfast, not the Khai talking to Kit, not the Khai he was introduced to.

"I... no, it's okay, you don't need to know why I'm upset." She murmurs. She seems so much older. "Sorry if I worried you or whatever. I'll be fine, Angel, okay?"

Angel notices a small sun tattoo on her right hand, near the thumb. It reminds him of something, someone, but he quickly pushes the thoughts out.. "Aye, Captain."

By then, quite a few teammates were on the ice, and after a few minutes of small comments and awkward company, Angel and Khai agree to get on the ice to join the rest of the Blades to warm up.

After skating a few laps and shooting pucks lazily, a whistle blows, stopping everyone in their tracks. Angel had been practicing his slapshot form on an empty net with no puck, and had been stopped dead at the height of his windup.

He drops his stick with a sad plop that echoes around the ice and makes his way to the growing group of Blades.

The coach is short and dark skinned, with a notable and deep white scar that wrapped around the front of their neck. Angel immediately recognizes them as Hansel de la Cruz, the youngest head coach in the league, a "temporary" replacement after the previous coach was fired.

"Everyone here?" They ask, looking around and fiddling with the whistle on their hand. "And sit down, please, y'all are too tall for me."

Everyone but Khai takes a knee. She gives the coach a dopey grin, saying "I'm here, coach."

"I know that. Sit down, Harper." Hans barks at her, with a half-joking tone.

Angel frowns, shocked at how Khai's face can be so easily switched. He realizes that Khai is an actress, and Angel doesn't know where the act starts and stops.

"Well, here's to 2016." Hans rubs their hands together. "Last year, we lacked on taking advantage of puck possession. Do any of you know how many missed opportunities we've had in the playoffs last year?"

There's a silence. Hans grins, though their expression seems a little bitter.

"A metric fuckton. That's a fuck of one-thousand."

No one laughs except Khai, and Angel's pretty sure it's mock laughter. Hans sighs, defeated, their sense of humor lost.

"...Well, forwards, you're skating. D, shoot some on Poki and Buzz, Minnesota drill. Practicing one-timers and passing. We'll figure out something like systems or whatever later, Sasha and Alkaev aren't here yet." Hans orders, halfheartedly. "Angel. Come here."

"Yeah?" Angel stands and skates to his new coach.

"So, new guy." Hans puts their hands on their hips and frowns. "Describe to me what you can do for the team."

"Well, I think--"

"No, no. Like I don't know you."

Angel's taken aback. It's weird, but de la Cruz did manage to scrape this team from the gutter to the second round of the playoffs last season. "Um. My name is Angel, I'm pretty good at shooting the puck and clearing the zone, keeping the line. I also, uh, have a sense of humor and I own a Championship Ring?"

Hans rolls their eyes and continues their mini-interview, not even stopping to give an opinion.

"You're living with Turk, right?"

"Yeah." Angel says. He dances on his skates a little bit, kicking the ice slightly. He glances at the rest of the team drilling, and finds Tomek chatting with another player as the goalies set up.

"Why?"

"So, besides Matti, he's the one you know best on the team right now?" Hans pesters. They look rather thoughtful.

Tomek is Vietnamese-Czech, trilingual, and his shoe size is eleven. And a half. He's proud of the beauty mark on his cheek and of his freckles. Loves strawberries.

"I guess." Angel finally says, blushing. "I've only been here two days, but I guess so."

Hans grins at him and takes out a notebook and pen from their jacket. "Congratulations, he's your defense partner."

"You've never even seen us play together."

"I just wanted to tease you. I know you two are perfect for each other, I watched the All-Stars in 2012." They point the pen at him. "So, what will it be? *Tange?* *Amek?* No, maybe something word based. *All-Star Crossed Lovers?*"

Angel opens his mouth to retort, but memories come flooding back. Tomek was that cute, quiet older kid he had clicked so well with in the exhibition game years back. Angel just never made the connection.

"Shut up." Angel says, trying to defend his pride. After second thought, he adds, "Coach."

Hans laughs and pushes Angel towards his new teammates. Angel lets himself glide backwards to glare at Hans before crossing over and skating towards the other side of the ice.

"Angel?" Another voice calls him. It's Khai, and she looks much more serious than she was a minute ago.

Angel stops and faces her. He tries not to frown as he tries to decode the mystery, the enigma that is Khai Harper.

"You don't like being called by your last name, do you?" Khai says, tapping his kneepads with the blade of her hockey stick as she leads him to the opposite boards.

"My first name is just fine." Angel responds, shrugging. He hadn't really thought about why it had upset him to be called *Sheppard* and *Sheppy*, considering that he used to proudly claim Sheppard as his surname. It was his link to one of Montreal's greats. He takes a deep breath.

"Cool." Khai says, smiling at him. "By the way, have you, um, seen Matti?"

"...Might still be in the locker room." Angel says, and he furrows his brows at the sudden question. He decides not to push it any further, remembering her reaction with Kit. *What is it with those two?*

The captain nods and heads off. Mysterious.

Angel finally reaches Tomek, patting his back as a greeting. "Hey."

Tomek straightens up and turns, surprised. "Oh, what's up?"

"I'm really tired." Angel says, truthful. He realizes he hasn't shaved in a couple of days and has been spending his nights staring at his ceiling. *And I don't understand our captain.*

"You... You do look pretty, um, pretty bad." Tomek says. "Remember what I said? About your roster photo? You should clean up, get that charm back."

"What, you don't like it?" Angel laughs. He taps a puck towards Tomek, a playful pass. Tomek smiles, a little sideways, then turns around to get back to practicing wrist shots while their teammates try to set up a drill.

"I think it's sexy." Angel says.

"I'll agree with you if you want me to." Tomek says, without looking back to see Angel's eyes widen.

Angel lines up next to him and grabs a puck. He observes the goalies for the first time. Both are giant, well over six feet, and the padding makes the two even more intimidating.

"Tahnay's blocker hand, above his shoulder." Tomek says, motioning towards the goalie in the crease.

Tahnay Pokiha starts on the far side, taking one shot at a time. Stick saves, easy leg blocks, catches.

It's Tomek's turn after Angel's slapper bounces off the crossbar. The windup Tomek takes is incredibly short, but his strength still bends the stick as the blade hits the ice.

The puck zips right over the giant's elbow and into the net.

Tomek smiles wide, turning to Angel. He chirps, "My name is Angel, I'm pretty good at shooting the puck."

"...Shut up."

"Where's the sense of humor?"

[NOV 1, 2015, 6:36 PM]

The heater is broken, so Angel and his housemate bundle up under layers of shirts, sweaters, and blankets. Watching sports highlights, talking casually. The topic of Hans de la Cruz comes up.

"They're coaching the Blades now, now that Traylor's fired. Out of nowhere." Angel says, leaned on the other man like a pillow. "Didn't de la Cruz like, disappear after that neck incident? And the NHA had like this memorial..."

"Thought they died in the hospital after getting sliced open." Dylan murmurs. He takes away his arm from around Angel and rubs his own neck, uncomfortable even thinking about it. "And it's weird how the Blades just... Pulled them out of the blue. Haven't seen the ice in ten years, and suddenly they're doing hockey again."

Angel shrugs. He doesn't really see a problem with it, considering the Blades managed to destroy the Wands in front of a quiet home crowd their first game as coach.

"How do you even come back like that?" Angel asks, low. "After an injury like theirs, near death."

"You *don't* come back, Sheppy." Dylan answers, cold. "You don't *ever* come back."

[SEPT 17, 2016, 5:25 AM]

Hans's phone rings, waking them up from a shallow sleep. They groan, pulling themselves from the heavy sheets and sitting up to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hansel, this is Eva Sheppard, Angel's sister." A woman's voice greets. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Yes, it's okay, though." Hans rubs their eyes and stands, careful not to wake the sleeping dog beside them. They walk into the hall. "Do you need something?"

"I just wanna know how Angel's doing." Eva says. "He's... my little brother, you know? And, um, he's not answering my calls."

"He came to practice yesterday. Looks a little tired, but I'm sure it's to do with moving in and stuff." Hans answers. "The team's good to him. I think living with Tomek will be good for the both of them, too."

"Well, how's the team? How have they been doing?" Eva asks.

"I don't know. I've only really coached kids and goalies seriously, this season's gonna be my first full season. Everyone individually is good." They pause, take a seat on the top step of the staircase, and sigh. "I'm just not sure how to make them work with each other. Khai and Matti had some sort of-- ugh. I just don't fuckin' know."

"You're tired, go back to sleep, Coach." Eva says, softly. "Watch out for Angie, please."

"I will." Hans says. "Goodnight."

"...Goodnight."

When she hangs up, Hans smacks their face and grumbles. They waddle back to their bedroom and fall into bed again, wanting more hours of precious sleep.

[SEPT 18, 2016, 8:42 AM]

Tomek insists on making breakfast from scratch before the second practice. It seems to be a tradition of his. And this time, Angel gets up early enough to help him out.

"Scramble these," Tomek orders, placing three eggs in a bowl on the counter in front of Angel. He hands him a fork. "Be quick."

"Bossy." Angel scoffs softly as Tomek turns around to work on dry ingredients for his special pancakes. "Who's coming over?"

"Oh. No one. Just us two." Tomek says. "What, do you want Canada's Golden Girl to munch in your face while telling you facts about yourself?"

An image of Skyler talking while eating flashes in his mind. He exhales, a little theatrically, going back to scrambling the eggs. "I'll hang out with her when we're not eating."

"She says you should work on other shots besides your slapshot." Tomek says. "Like, what if one of our forwards have to get off the ice and you have to replace them? Or if our forecheck messes up and you're the one who has to take the puck into the zone?"

"Sounds like a real specific reason to take away time from my usual practice." Angel says, amused. "My routine has been working for the past few seasons."

"I thought you would like another perspective." Tomek shrugs, then walks back next to him.

"Eggs, please."

Angel leans back on the counter, watching Tomek dig a little pond in the flour mix for the egg.

"What's that do?"

"I don't know. I saw some professional chef do it once, though." Tomek says, grinning. He mixes the ingredients with a whisk. "Can you get the milk?"

Angel nods. He opens the fridge and only sees beer bottles. "What's with all the booze?"

"Got a water shortage in California, man." Tomek says, his tone mimicking a stereotypical surfer dude. "Milk, please?"

"Yeah, yeah." Angel rolls his eyes. He places the jug right next to the bowl, making Tomek flinch. "Anything else?"

Tomek snorts and hip checks Angel out of the kitchen. "Set the counter, Angel, my Angel."

"Just for you, Tommy, honey." Angel teases, finding himself smiling. His grin quickly drops, remembering what Matti had said to him the last time Tomek made breakfast. What Jake had said.

Find someone who makes you happy.

Angel wonders if he's looking at him right now.

He shakes his head.

Just gonna be another Dylan, Angel thinks. Just another Dylan.

[JUL 4, 2016, 10:48 PM]

The league assigned Skyler two bodyguards to protect her throughout all three nights of the draft. Even though they're friendly people, they're not much for small talk and good company in general.

"Uza?" Skyler meekly taps on her door guard's shoulder. "My parents. They'll want to come. You... The NHA won't let them in?"

Uza bites her lips. "Miss Iwata, I don't think they can do anything."

"Oh. I just thought, with the restraining order..."

"It's a pay-to-enter event. They won't be allowed in front, but..." She trails off. "I'll see if we can change that, okay?"

"Yeah. Thank you." Skyler excuses herself back into her hotel room, her breath shaking. She sits on her bed and stares out the window. After some time (A minute? An hour?), there's a soft knock at her hotel room door.

"Miss Iwata, you've got a visitor." Uza's voice calls. "You know Timo Nylund?"

"Yeah, but never really talked to her..." Skyler walks to the door and opens it just a little.

"Girl talk?" Timo offers, peeking out from around Uza's body.

"Uh, sure. Come in." Skyler says, not even thinking. Well, no turning back.

"Okay, Skyler." Timo says. She closes the door behind her and sits on the bed. "Drafts? Scary. Being the obvious first pick, scary. I'm first overall in junior Finland draft. I know. Having... this? Normal to be scared."

Skyler nods, staying in front of her, avoiding meeting her eyes.

"We both going to California. We can... I don't want you be alone." Timo takes her hands and rubs her thumbs into the muscles of her palms. "Yeah?"

Skyler blushes. "Timo, do you wanna..."

"What, make out? Cuddle?"

"Sure. Yeah." Skyler mumbles, squeezing Timo's fingers in a death grip. "Yeah, that'd be fun." Timo laughs, and it's the purest noise Skyler's ever heard.

[SEPT 21, 2016, 6:03 PM]

"It's only *preseason*, Matti. The Seals will be *friendly*, Matti. You're just *nervous*, Matti. Suck it *up*, Matti. Breathe *deeply*, Matti. It's not that *serious*, Matti. You're *fine*, Matti. You're fully *healed*, Matti." Matti monologues to the entire locker room as a medic wraps his sprained wrist. "If the other teams play like *this*, I won't make it to regular season."

"You'll live." Khai says, smirking as she leans back into her stall. She nods at the medic, a dismissal.

"Sure, I'll live. I just won't enjoy it." Matti snaps back. A second in and his grin breaks. Khai laughs.

Coach Hans enters the locker room, looking very unsatisfied. They're wearing what looks like an old Olympic hat and their hands are stuffed in their pockets, nervous.

"So, we, um, didn't regain momentum in the second period like I had hoped and anticipated." Hans starts, looking around the room. "We let no goals in, but we only ended up with nine shots total on the Seals' net at the end of the period."

Angel frowns and he casts his eyes down. This isn't what he wanted his Blades debut to look like-- down three goals and struggling to fight back? Angel fumes at the thought of the Wanderers, successful in their first preseason game by a landslide. *I should probably unsubscribe from the NHA news stream*, he thinks.

"Our defense is still a priority. Centers, check back earlier and quicker. Defense," Hans pauses, then glances at Angel and Tomek, whose stalls are right next to each other. "Power and speed. Use everything you have to your advantage."

Tomek looks at Angel to gauge his reaction, but Angel's still contemplating the toes of his skates.

When the other coaches finish talking to everyone, giving specific pointers to specific players, Hans approaches the two.

"Turk, Angel." Hans greets. "I'm liking your chemistry. You two are like those two, but, y'know, D-partners. Keep it up."

"Khai and Matti." Tomek says. He holds in a laugh at the comparison.

"Khai and Matti?" Angel repeats, frowning. *That's supposed to be good?*

Someone shouts the one minute warning. Hans takes their hat off and presses their fingers along the seams. They sigh, scratching at the scar on their neck before addressing the team again. "Let's get the lead back, Blades."

Angel purses his lips and furrows his brows.

[DEC 19, 2004, 9:55 AM]

"So. Sweden, yeah?" Hans says, leaning on the bench press besides Khai. "Isn't Daddy playing for Sweden?"

"Stop calling Årud that." Khai huffs out, still focused on lifting her weights. Under her breath, she says, "It was one time."

"Not very loyal to the States if you're being like that, all... friendly." Hans says, teasing even further and ignoring her complaints. "You're not gonna go easy on him, huh? I'm not. It's the Olympics, and Sweden might knock us out."

"I haven't texted him today." Khai sets the bar on the rest and sits up, wiping her hands on her shorts. "We're not, uh, on terms like that. Really."

"You haven't texted him today? How about yesterday?"

Khai bites her lips and doesn't answer. "It's not like that, we're not like that."

"So, you texted him yesterday. Right." Hans scoffs and pats her shoulder. "Did you just use all your texts on him? Hundreds of dollars worth of texts to Matti, yeah?"

"Shut up."

And, after a moment, Khai adds, "I have unlimited texting."

[SEPT 21, 2016, 7:34PM]

As Tomek pulls into Tahnay Pokiha's driveway and pulls the parking brake, he sighs loudly.

"Angel?"

"Yeah?" Angel turns to face Tomek, who's folded his arms on the steering wheel and stuffed his face in it.

"Are you still angry at me?" Tomek asks, voice muffled.

"What? No, of course not." Angel says, guilty. "I shouldn't have yelled. I'm sorry."

"It was a really bad mistake, I called for it so you let off, I just--"

"Tomek, it's okay, I swear. It's still preseason. Losses don't mean anything." Angel says. He's desperate. "Come on. Tahnay said he won't eat until we arrive."

"Okay." Tomek takes a deep breath and manages a smile.

The goalie's home is massive, on lovely property with a good view. Angel notes that the front doors are about seven and a half feet tall to comfortably accommodate for Tahnay's height.

Tomek, standing next to him, is carrying a bottle of wine. He presses the doorbell.

"Merlot?" Angel says. "Where'd your cheap booze go?"

"Those aren't cheap." Tomek mumbles. "That brewery is owned by a Belgian family and every batch is hand brewed. The bottles are made by glass artisans hired by the company."

"Sounds cool." Angel says, holding back a laugh. "Is it good, though?"

Tomek scowls at him.

The door opens to a shorter woman with a big smile on her face. "Hey, what's up?"

"Hi, Lee." Tomek laughs and kisses her cheek, then offers her the bottle.

"Thank you, Tomek." Lee teases before facing Angel. "Nice to meet you. I'm Lee, Tahnay's wife."

"Hi," Angel greets and shakes her hand. "I'm Angel, Tomek's... roommate."

"Roommates, huh?" Lee smirks. "Come on in."

Tomek snorts at Angel as he passes him to walk in.

"Shut it." Angel mumbles to him as they take off their shoes. "What was I supposed to say?"

"You didn't have to mention me at all."

Angel rolls his eyes, following Tomek deeper into the house. The table is set for five. A little girl's already at the table, eating.

Tahnay, noticing them, stands to greet the two. "Thanks for coming."

"Thank you for having us," Tomek says, giving Tahnay a handshake-hug.

"Hey, Angel." Tahnay shakes his hand, too, and pats his shoulder a little awkwardly. "No hockey talk at the table, alright?"

After a hearty meal of Lee's gumbo, Tomek and Lee have moved on to wine, while Tahnay and Angel are sitting on the carpet, watching his daughter play.

"Aisha, not too rough with your toys, they might break." Tahnay says softly.

Angel picks up a dragon figurine, painted black and red. "You have good taste, Aisha."

"Her name is Bladesy." Aisha says proudly. "She can rip the fabric of time and space. She saves the universe a lot."

"Oh. That's wicked sick." Angel says, surprised. "You got more cool stuff to show me?"

Tahnay grins. "Tell Angel about my hair."

"Oh, yeah!" She says, excitedly. "My favorite color is pink, so Dad makes it pink for me. He also lets me draw on his water. He's my favorite player."

Angel smiles at that, but takes a deep breath, unsure about his feelings about his own father. A hero, he's been told, despite never being around when he was alive. "Your dad's a real good guy, better than a lot of people."

"Angel." Tahnay says, softly. He touches his arm. "You don't have to, I'm sorry I made you think about--"

"No, it's fine." Angel says. He looks down at the carpet. "...I never want to go back to Montreal. I just want to prove them wrong, get a few hits back."

"You have to stop thinking about them." Tahnay says. "You're playing out of spite and not for love of the game."

Angel stares on at Aisha knocking over trucks and other figures with her dragon. He envies her a little bit, her positive and innocent mindset.

"Angel, you're trying to prove yourself to people who don't care about you." Tahnay says.

Angel watches Aisha's dragon fly away to the dinner table, trying to process what Tahnay had said. *Is he right?*

Angel didn't even notice his on-ice personality has changed. He's angrier, gets more penalties. He yelled at Tomek, for fuck's sake. All this to prove Montreal wrong.

Angel glances at the taller.

"Khai... She says you have to learn that." Tahnay says. His eyes are closed. "Gotta learn to love. But, you know, do as she says, not as she does."

"Why is she so nice to Matt but hates talking about him?" Angel asks, quietly.

"I really don't know." Tahnay says, then he sighs. "They used to be together but something happened during the lockout."

Angel had met Matti playing in Sweden during the league's shutdown. He had talked about Khai, but he never explicitly said she was the same person as his girlfriend. "I just find it strange."

"The two aren't the same." Tahnay says. "Everyone knows. Hans is Khai's best friend, and even they're not sure what's going on. On the ice, they're fine, but off the ice, it's weird."

Angel nods. "Have they tried to make mends?"

"Nothing will work until they both agree to forgive." Tahnay shrugs. "It's a mutual thing, y'know."

Angel looks over at Tomek at the table, thoughts racing. Tomek's laughing at something Lee had said, grin wide and cheeks red. He's setting up Aisha's toys on the table with his left hand and babying a wine glass in his right.

"Angel..." Tahnay says, following his glance. "You've known him for less than a week."

"It's not that." Angel closes his eyes.

He knows he's latched on to Tomek because he's been hurt. He feels horrible about it, using him as a tool to cope.

"What is it, then?"

"Tomek doesn't know how much I need his company." Angel whispers, wincing. "If I lose him, I think I might lose my mind."

[NOV 9, 2014, 4:03 AM]

Matti's phone buzzes violently enough as to fall off his headboard and smack him in the head, waking him. Grumbling, he forces himself to sit up and answer the call.

"*Leave me alone.*" Matti says, in his native tongue. He intends to hang up before a familiar voice stops him.

"Matti? Fuck, I'm sorry, what time is it there?" Khai says. Her voice is raw, a little nasal. "I'm sorry, I can... I can call back later if you're--"

"Khai, it's fine. Is everything okay?"

Matti can only hear shaky breathing on the other end before Khai speaks again.

"...I think we need a break." Khai says. Her voice is so soft, vulnerable. Matti feels his chest tighten as she continues. "I'm so sorry. This is... This is too hard right now. After the lockout we can figure things out."

"A break?" Matti repeats. He bites the back of his hand, unsure. "It's over?"

"I'm sorry to wake you up like this, I just..."

"Khai, babe," Matti says, just to say something. "Please don't."

"I still love you, but..." Khai trails off. "I'm, I've been hearing rumors, okay? I know I shouldn't believe them. But you haven't called me in so long."

Matti tenses. His grip around his phone becomes almost painful. It was one time. It was a mistake.

"You... You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you?" Khai's staticky voice breaks through the silence. She doesn't sound sorry anymore. It hurts. He hates it.

"I'm sorry, Khai." Matti whispers. It's his turn to break. "He... Axelsson came on to me. I didn't, I didn't want it to happen like this."

Silence. Matti manages to stifle a sob.

"And you didn't say no?"

"I want to come home." Matti says instead of answering.

He feels so guilty, he feels like he might throw up. The thing is, he didn't say no. He said yes.

He said yes despite knowing Khai was staying loyal and that she was counting on him to do the same.

But he *couldn't* say no to Axelsson, who's basically controlling his life in Sweden right now, who's provided him and Angel with housing in Malmö.

If he had said no...

"Matti,"

"I want to go home so bad. I need to see you."

"Emu, go to sleep, okay? I--" Khai cuts herself off short. "You'll be back home soon. Sleep tight."

"I love you," Matti says. He closes his eyes again. "You'll wait for me?"

"I'll... I'll wait." Khai says, but Matti hears hesitation in her voice. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Matti takes a shaky breath. "No. No, I'd never hide anything from you."

[SEPT 22, 2016, 10:04 AM]

Skyler wanders into the room where Angel's working on his boxing. He's shirtless, sweaty, and huffing loudly, punching at the air. Tightening her ponytail, she chases out an intrusive thought regarding Angel's current lack of clothing.

She takes a seat on a nearby bench, fascinated with Angel's graceful and quick jabs as he fights an invisible opponent.

Angel sighs and stops to rest, taking his gloves off. He bends over the ropes to reach for his bottle of water. Angel nearly falls over when he makes eye contact with Skyler.

"You need a dance partner?" She asks, grinning. She takes off her tank top in favor of bare skin like Angel. She stretches her arms behind her back and sighs, shifting her mindset to fight mode.

"Y-you can box?" Angel stutters out, still hanging over the side of the ring.

"Yeah, I'm real good." Skyler climbs up and hops over the ropes. "There's more gear in the bag, right?"

"It's from the equipment room." Angel says, unscrewing the cap of his water. "No face punches, okay?"

"Promise. Your bruise is still kind of visible." Skyler says, voice softening.

Angel touches his temple, frowning. It looked pretty gone to him. "Well, alright, Iwata. Don't kill me."

She straps the gloves around her wrists, punches her fists together, and smiles at the taller. She reassures him. "Light jabs. No follow through."

"Alright. Get ready to be rocked." Angel takes a deep breath and bounces backwards on the balls of his feet, keeping his movement constant. "Should've strapped your socks on, too. They're 'bout to go flying."

"You sure?" Skyler mirrors him, albeit a little slower, but it's a bluff as she hooks a left.

Angel blocks her fist down with his forearm, retaliating with a tap on her side and a quick movement towards the center once more.

Skyler turns too quickly, disorientated. "Damn."

"Eyes on me, not my hands, eh?" Angel says. "My action's different from what my eyes say. With a little pump fake, you're down."

"Right." Skyler nods, assuming a fighting stance again. She attempts to corner Angel, egging him to make a move.

The taller gets too distracted and winds up trapped, and Skyler lands three good hits before Angel slips away.

"Well?" Skyler says, smug.

"G-good." Angel wheezes. "Not too hard, kid, just..."

"Wait, sorry, I didn't mean to--" She says, but with an unimpressed look from Angel, she shuts up. "Okay. Back in the game. I'm learning how to fight off those rink rats. The guys who think I would like them."

"This is why you box?" Angel asks.

"Well, yeah. In case they're not already intimidated by me saying that I'm not interested."

Skyler says. She hops to Angel's left and attempts to break through his guard.

Angel twists his body out of the way, barely dodging, and he repositions. "If you wanna fuck over a straight guy, you gotta let him buy you drinks."

"Then I borrow his phone to inform his mother he was buying alcohol for a teenage girl."

Skyler says, the grin on her face a little too wide to fit into the innocent smile criteria. She matches her feet with his, guard loose. "Get him busted."

"Right." Angel squints at her and cautiously backs up.

"Don't give me that Kitchi Lopes look." Skyler frowns, puppy eyes activating. "He already gives me so much shit."

"No, no," Angel scoffs at her. "I'm just mad I haven't thought of it first. Could've used that strat as a teen."

She laughs, then closes in to jab Angel around his guard, then goes for his chest when he opens.

Angel yelps, more surprised than anything, and tries a sloppy counter which Skyler easily dodges. She sidesteps.

Angel miscalculates his duck and moves his head right in front of the path of her glove. She hits him square on the bruise, and his vision blurs.

"Oh my gosh, I'm..."

"No, no, I'm fine, I'm just..." Angel stumbles backwards. He slowly sits down, shaken. Angel looks up and sees her youthful but worried face. He blinks, trying to refocus his eyes. "You learn real quick, too quick."

"Thank you, I think?" Skyler says, but her tone of concern stays as she continues. "I'm sorry, Sheppy, really."

"Please don't... Don't call me that." Angel manages to say between shaky breaths.

She bites her lips, wanting to ask why. But even if she did ask, Angel wouldn't even have an answer.

"Angel, I'm sorry." Skyler sits beside him.

"Shit." Angel's voice is soft. "One game in, I can't do anything right. Tahnay thinks I'm gonna be a burden, he told me Khai doesn't believe in me, I..."

"No, they didn't say that. Stop it." Skyler says, ripping her gloves off. She rubs her hand on his shoulder, trying to loosen him up. "You sound like me before draft night. Panicking about my future and what everyone would think of me. It's unnecessary stress, I promise."

"Aren't you the rookie here?" Angel says after a long silence. "How are you so mature?"

"I was born into the categories of people that have to grow up quick." Skyler murmurs. "You know you were, too."

"...yeah." Angel says, glancing down at the nearly invisible scars on his tan chest. "Why do you think my fighting style involves mostly dodging?"

"Angel," Skyler starts. "Get some rest, okay? It's gonna be an overnight flight."

[AUG 14, 2016, 3:10 PM]

When the plane finally descends below the thick layer of clouds above San Francisco, Skyler almost chokes at the sight. She's seen pictures, everyone's seen pictures, but the beauty of human technology really shines through when seeing San Francisco in person. Skyler's phone buzzes as it reconnects to cell service.

Timo: So, tell me if the bridge is really golden

Skyler snorts at that, then quickly sends a reply.

Skyler: It's more of a desaturated maroon, don't see any gold. The name Golden Gate was just meant as a representation and the idea of gold

Timo: Whatever

Timo: Can't believe I'm lied to like that.. What's next. Red sea isn't red?

Skyler can't tell if Timo's being serious.

[SEPT 23, 2016, 1:13 AM]

Angel wakes to a voice murmuring in his ear. He glances at his shoulder, and sure enough, there lies Tomek. The freckled had lifted up the seat divider and curled up against Angel for warmth.

"Good game, Angie," is the first coherent English phrase Angel hears from Tomek. The next is, "I love you too."

Aw. Angel can't help but laugh at that, and wonders if the phrases are connected in any way. He decides to respond. "You're so sweet, Tomek."

Tomek hums back, and Angel doesn't know if that means he understood. He continues to speak, despite the action seeming rather one-sided.

"I like you a lot, I really do, but I don't want us to end up... hating each other?" Angel whispers, mostly to himself. "Like with Matti and Khai."

Tomek seems to stay asleep, and Angel doesn't know if he's glad or not.

"I know we only became friends last week, but I don't think I can be separated from you now. I mean, you probably can. But you took care of me so well my first few days I was being a mopey fuck and I just..." He continues. "Ugh. This sounds weird, sorry."

Tomek's brown eyes flutter open. "What sounds weird?"

"N-no, go back to sleep." Angel reassures him. "Was talking to myself."

"I won't leave you. I won't hate you." Tomek says after a few moments. "I swear."

Words get caught in Angel's throat trying to respond. So, instead, he takes a deep breath, leans against Tomek, and closes his eyes.

The rest of the flight is quiet.

[APR 12, 2015, 9:38 PM]

Trevor decides to sit right next to Tomek on the plane, considering their usual seat mates are injured and not flying with the team to Long Beach. Tomek flinches when Trevor lifts up the seat divider.

"What?"

"Don't want to fall asleep on you." Tomek says, firmly, and he pulls the bar down again.

"What?" Trevor repeats, trying not to laugh. "I don't mind."

"No, no, you're dating Kit." Tomek insists. He plants his hand on the armrest, not allowing Trevor to even touch it.

"I know you can't sleep on the plane without someone's shoulder, Tomek, it's fine." Trevor says, slowly. "Kit won't mind. This isn't like, a dating thing. You and Gail aren't dating, you two

sleep on each other all the time."

"It's different, she's not dating Kit." Tomek insists, but he lets his arm be moved and the divider to go up again. "Trevor..."

"Tomek, I know you need a nap after that homestand." Trevor gently says, pulling him into a side hug and ruffling his hair. "It's fine."

Tomek sighs and leans his head on Trevor's shoulder, accepting his defeat.

[SEPT 30, 2016, 7:53 AM]

Tomek stumbles into the main room, hair everywhere and no shirt. Angel's at the stove, tending his pancakes.

"Angel, what are you doing? I'm supposed to make breakfast." Tomek grumbles, walking over to him and lightly punching his shoulder. He sighs and leans his head on his teammate. "Milk. Where?"

"Good morning to you, too." Angel laughs, messing up Tomek's hair even further. "Coach Hans came by and dropped off your strawberry milk, it's in the fridge."

"It better not be some off-brand shit like yesterday. I almost beat their ass." Tomek mumbles and opens the fridge. He grabs the pink carton. "What does this say? I don't have my contacts in."

"I don't know. It's in Vietnamese, I think." Angel says, and he flips over the pancake. "What's with you and strawberries?"

"I like them." Tomek simply says, then takes a swig of the milk. He pulls out something from his pocket and shows it to Angel. "Your phone was getting pinged, got it for you. It's from the contact called *Don't Answer*."

Angel tenses. *Dylan*. Probably bragging about Montreal's perfect preseason. He flops the last pancake onto the serving plate and turns off the stove.

"Oh." Tomek frowns, realizing. He places the milk carton on the counter. "I'll delete it."

After a moment, Angel nods. "Yeah. Thank you."

"Let's just eat." Tomek turns Angel's phone off after deleting the texts. He notes how the dark bruise that had been on Angel's temple has completely faded, a sort of symbolic recovery. He's glad that Angel didn't read them. It would've been another bruise.

"So... is it good?" Angel asks, voice low as Tomek takes his first bite. It's different from the pancakes he makes, sweeter and lighter. Tastes even better with the strawberry jelly. Tomek vigorously nods at him, almost tearing up with pride.

Angel scoffs, then goes to work on his own plate.

After breakfast, they end up on the couch watching old cartoons.

"Can you change the channel?" Tomek asks.

"No. These were my favorite." Angel says, not taking his eyes off the screen as he places the remote on the coffee table.

Tomek laughs softly at that before speaking again. "Thanks for making breakfast."

"It's no problem. You've been babying me this entire time, I wanted to... give back." Angel shrugs. "I should thank you."

"It's what I'm here for." Tomek mumbles and he kisses his cheek, just a chaste peck.

It takes Angel a little before registering he kissed him. "Oh, gosh."

"I, um, sorry, that's like, uh, habit and tradition for me." Tomek hastily says, eyes wide. "Sorry, I won't do that."

"No, I mean..." Angel turns red. "It's cute-- fine, I mean. It's fine. Should I shave?"

Tomek bursts out laughing and Angel curses himself for falling so quickly, so easily.

[FEB 13, 2004, 1:09 PM]

"*What's your damn problem?*" Hans scolds in Tagalog as they slap their boyfriend's hand away from the fish display. Shaking their head, they continue in English, calmer. "You touch, you buy, and I know you don't like tilapia for some ungodly reason."

"Sorry." Jakey says. He instead pokes at the ice next to the fish. "It's just, this place is so cool."

"You've never been in an Asian market?" Hans snorts as they pick out jars and cans and place them in the shopping cart.

"That's when I didn't have a li'l Asian in me." Jake says, leaning in a little too close to Hans.

"You are gross." Hans rolls their eyes and gently pushes him off their shoulder. They push the cart along. "You like mangos?"

"They're okay." Jake says as Hans leads them to the produce section.

"Wrong answer." Hans says as they approach the large stand. They pick a mango up and smell it. "You ever had a Filipino mango?"

"What makes them so special?"

Hans stares at Jake in the eyes as they stuff a few pounds of mangos into a plastic bag.

"Okay. Got it." Jake laughs. "You're so cute when you do that."

"What? Stare at you and pretend I'm unimpressed?"

"Well, like, I don't get that look on the ice. So it reminds me that we have this... this thing outside work, you know?" Jakey says, a sunny smile on his face. He pokes Hans' small nose, making them yelp. "Reminds me how much I like you."

"You're so sappy." Hans says, trying to play off their reddening cheeks. "It's um, it's cute."

"Pink looks good on you, sweetheart." Jakey says, offering his hand. Hans sticks their tongue out, then laces fingers with Jake's.

[OCT 2, 2016, 4:34 PM]

Angel has somehow ended up with Kit and Skyler across the table from him as he draws diagrams of Montreal's plays on a whiteboard stolen from a certain coach's office. Skyler is rearranging the the fruit bouquet while Kit intently listens.

"We were basically hyper-offense," Angel says. He uses the sleeve of his hoodie to wipe down the whiteboard. "I really didn't defend all that much. I just tried to score."

After a moment, Kit says, "Angel, you're pretty obsessed."

"That's an understatement." Skyler mumbles, taking the whiteboard and the pen. She begins to sketch the fruits in front of her. "We're not even playing them tonight."

"Yeah, I know, I just..." Angel sighs and collapses on the table. "I want to prove them wrong by destroying them."

"I get that." Kit nods and leans back into his chair. "First game as a Blade against Scheyich, I almost got thrown out by the refs 'cause I was fighting too much."

"Is that how you lost your teeth?" Skyler asks, nonchalant.

"No, but I lost my virginity." Kit says and he smiles at her, showing off the odd space between his incisors. "Just kidding. Kind of."

"That doesn't even make sense." Skyler frowns and sticks her tongue out at him. She leaves, but quickly comes back to retrieve the basket of fruit.

Kit squints at her, then turns his attention back on Angel. He sighs. "Look, Angel... You don't need to obsess over this. You're gonna bust yourself against the Wands, and we need you for the entire season."

"I know, I know." Angel says. "That's what Tahnay told me. Team needs me to be positive, but I can't. I don't know how."

"...Are you doing well? Mentally?" Kit asks. "Happy brings you a long way."

"Proving them wrong will make me pretty happy." Angel says instead of answering. "Tomek said he wants to prove them wrong, too. That Montreal didn't even deserve me in the first place."

Kit takes a deep breath, giving up. "Yeah. Sure. Get warmed up, okay? Puck drops at six."

[AUG 27, 2016, 2:57 PM]

Skyler can't focus. She can't take her mind off of her. She can't ever play against the girl who'd been so supportive, so loving.

What if she hits Timo? It's part of hockey, yes, but what if it's a bad hit? She should just end it, before it becomes too serious, before they hurt each other.

Pismo and San Francisco are supposed to be division rivals anyways, right?

Skyler shakes her head.

"You're pedaling pretty hard, Sky." Kit Lopes greets, his voice soft. He sits on the exercise bike next to her and leans on the handlebars. "Debut nerves or something else?"

She doesn't say anything to the older player, unsure if she could trust him. She pushes her legs even deeper into the motions of the pedals.

Kit frowns. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to overstep, I'm just worried about you, kid."

"It's not my parents, really, I just..." She says, slowing her pace. "I'm just being stupid."

"You're not stupid, don't call yourself that." Kit says. He reaches a hand out toward her arm in an effort to comfort her, but quickly drops it as Skyler flinches. "Sorry."

"No, it's fine, it wasn't you," Skyler mumbles. "I, um, I'm just scared to play against Timo. I'm close with her. Like, close."

Kit opens his mouth to say something about playing his old buddies, but stops, realizing that this is probably different. "Of course it's a bad risk, it makes perfect sense to be scared you might hurt her." Kit says. It's quiet in the room. "It means you really do care about her. I can promise to not hit her when we play Pismo, and I can tell the others, too."

Skyler nods, somewhat relieved, but soon her fear shifts: What if Timo hits her?

[OCT 3, 2016, 7:27 AM]

There are several papers on the desk, written on front and back, with diagrams and breakdowns. Hans is much too exhausted for this.

"How'd you get in here, Angel?" Hans sits in the chair across from him. They take a long sip of their coffee.

"It wasn't locked." Angel yawns and hands a paper to his coach. "That one's for Seattle. What to improve and stuff."

"How long have you been here?" Hans asks, trying not to look impressed at the color coded schematics.

"Twenty-four years, Coach." Angel says, struggling to keep his eyes open. He yawns again.

"Since last night's game, okay." Hans begins to stack all of Angel's papers. "Does Tomek know you're here?"

"He's in the weight room, he took a break, I'll get him..." Angel stands and heads for the door. He slams into the glass wall instead.

Hans stands, picks their player up, and dumps him back on the chair. "I'll call him."

"Don't touch my papers..." Angel says, and his eyes flutter close.

Hans takes a very, very deep breath and pats Angel's back. "You and Tomek don't like losing, huh?"

"I don't like anything." Angel retorts, voice muffled in his hoodie. "Except for winning."

"Are you gonna remember this later?" Hans asks. They are trying their best to suppress the urge to snap a picture of him and send to Khai.

Angel answers with a snore.

[OCT 4, 2016, 10:03 AM]

"Coach?"

Hans looks up from their desk to see Skyler Iwata leaning on the doorframe, hands stuffed in her pockets. There's bags under her eyes. Hans drops their pen. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... I don't know if I can play tomorrow." Skyler takes a seat across from Hans, then sighs. She rubs her face and pulls at her hair. Obviously frustrated. "You know Timo Nylund?"

"Uh, yeah. I think everyone does." Hans says, then they squint. They lean in. "What, you got beef?"

"What? No, it's just... I had a, I had a thing with her on draft night. She came to my hotel room, she and I just... We, uh..." Skyler trails off. "Yeah. You know?"

"You can play. You have to, or else the entirety of Canada will riot." Hans tries not to laugh as they jot down a note. "I'll just offset the lines so you're not against Pismo's first line, okay? You're fine."

"No, I mean, I want advice?" Skyler says, sinking deeper into the plush chair. She pulls her knees up to her chest and starts to fiddle with her necklace. "I like her but I'm afraid she thinks it was a one time thing and we're just friends."

"You're asking me for relationship advice?"

"I'm not gonna go to *Matti*."

The older snorts at that. "Dating other players is hard, okay? My advice is to let go. You have to just let it go, it really is the best option."

"But..." Skyler wants to say, *what about Kit and Trevor? They're doing awesome*. She instead shuts her mouth and says something else. "Well, did you ever try to date another player?"

"Yeah. He... got traded and never turned back for me." Hans murmurs. "Other players, they're always gonna value their own career over you."

Skyler frowns. "Okay."

Hans takes a deep breath. "I know you're gonna go after her anyways. That's fine. Just... don't hurt yourself, okay? It's the first game of the season tomorrow. San Francisco needs you."

She nods. "I'll do my best."

[OCT 5, 2016, 6:43 PM]

It takes a second for Angel to remember he's not in Canada anymore, as he had felt so at home. The Star Spangled Banner tastes strange on his lips as he mouths along and shifts his weight back and forth on his skates.

The lights go back up after the last line, and the team crowds Coach Hans for the opening plays.

Angel can barely hear, being on the far end of the bench.

"We keep right on our systems, okay? Pismo relies on errors for fast breaks and opportunities." Hans orders. "Let's take this one. First of the regular season."

Angel sees nods and hears cheers, and he tries not to snort-- Hans really did look at his papers. Tomek somehow senses him and elbows him in the ribs.

"Ow, fuck, save it for the game." Angel hisses.

Tomek rolls his eyes at him. "Sit down, puck drop is soon."

Angel plops down on the bench like a little kid having a tantrum. "Watch me be the reason we win."

"If you win, I win." Tomek says, grinning. "And if I lose, you lose. That's generally how team sports work."

"Are you two always like this?" A voice pipes up. It's Quincy Buzumna, the Blades backup goalie, slouching on her folding chair with a hat over her eyes. "You're worse than Khai and--" "Alright, alright, geez." Angel waves her off. Quincy flips him off.

Tomek hops off the bench and over the wall to replace an incoming defenseman, who then takes his place on the bench next to Angel.

"Buzz, how long was that?" Kendall Jax calls to the goalie. "Fifty? Sixty?"

"That was a solid forty seconds, Jackie." Quincy says. "Good shift."

"I should've retired last year." Jax huffs, bumping her helmet to her stick. "Angel, don't play into your late thirties like me."

"Um... Sure." Angel tries not to laugh at her completely serious tone.

"Angel!" A voice calls, and Angel jumps to his feet. He hops the boards with ease and takes his place quickly on the far ice.

Everyone looks to be in perfect sync. Tomek gives him a perfect saucer pass up the ice, and Angel carries it into zone.

Skyler blazes past him and calls for it by the net, so Angel slaps the puck in her direction before getting unnecessarily slammed into the boards by another player.

He curses as he stumbles back on his skates and makes his way towards the bench, calling for a change.

"Thirty-five seconds." Quincy says, scratching her nose with her obnoxiously large catching glove. "Can't even beat Momma Jax?"

"Please stop talking." Angel grumbles at her, taking his own gloves off and wiping his face with a towel. "Where's our nurse guy?"

"You're fine." A voice says, then quickly fades.

"He said you're *fine*." Quincy repeats. She spots Tomek coming to the boards and lights up.

"Seventy!"

"Felt like a thousand, way too fuckin' long. Puck always went down my side." Tomek sits down next to Angel, sighing. "You okay?"

"I'm f-- I mean, I'm *good*." Angel stutters out. He feels a smug pair of eyes watching him from behind.

The arena gets loud and antsy before there's a loud cheer and a foghorn. Pismo scores. Angel watches as Tahnay takes his mask off and drench himself using his heavily decorated water bottle. The goalie takes a huge breath, his chest expanding, letting the water run down his face dramatically. He smiles at the fans behind the glass instead of watching the replay of the goal.

It looks like he doesn't even care, Angel thinks.

The giant monitor above the ice now reads 1-0, and Angel can't help but grit his teeth, angry at the thought of losing. Angry at the thought of Dylan mocking him for being on the worse team. Angry at the thought that maybe, just maybe, *he* was the one who didn't deserve Montreal.

[JUNE 9, 2011, 8:38 AM]

"This is as far as I can walk you, Turk." Sadie says. His voice is soft, a rather strange contrast to his usual persona.

Tomek sighs. "Sadie Sleepingfox..."

"Yeah, yeah. You love me, you'll miss me, yeah." Sadie mumbles, and he waves his hand dismissively.

"No, Sadie. Thank you." Tomek says, somehow managing a smile. He hesitantly touches his shoulder. "For guiding me, for being a friend."

"Edmonton will miss you. I'm gonna miss you." Sadie pulls the taller into a hug. "I'm sorry for being a jerk all the time, okay. I don't know how to show affection."

"Like this, maybe?" Tomek laughs, gesturing to the hug currently occurring.

"You punk." Sadie lets him go and flicks Tomek, making him yelp in surprise. "You'll call, right?"

"Text." Tomek says, firmly. He rubs his arm. "No calls."

Sadie snorts at that. "Okay. I'll see you. Tomek."

"I'll see you." Tomek says with a nod, then walks away. He leaves his second home in silence.

[OCT 7, 2016, 9:52 AM]

"You want an apple?" Kit opens Angel's bedroom door and leans on the wall, fruit in hand.

"You gotta fiber up, we're facing *Les Vagabonds* tonight. Summon the power of your bloodline."

Angel, who had recently raided the nearest office supply store, looks up from his papers detailing strategies and counter-plays specifically for tonight's game. "Does cellulose even help with energy?"

"That's a big word. I dunno." Kit says. He sits down next to him on the one empty space on the carpeted floor. "How many hours of sleep did you get, comrade?"

"Eight hours and forty-three minutes." Angel responds. He checks something off on his rink diagram. "Y'know, all our play errors stem from bad passes and miscommunication. I thought you said Khai and Matti were supposed to be good together?"

"Were. They're much more inconsistent now, things got weird." Kit shrugs. "And... they're people. People are inconsistent. Like Poki. Sometimes he's an immaculate knee hockey player. Most of the time he's trash, even if he is bigger than the net."

Angel snickers at that. "You and Tahnay still play knee hockey?"

"That's why me and Poki came over, man. Turk holds a mini tournament every month. Mental exercise, team building stuff." Kit takes a bite of his apple. He munches loudly as he continues.

"You should join us, come on. Three versus our goalie."

The Wanderers slip out of Angel's mind for the first time in weeks, and he gladly accepts it. He stacks his papers and follows Kit out his door. "Thanks, Kit."

"What'd I do?" Kit asks, surprised.

"Pulled me out of there, I guess." Angel says. "Thank you, really."

Kit smiles and nods, mouth still full, and he pats his shoulder.

[OCT 7, 2016, 1:07 PM]

Zhenya: Hey, see you tonite! Be careful, might hurt you((Goldstrom doesn't want to play too, asked for scratch.

Angel reads Zhenya's text over and over again, frowning at how cryptic it sounded. Zhenya was never the type to crack jokes about hurting him-- or anyone, for that matter. And Jakey Goldstrom not wanting to play against him? He doesn't mention the strangeness of it all when he replies.

Angel: Hopefully we won't be on the ice at the same time..might accidentally pass to you. see you !

Angel sighs and closes his texts, ignoring the fact that he has hundreds of notifications. But, oddly enough, he only has one missed call from his sister, Eva.

Feeling guilty, he calls her back.

"Yeah?" Her familiar voice instantly relaxes him.

"You called earlier..." Angel murmurs. "What's going on?"

"I'm worried about you. I haven't even talked to you since before you got traded." Eva says.

"Jakub told me you were in bad shape when he dropped you off at the airport."

"He doesn't mind being called Jake even if you barely talk to him, you know?" Angel scolds her, trying not to laugh.

"That's not my point, Angel. Are you okay? Roomie okay? Team okay? You eating good? No candy, right?" Eva fires questions at him one after another, not giving him a chance to answer.

"Tomek is alright. I like the team. Veggies every night. No comment about the candy." Angel answers, out of breath from wheeze-laughing. "I miss you, sis."

"I miss you too, *mi hermanito*." Eva teases. "I love you, Angie."

"Love you too, Eves." Angel says back, then hangs up the call. After a moment, he realizes he didn't answer Eva's first question: "Are you okay?"

Angel doesn't know what to think, and he flops back on his bed. There's a little *thwip* sound and Angel sits back up to inspect his room. A piece of paper lies on the floor, in front of his door. He can't help but smile as he picks it up to read Tomek's note.

did you just call me "alright"

[SEPT 29, 2016, 10:04 PM]

"I don't... I don't want to hurt Dylan, either." Zhenya says, softly tapping his spoon against his coffee mug. "Angel's been like, bad to Dylan."

"It wasn't an equal fight, Z. Dylan was..." Jakey buries his face in his hands. "It was little things, little drops, over and over. Dylan hurt him a lot. You don't know."

Zhenya winces. "I thought it was only name calling. I don't wanna take sides."

"You can't--!" Jake lets his fists hit the table. He sighs, ignoring stares from strangers in the café. "I'm sorry. You just... We need to support our Tiger, you know? There's only one of him left, Zhenya."

"Dylan feels bad, sorry that Angel got hurt." Zhenya says, voice shivering. "I talk to him."

"That doesn't matter until he makes up for it, acknowledges his own faults!" Jake says. "You have to support Angel. There's no middle ground choice here. If you're not for Angel, you're just letting Dylan do it again. Enabling him."

Zhenya feels sick. After a moment, he asks, "So. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna retire after this season."

"What?"

"After this year, I'm done." Jake murmurs. "It's the last year of my contract. I'm not renewing. I'm not signing with anyone else. My game's getting slower and I don't want to be associated

with this organization anymore. I'm moving, somewhere in Silicon Valley or back home in Ottawa. I can't... I can't do this here."

"About Dylan, I mean." Zhenya elaborates. His voice is shallow and soft. Jake's going to leave, too. He might as well just be the only player on the Wands.

"I don't know. I can't prove anything. Neither can Angel." Jakey says. He pokes at his breakfast.

"I can't beat him up. He's still our teammate, even if I do want to fucking kill him."

Zhenya scoffs. "Hire a hitman?"

"They go for a lot. I want to have money to my name when I retire, Z." Jake rolls his eyes. "I'll do it myself."

[OCT 7, 2016, 4:58 PM]

Hans takes the long route around Auburns Arena from the staff and player parking lot, like they always do before games. It gives them time to think over plays and line matchups, and it's good time for the other coaches to put together their own plans and specific plays.

They're walking with their eyes cast on Angel's charts and drawings that he had left on their desk, deep in thought, so they don't see the other person that they subsequently crash into. Papers go flying.

"Sorry, sorry!" A voice begins to apologize immediately as Hans blinks and realizes that they're on the ground.

Seeing who they had bumped into, Hans slaps away the helping hand. "I'm-- I'm fine, Goldstrom, don't touch me."

Jake looks taken aback at the use of his surname. "You never... You never call me that."

Hans collects their papers hurriedly, ignoring him. "I know you don't like me, I'm sorry for bothering you."

"Hans, what?" Jake reaches out and touches their arm. Hans stops and looks up at him, only sadness in their eyes. Jakey desperately tries, "Sweetheart--"

"You left me behind." Hans murmurs. "Without even telling me."

"You were in the hospital, I had to get on the plane, it was Yom Kippur, I didn't know what to do! I..." His eyes fall to their neck, the scar somehow still bright and prominent on their dark skin. "I should've left you a note on our bed, I should've gotten a phone like you said I should, I should've visited, I'm *sorry*."

Hans scoffs. It's bitter amusement with no hint of forgiveness. "You didn't even try to find me the last dozen years."

"I thought you were dead! Most of the league thought you were dead. I... I sent flowers." Jakey says, his voice shaking. "I didn't believe it was you coaching the San Francisco last season, I... I'm scratched this game because I don't want to play against you. I th-thought you were, I didn't, I didn't know--"

"You didn't know what to do?" Hans interrupts with a mocking sneer. When met with only shocked silence, they push right past him.

[OCT 7, 2016, 6:53 PM]

Angel hears Kit's scream across the ice as he falls, holding his knee. The heat of the game freezes and the crowd quiets.

The referees have called for a stop already, and Angel sees both the Blades and the Wanderers on the bench anxiously watching as he skates closer to Kit. Trevor Hill, Kit's right winger, is down on one knee, trying valiantly to comfort him with soft words as Kit bites his own arm to muffle out his curses.

"Kit..." Angel stares, wide-eyed at his teammate. Even with the shin pads and the padding around the knee, a full speed hit right to the joint at the right angle would still tear it apart. He hears ice scrape beside him. It's Tomek, silent, horrified. He only looks on in concern, unsure what to say.

One of the team's trainers come out on the ice to check on Kit, asking simple questions that don't require verbal answers. "Can you point to where it's worst? Can you stand?"

Kit answers by motioning to his knees and shaking his head. He is still covering his face, ashamed of his pain.

Angel, Trevor, Tomek, and a handful of other Blades staff have to lift Kit onto a stretcher in order for him to leave the ice.

The crowd claps for him out of respect, while the Blades and Wanderers tap their sticks on the boards or on the ice.

Except for one person.

Angel casts his eyes down when he sees that familiar smirk. Dylan Karr.

He's glad there's a stoppage in play so Angel can sit down and swallow down the sick feeling in his mouth.

The team's morale drops lower and lower as more time passes, the offensive lines fall apart, and the score becomes 3-1 in favor of Montreal by the third and last period.

Skyler and Trevor, without Kit as their center, go out of control trying to make up for his absence. Angel hops on the ice, filling in for Jackie, when someone crosschecks Trevor dangerously close to the neck.

Skyler immediately yells and shoves the offender out of the way as referees whistle them down. All the skaters on ice crowd around the back of Montreal's net, yelling obscenities at each other.

Angel manages to push his way in front of the rookie winger, trying to protect her. "What's your fucking problem? You don't fight rookies."

"He wanted to fight me. Let the fag fight." Dylan spits. "Stop getting in his way, fucking tranny."

"You piece of *shit*!" Angel's face burns, furious. His blood turns cold and he shoves Dylan into the boards, where fans are hitting the glass, waiting for a fight. "I can't believe I used to fucking trust you."

"My fault?" Dylan laughs, and despite his shorter build, he manages to pin Angel to the glass using his hockey stick. He slams Angel into the boards as a sort of emphasis, making his helmet clack on the glass and his chest hurt. "It's all *you*. I wouldn't have *traded you*, I wouldn't have hurt *Lopes*, we wouldn't be *here* if *you* didn't act up. *This* wouldn't have happened *at all*. It's all *you*."

Dylan is jerked back by a hand, and he reacts violently by swinging and cracking the same hand.

It's Matti. He curses, cradling his wrist. It's the same one he hurt during the preseason.

The referees, deciding that the little vent quarrel has gone too far, manage to intervene and separate the teams.

Angel's pulled from the boards by a worried looking Tomek, the same look of terrified concern on his face. As the pair skates towards the bench, with Tomek supporting Angel's weight, Angel notes Skyler heading into the locker room with Matti. *It's all you*, Dylan's voice repeats. *It's all you*.

Angel feels dizzy and nauseous.

"Hey, Angie." A voice softly greets during the stoppage.

Angel looks up to see Zhenya with an unusual frown on his face and unusual bags under his eyes. "...Hey, Z."

There's an awkward beat of silence.

"I'm sorry." Zhenya says. "He, uh, got ejected by the refs, by the way."

Angel nods, dismissing his old friend, but he doesn't understand. Zhenya didn't even try to stop Dylan. He knew, but he just watched.

He sits on the bench, absorbing everything at once. The look of grief and horror on all of his teammates. Coach Hans pacing back and forth, seething. The arena is quiet.

He notes their captain, Khai, squeezing Trevor in a side hug. Her eyes are glassy as she murmurs consolation to her player.

Angel feels a hand on his back. It's Tomek's.

Angel takes a deep breath and slings his arm around his defense partner, pulling him closer.

[OCT 7, 2016, 9:03 PM]

Kit wakes up in hospital room with stitches and supports on both his knees and Matti beside him, leaning on his bed, lightly snoring. He wakes him with his elbow, annoying him with pokes and pushes. "No time for a napperooski, Matti."

Matti sits up slowly, frowning and squinting at his teammate. His right wrist is now in a removable cast to support the joint, but he manages to still point behind him with the same hand. "How come Trevs gets to sleep but I don't?"

Kit smiles, shifting his gaze to his long time partner, sleeping and snoring in a plush chair in the corner. "Because I love Trevor and Trevor is my soulmate. And soulmates can get a free pass."

Matti laughs softly at that, finding it rather delightful that Kit, despite being in pain, still finds a way to bring up the love of his life.

"I know. So cute." Kit says, beaming at Trevor. "Did anyone else visit while I was out?"

"Skyler managed to buy you flowers." Matti turns and hands Kit the bouquet of yellow roses, a little wilted.

Kit brings them to his nose anyways, adoring the sweet and somehow still fresh scent. "Tell her thank you."

"She was super quiet and looked at you like you were dying or something." Matti says. "I feel bad for her. You're one of her idols, you know."

Kit sighs at that. He never really thought of their relationship that way, a sort of mentor and apprentice type of deal. He just thought of her as a friend, his linemate. He carefully places the roses on the table next to him. "I'll call her sometime later."

Matti only nods, then leans on Kit's bed again. "We got injured by the same guy, you know?"

"Karr?" Kit scoffs at that and he furrows his brows. "Bad luck or what?"

"No, I heard what he said to Angel." His voice becomes softer. "Horrible things. He meant to hurt us."

Curiosity and anger makes Kit want to ask what the other player said, but he holds back. Kit looks down at his fingers and fiddles with the decorated ring, engraved with images of roses.

"Did the doctors tell anyone how long it'll take for me to get back on the ice?"

Matti sighs and sputters, examining Kit's legs instead of answering. There's stitches up the left shin where a surgeon had installed a metal support. Bruises all around, yellowing around the incisions. More stitches. Matti's left hand, the one with the moon tattoo, hovers over Kit's leg before resting on his thigh.

Kit almost flinches, suddenly aware of where his knees was ripped and dislocated, where he was sliced open to fix the insides.

Matti avoids looking at Kit as he speaks. "Hans tried to insist that you'll be fine by the second half of the season."

Kit shakes his head and he touches the back of Matti's head, stroking his hair.

Hans insisting on his recovery takes him back a decade, with Hans' own career ending injury. How they disappeared for weeks at a time and how they refused to go on the ice for years.

"You should check on Khai." Kit murmurs. "You know how she is with... injuries."

Matti looks at him, frowning. "Do you think she'll even let me in her house?"

"You two need to start somewhere." Kit says, and he squeezes Matti's shoulder. "I miss pre-lockout Matti and Khai, you know? The last time you were voluntarily in the same room as her--"

"I didn't leave because she was there!" Matti insists. "Angel said... something that just threw me off. I'm worried about him."

"I'm worried about you, Matt." Kit murmurs, reaching for Matti's hand. He pats it. "You know what? Get home and sleep like you wanted."

Nodding, Matti stands up. "*Jag älskar dig*, Kit."

"Love you too." Kit says, smiling his gap-toothed smile. "Goodnight."

[OCT 8, 2016, 7:24 PM]

"It's supposed to be my birthday." Jackie sighs. She rubs her eyes and turns to the rookie.

"Skyler, you want cake?"

"No, not really." She says, stabbing her salad.

"...Khai? How about you?"

Khai doesn't answer, instead, she stares at her hands.

"Cool, this is great. Not weird." Quincy says. She glances at Skyler's companion. "Timo, it's, um, nice to meet you, I guess."

"Yeah. Sorry about the timing." She shakes her hand. "I watched the game. Rough stuff."

"Rough?" Skyler, next to her, scoffs. "A little worse than rough, Timo."

Khai takes an audible breath, and everyone turns to the captain. "That game was bad for all of us. I'm sorry, Timo, you had to see us like this."

Skyler winces, but Timo forgives her with a squeeze on her hand.

"And happy birthday, Jackie!" Quincy adds. She pats her back too hard. Jackie slaps her hand away, finally smiling. "What is it? Twenty-nine?"

"Shut up," Jackie spits at her, laughing. "I can't pass as that. Not anymore, anyways."

"No, you totally can," Skyler reassures her. "If Timo can pass as sixteen, you can pass as twenty-nine."

The banter continues, light hearted, but dread stays fresh in their minds.

[AUG 30, 2016, 9:24 AM]

Timo stares at the small package in her hands, with no name on the return address. It's heavier than it looks. Her phone buzzes.

Skyler: Check your mail!!

Timo immediately brightens up at that, and hurries to find scissors to open the box. She pulls out a jacket-- it's turquoise and pink and yellow and hideous. Timo loves it. There's a note attached.

Saw this thing at some hipster shop. I hope you don't already own one of these.

Skyler

Timo laughs and immediately puts it on. It smells faintly of what Timo could only assume is Skyler's apartment: laundry detergent, candles, pillows.

She reaches into the box again, trying to find something solid within the packing peanuts, and pulls out a notebook. The first page reads:

Hi Timo!! Within this book I've written...

-reasons why I like you

-things that remind me of you

-bad poetry about us

Enjoy,

Skyler

Timo chokes back a sob. She doesn't deserve this, Skyler's never even seen her in a bad time. Shaking her head, she pulls out her phone again.

Timo

I have best girlfriend in the world...

Skyler

no, I have the best girlfriend!!

Timo smiles so hard her face hurts.

[JUNE 3, 2016, 1:57 AM]

"Get off me, bean fag." Dylan laughs, shrugging Angel's arm from around his shoulder, who then stumbles.

"I need you, Dyl." Angel mutters, then burps. "I'm fucking drunk as fuck."

Dylan reluctantly takes Angel's arm around his shoulder again, supporting his weight. He wipes sweat off of his forehead and drags the two of them to the sidewalk to wait for a taxi. He's way too sober for this.

"I need you." Angel repeats. His eyes seem glossy under the harsh street lights, half his features drowned out in shadows, but what's visible doesn't look bad at all. If Angel was still a girl, Dylan thinks, he'd be all over him... Her? He'd be all over her, even if she is bigger, heavier. He knows he's stronger.

A taxi pulls up and Dylan's reminded that he's drunk, they're both drunk, and these are nonsensical thoughts pulled to the surface by the beer. Angel's a guy, a bro. When Dylan contemplates having sex with *him* for longer than a second, it makes him puke in his own mouth a tiny bit.

Dylan has to click Angel's seatbelt in for him, since he's somehow in a worse state. He then throws a large amount of cash in the driver's general direction, tells them the neighborhood. The driver seems okay with the demand and the overpayment.

Angel's passed out on Dylan's shoulder. Dylan makes sure Angel's phone is still with him. (There's a few hundred unanswered texts, most of them from the Wanderers group chat.) Angel begins to snore. Dylan pokes at his teammate, his own ears too sensitive for that sort of noise.

"What, Dyl?" Angel says, eyes fluttering and struggling to focus on the person above him. He then says something in either French or Spanish, and Dylan recognizes his tone as affectionate. He shakes his head.

"You're snoring."

"Okay." Angel replies. He lays his head down on Dylan's thighs, heavy.

Upon arrival, Dylan tosses a few more bills at the driver, mutters a thanks, and drags Angel out of the car and into their shared townhouse. Dylan struggles to open the door with one hand and support Angel with the other. They manage to squeeze through.

"I need you," Angel repeats for the third time of the night, as Dylan basically carries him to his bed. "Dylan."

Dylan lays him down, pulls the covers over him messily. Angel grabs his hand loosely.

"What, Shep?"

"Fuck me."

Dylan waits for a few more words from Angel's mouth, but that was all. He stares at him.

"You had a boner in the cab," Angel points out, holding back a laugh. "S'okay, really, lemme just do this for you, as a friend, y'know. Fuck me."

Dylan, convincing himself that it's not gay since Angel's really still a girl in his mind, obliges and pleads guilty.

Angel remembers nothing but the bruises left on his skin.

[OCT 9, 2016, 2:13 AM]

Angel feels himself choke on his sobs and cries for help. He tries desperately to squeeze his eyes shut, but Dylan's intense blue eyes never escape his vision, almost biting. His voice is unbearably loud.

There's a blunt pain on the side of his head where Dylan had hit him. Angel hears his heartbeat thumping loudly in his ears, a kicking drum.

The air around him is too thin and the grip around his neck is too tight. He can't breathe. He can't fucking breathe.

"Angel? Angel!" A voice breaks Angel away from his nightmare. His bedroom lights are on and the atmosphere feels so much warmer. Someone is above him, hands holding his face desperately.

He recoils and retreats to the other side of his bed, against the wall, chest heaving. He's sweating and his blood is buzzing in his veins. "T-Tomek?" Angel manages, inconsistently gasping for breath through short, random sobs. "Sorry, I... I woke-- I woke you up?"

"That doesn't matter. Are you okay?" Tomek murmurs, frowning deeply. He moves to sit next to him, but gives him space. "Will you be okay?"

"It was-- it... bad dream." Angel says, being interrupted between words by his own breathing. He's barely crying now, his eyes all dried out, but his heart is still pumping hard and his legs are trembling. He pulls his knees in, hugging them. He still tries to continue. "Dylan..."

"Angel, it's okay, you don't have to." Tomek says, placing a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. "It's okay. I'm still here. Just try to breathe. Slowly, okay? Breathe."

He nods, his breath still shaking. His eyes are focused on Tomek's hand and the sound of him humming a sweet song quietly.

Tomek, half-humming and half-singing, notices Angel's fixation on his hand. He lets go of his shoulder and offers an open palm to Angel.

Hesitant, Angel only touches his hand and doesn't do anything radical like closing his fingers around Tomek's. Tomek nods and seems to understand, so he turns his palm to just simply rest his hand over Angel's.

Angel sighs in relief. His breath still stutters and hiccups, but he has significantly calmed down.

An aura of comfort seems to radiate from Tomek, so Angel leans on him, trying to absorb it.

The contact makes Angel automatically smile and scoff a little. He blushes, embarrassed.

Tomek, continuing to hum, glances at him and grins a little sideways when he sees Angel's red cheeks. Angel crinkles his nose and sticks out his tongue.

After a few minutes of Tomek half-singing and half-pandering in Vietnamese to himself and to Angel, Tomek asks, "Do you need anything else? Water or something?"

Angel's voice is soft when he asks, "Can you just... stay with me?"

"Yeah. Of course." Tomek says, lightly squeezing his defense partner's hand. "I'll protect you, I swear."

He says it so definitively, so confidently. Angel appreciates it, and he somehow has enough energy to thank him before closing his eyes and lying down on his lap. Tomek brushes Angel's hair back with his fingers once, then rests his arms on his chest.

The icy blue that was haunting Angel is slowly replaced by a warm, beautiful amber which gently lulls him to sleep.

[JAN 13, 2007, 11:10 PM]

"Emu, are you awake?" Khai asks into the dark hotel room. She pushes herself into a sitting position and turns her head to squint her eyes at the other bed, trying to trace the shape of Matti's body against the sheets.

"...Yeah." Matti says, his voice feeling like sand in his throat. He rubs his eyes. "What can I do?" "I need to talk to you." She murmurs. He should know. He needs to know.

"Of course." Matti says, then yawns. He pulls himself onto Khai's bed and sits next to her, making sure that their shoulders touch.

"I'm... I'm a girl." Khai says, breaking the quietness rather bluntly. "Transgender. I mean-- I'm not a man, okay? I'm a *she*. I don't know how I'll do this with PR, but... I wanted to tell you first, since you're my best friend."

"I still..." Matti hesitates with his words as he extends his arm around her shoulder and pulls her in tight. "I'm still with you. Will always be. No questions."

Khai's breath hitches and she feels tears threatening to fall from her eyes, liquid relief. She leans into Matti's body, warm and sheltering.

"Thank you for trusting me. I... I love you, okay?" Matti says. His voice is soft, only a breath.

"Go to sleep. We have to skate in nine hours."

"Okay. Love you too, Matti." Khai mumbles as she leans back on her pillows. "Stay with me here, please?"

"Of course."

[OCT 9, 2016, 10:04 AM]

Kit and Trevor break into soft laughter after watching Angel Sheppard stumble out of the room after his own beloved roommate, Tomek.

"They're so much like us back then, when we were new here." Kit mumbles, grinning and wrapping his hand around Trevor's smaller and paler hands. "Obvious, bumbly, crooshy crushes on each other."

"Those aren't words," Trevor says, eyes rolling. "You know... You're lucky I like you."

"Trevor Hill, my heart, my soulmate. My everything." Kit enunciates in a unnecessarily husky tone, completely butchering what could've been a sexy voice. "You're lucky you took that jacket. Check the pockets."

Trevor, raising a brow, pulls out what looks like a slice of a rough wood carved into a box from Kit's jacket pocket. "What's this?"

"Give that to me," Kit reaches for the box, and Trevor slowly hands it to him. Kit smiles and opens the box.

"Are you... proposing to me?" Trevor asks, puzzled because Kit isn't displaying the box and is instead frozen.

Kit stares at the ring on his middle finger on his right hand, engraved with roses, then at the one in the box. The ring in the box is polished wood that Kit had carved himself. It took him almost a year to perfect, as he was using manual carving techniques. It's a very different ring for a very different relationship than the one on his hand represented.

Kit closes the box and places it on the table, sighing. Trevor glances at it, and is about to say something but instead holds it back to let Kit speak.

"...Trevs, I'm sorry, I don't know." Kit weakly says, casting his eyes down to avoid Trevor's soft hazel eyes. He fiddles with the blanket on top of him, scratchy over his legs. "I'm not sure. What if you get traded away? What if I die from this? What if--"

Trevor lightly touches Kit's hands, trying to comfort him. It feels like that moment on the ice, with Kit attempting to hide his pain from the cameras and Trevor trying so hard to ease him.

"It's okay to not be ready. Just because we've been together eight years doesn't mean we have to get married, it really doesn't matter."

"But I love you." Kit says. His voice is soft, quivering, and Trevor can hear the edge in his voice before he begins to cry. "I just, I don't know. I have to keep my promise to Rosey, give this ring back to--"

"Kit. It's fine." Trevor takes his hands in his and kisses them. "He's clearly not ready for the truth, either, like how we are for getting married. Okay?"

"What does ready even look like?" Kit asks desperately, between his hiccuping breaths. "When will I know?"

Trevor doesn't have an answer.

[OCT 9, 2016, 7:28 PM]

Tomek sprints into the living room and dives over the armrest of the couch, almost like a pole vaulter, and flops perfectly in front of the TV. He seems proud of himself when he grabs the remote off the small table and clicks the power button.

Angel, locking the door behind him, tries not to laugh as he takes a seat next to his defense partner, eyes fixed on the screen.

"Would you ever do that?" Tomek asks as the baseball game goes to commercials. His eyes are on Angel, the bronze of his iris shining in the setting light.

"What, baseball?" Angel asks, laughing. "I did play Little League. Made the Canadian trials."

"No, I mean..." Tomek sighs and shakes his head. "Should've clarified. Would you be the Trevor to my Kit if I was stuck in the hospital?"

"Yeah. Of course." Angel says without thinking twice, or thinking about what deeper meaning Tomek was implying. "I care a lot about you, Tomek."

Angel's eyes widen at how cheesy and embarrassing he sounded at the very moment, but he doesn't attempt to deny it. Tomek scoffs at him, trying to play off his own pink cheeks.

Wanting to change the topic, Angel grabs the TV remote and changes the channel.

"Hey, I was watching that..." Tomek whines, reaching for the remote in his hand. He climbs on top of his teammate, elbows and knees stabbing him.

"Too bad," Angel says, and he's wheezing for air. He pushes him off of the couch, which is then accompanied with a *thump*. Angel, victorious, throws the remote on the the other side of the couch.

"Jerk," Tomek mumbles from the floor, and before Angel can laugh, he finds himself being pulled off by him.

And now, Tomek's on top of Angel. The room seems suddenly hotter and smaller. Angel never realized the full extent of Tomek's freckles, dotting his neck, chest, shoulders, arms, and hands. A small scar from his forehead down to his brow breaks up the pattern, a crack on the sun.

It takes a while for Angel to become aware of Tomek staring right back at him, thinking the same beautiful things as him, about him.

"Angel?" Tomek finally says, breaking the silence. His right hand gently pushes away a stray strand of hair on Angel's face. "Is it okay if I..."

Angel furrows his brows, not quite knowing and not quite believing what the other is asking of him. He brings his own hand to his, touching Tomek's fingers. "If you what?"

"Is it okay if I kiss you?" Tomek finishes, voice trailing off. He winces and brings his hand back to himself, squeezing his arms to his chest.

"It's more than okay," Angel says, observing Tomek's shaky breath. "...Oh, come here."

Tomek yelps as Angel sits up and he ends up in his lap. He settles after a few seconds.

Angel's about to say something witty, but Tomek leans in quickly to give him a gentle kiss right on the lips.

Although surprised, Angel doesn't pull back. He leans into it.

"You really do like strawberries," Angel says after pulling away.

Tomek blushes even harder, resembling the very fruit-- his freckles being the seeds, of course.

Later, when the two are back on the couch comfortably, Tomek switches the channel back to the baseball network.

Angel tenses when he recognizes the picture in front of him. It's the ballpark in Montreal, home of the Expos. The last time he saw the Expos play was almost a month ago, right before his trade.

Tomek glances at him, then at the TV, and widens his eyes. He scrambles for the remote and turns it off.

Angel stares at his own reflection of the dark screen, thinking about Kit and Matti's injuries, both caused by Dylan. Tomek might be next if Dylan knows about them. No, Tomek *will* be next and Dylan *will* know about them.

"Angel? You okay?"

"I can't, I really can't." Angel says, softly. "We can't do this."

"What?" Tomek frowns. "We don't have to be public with this."

"No, I can't." Angel repeats, voice trembling. Dylan will find out. He always will.

And it'll be all Angel's fault.

[OCT 12, 2005, 2:00 AM]

It seems like there's a loud ringing coming from the left of Hans, and it's annoying enough to wake them from sleep.

The ringing stops as soon as Hans opens their eyes. After a moment, they realize that their neck is in some kind of a brace to limit movement. Hans also can't feel their face, but manages

to take a look around anyways.

Khai Harper is to their right, holding their hand. She seems to have fallen asleep whilst praying over them. Hans manages to shake her awake.

"Fuck." Khai groggily says. She blinks as her mind wakes up. "...Hans, oh my god, I thought that you were gonna die. You were like, bleeding out, the game was postponed and--"

"Khai." Hans says, somehow. "It's fine, I'll be back soon."

"Don't talk, the doctors said you shouldn't strain it." Khai murmurs. "It'll be okay."

Hans, now feeling the pain, gives her a thumbs up.

Khai sighs. "Go back to sleep, Hans. It's actually pretty late. I'll visit in the morning, but for now, it'll just be you and the flowers."

Flowers?

After Hans waves a pathetic goodbye to the other Blade, they slowly turn their head to the table to their left. There's a vase, full of yellow roses.

The pale hospital lights make them look sickly.

[OCT 10, 2016, 8:32 AM]

It's cold and the fog still hasn't lifted in the the hills. Angel keeps jogging, trying to convince himself he'll warm up even though he keeps slowing down to check his phone for any texts from Tomek.

He shivers, remembering the note his roommate had left him.

I'm really sorry about last night. I want to make this work still

It's 3am and still worried. i'm going to sleep in. i love you.

Tomek

The sun is out but Angel feels no heat, which is typical in San Francisco, but he can't help but think it as some metaphor about his situation. He shakes his head, pulls his hoodie up, and begins to run a little faster.

Can a relationship even work?

Well, yes. He's seen Kit and Trevor and their dedication and loyalty to each other. They've been together almost a decade.

But can it work with Dylan Karr watching?

A mental image of Tomek laying motionless on the ice pierces Angel's heart like a bullet, making him stumble on his feet and stop, chest heaving.

Angel loves him, he really does, but too much to let him become a target of Dylan's.

Angel finds himself outside a cafe, hunched over, taking short and irregular breaths. He checks his pockets for cash and only finds lint and gum wrappers. Cursing, he takes out his phone and opens the bank app, only to then realize his account was frozen because of the massive amount of money he had spent in one day on office supplies.

"Why am I like this?" Angel mutters to himself, then turns his phone off.

"...Angel?" A voice says accompanied with a tap on his shoulder, and he looks up to find a concerned looking Tahnay. His hair is a sad, dusty pink in the washed out light and he seems older than usual. Still better than Angel's patchy beard, sleepless eyes, and messy hair, though.

"Come inside," Tahnay says. Angel allows himself to be herded through the doors of the cafe and to a booth towards the back, where Hans was chatting with Khai.

"Hey, Angel," Khai greets, her voice unusually cheery. It seems genuine too, especially since Hans doesn't roll their eyes.

"Khai. Coach." Angel reciprocates awkwardly and sits across from the two. Tahnay closes Angel into the situation by sitting next to him.

"Where's Tomek?" Hans asks, bringing a big coffee mug to their lips.

"He, um, slept in." Angel says. He feels guilt pulling at the muscles of his back.

"That's weird." Khai comments, voice concerned. She fiddles with her twists as she continues.

"He's such a morning person."

Angel shrugs, a dismissal; at the same time, he tries to loosen the tightness in his shoulders. He changes the topic. "Well, why are you so happy?"

"She and Matti are dating again," Tahnay says, a dorky grin on his face, which looked strange considering his usual expression was rather serious. "Back together, finally."

"It... It's not official," Khai is flustered, playing with her hair even more. But, she's smiling.

"Might as well be." Hans slaps her hand, right where a small sun tattoo was.

Angel realizes why it had seemed so familiar before. It's because he's seen the other half: Matti's crescent moon.

He can't help but sigh at that. He's always wanted a long, committed, self-healing relationship. Tahnay and Khai don't hear him over their chatting, but the coach, ever observant, catches it. Hans gives him a worried look and mouths "Tomek?" at him.

Angel winces.

After his teammates had convinced him to eat at least some food, Hans offers Angel a drive home. He accepts, grateful for the kindness but reluctant to follow up on why he sighed and was all sulky in the first place.

At a stoplight, Hans finally breaks the ice. "Playing Montreal was hard for you, I know."

Angel leans back into the worn leather seats of Hans's car. He says nothing, only because he doesn't know how to respond.

"I know... I know you're frustrated we lost, that we're not good enough. Frustrated we lost Matt and Kit for fuck knows how long. Frustrated at... at whatever happened between you and Tomek." Hans says. It's strange, watching them talk and drive. They seem like they have two different brains: hesitant in language but smooth on the road.

Angel nods, still speechless. Frustrated is right, but Hans left out his paranoia about Dylan. He wonders if they know.

"But bad things happen all the time, okay? Things don't work as planned." Hans says. They're trying to make their voice assertive, but instead sounds defeated. "You have to adapt and try to make things work. And if they-- if they don't..."

"Hans," Angel softly says, unsure how to comfort them. He watches as they take a deep breath and continue driving like nothing had happened.

"You can only move on. You have to forget about the Wands sometime." Hans says, voice soft as the car pulls into a parking lot. "You don't belong to Montreal anymore. They don't control you anymore."

Angel can't help but wonder about the hurt behind his coach's image. "Hans?"

Hans pulls the parking brake and shuts the engine off. They lean on the steering wheel.

"Yeah?"

"What did you have to let go?"

Hans laughs, more nostalgic than bitter, and they finally let their tears run. "My dreams, Angel."

The scar on their neck seems to flash in the dim light, and Angel's heart drops. "Oh. Right."

Hans catches Angel staring, and they laugh again. "Not just that. My b... my best friend left me behind and never talked to me again."

"Hans," Angel says, and he feels helpless.

"I don't want you to just give up because horrible shit happened." Hans murmurs. "I gave up because I thought I had nothing else to hang on to. But you... You have this team behind you, okay? You have Tomek, even if you think you don't. He really does care about you, you know."

"...I know." Angel nods, the blood inside his veins buzzing.

Hans weakly smiles back.

[OCT 11, 2016, 9:37 AM]

"To think all of this was because of one game," Tahnay comments, watching from the far end of the ice as Hans rubs their eyes, then scribbles out everything on their notepad.

"I like the concept behind Murphy's Law, but sometimes it manifests at the shittiest possible time." Quincy, beside him, says. She lies down on the ice and sighs. "Trevor's fucked up without Kit. Iwata's lost all her spirit because Trevor's all business now. Khai can't even offer any help because she's so busy falling back in love with Matti. And not to mention Angel's being a lifeless dick because of losing to the team that traded him."

"Lifeless dick?" Tahnay repeats. He takes a knee and taps her on the mask. "What's that mean?"

"Look at him. He has no passion anymore." Quincy says. She sits up.

Angel's on the bench, refusing to talk to his new defense partner. All of the coaching staff worked to rearrange much of the lines and pairings following the game against Montreal. Even though everyone's been practicing, everything is going wrong with the knowledge that Kit's career may be over and Matti can't come back for months.

"This is bad." Tahnay murmurs. "We're falling apart. We're hopeless for tonight's game, even if we are playing Turk's horrible former team."

"...Where is he, anyways?" Quincy asks, scanning the ice.

"Scratched. He said he feels sick and he looks the part. I had to drive Angel here." Tahnay says, taking his mask off and wiping his face. "Hans told me that he and Angel are... working things out?"

"Khatti style?" Quincy asks, and she snorts. "Pretending everything is great? Ignoring everyone else?"

Tahnay only frowns in response and skates to meet with the group of D-men, huddled around Coach Alkaev, arguing about the backcheck plays.

Gail Charbonneau, who's supposed to be Angel's replacement partner for tonight's game, is half-heartedly poking a puck around, a scowl on her lips, occasionally glancing at Angel sitting on the bench.

"It's not you." Tahnay offers, his voice gentle. "Angel blames himself."

"I still feel bad." Gail says. She sighs. "I want the team to do good after last game, I don't want us to spiral down. I'm worried about him, about Tomek. About what happened between them."

"I know, Charzie." Tahnay says. "I know."

[OCT 13, 2016, 3:04 PM]

Tomek finds Angel asleep on a reclining chair in the hotel lobby, a notebook splayed open on his chest, his hair tangled. Carefully, Tomek takes the notebook and places it on nearby table. He tries not to look, but he recognizes his name written on the page as he shuts the notebook. Tomek doesn't open it again, but he's still bothered by it. He gently shakes Angel's shoulder to wake him up. "Angel, hey."

Angel grumbles and pulls his feet up to his chest.

"You okay?" Tomek asks.

"Fuck, who cares, are you okay?" Angel blinks hard and sits up. "Are you gonna play tonight?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm fine," Tomek says. He's caught off guard by the concern.

Angel spots the notebook on the table, then looks back at Tomek. "...Did you read what I wrote?"

"No. I promise."

Angel nods, and Tomek can't quite decipher his expression. He wants to tell Angel that he does love him, that he misses him. He feels like he fucked everything up with the kiss. Fucked it all up just with one touch. The thing is, he has no idea how Angel feels.

But is it really that hard to talk?

"Turk," Angel says, his voice soft, hesitant. He tugs at Tomek's hand. "It wasn't anything bad, really, I was just... Our defense wasn't solid without you, you've got speed that the rest of us don't. I was thinking on paper."

Tomek is still processing what Angel had called him. He pulls his hand from Angel's grip before saying, "You've never called me Turk before."

Angel says nothing, only wincing.

"You're trying to distance yourself." Tomek accuses him, his body tensing.

"I don't want us to end up like... I don't want this to hurt the team--"

"No. It's okay." Tomek interrupts. "I get it. This can't work, I'm sorry. We can just forget it, okay? We can just go back to being teammates."

Angel just nods. This isn't what Tomek wanted, and he's only half-sure that Angel feels the same regret.

When he leaves to take shelter in his hotel room, Tomek begins feels so guilty to the point of sickness. Bile in his stomach rises. It burns the back of his throat and leaves a disgusting taste on his tongue.

He doesn't play that night.

[JUN 7, 2004, 11:09 PM]

Kit's legally not allowed to be in the locker room, being only eighteen years old, while his teammates are popping bottles and waterfaling six beers at once.

So, he waits patiently in a conference room, fruit bowl in front of him, smiling to himself. He's finished his interviews, texted back all his congratulations, and threw his gear over the glass to fans. The realization actually settles in.

King Cup Champion.

He leans back in the chair with a "Huh."

After a minute or so, someone takes the seat right across from him. It's Séraphin Belrose, soaked in champagne and sweat. Strangely, he isn't smiling. "Kit Lopes," he addresses him formally, carefully. "I'm gonna ask you a big favor."

Kit furrows his brows, confused at his mood, at this change of pace. They just won-- he seems so down. "What's up, Rosey?"

Finn slips off one of two rings on his hand and places it on the table. It looks like a wedding band. "Give this to Biel Sheppard's kid. He'll go professional one day, you might... I don't know. I don't know how else I would give this."

Biel Sheppard? That was years ago, wasn't it? Kit stares at the ring sitting on the table. "Rosey, what are you talking about?"

"When Biel's kid is ready, you give it. Okay? Or... Or find a way to get it back to him." Finn murmurs. "It doesn't belong to me, it never did. It was Biel's."

Kit takes it and slips it on his middle finger. It feels heavy. There's a series of beautiful engraved roses on the band.

Finn looks like he wants to say something, but can't bring himself to do it.

Kit asks, "You're not in touch with his family?"

Finn winces. "I used to send the kids gifts, but they moved or something. Biel's old agent lost contact, too."

"Are you gonna retire?" His voice is soft. Kit traces his fingernail along the grooves of the ring, memorizing the lines and curves. "Is that why you're asking me?"

Finn sighs and bites his hand before continuing. "I'm sick, Kit. I'm really, really, sick."

"What?"

"I've already pushed my body too hard by playing this season." Finn shakes his head. "I've been taking stuff for my heart but they say it's getting worse."

"No, Finn, what?" Kit doesn't want to believe him. "You're fine. You're young."

"I'm old enough to be your father. I've played too long. Much too long." Finn laughs. His expression is bittersweet. "I should've just stopped at the solid four-oh, eh? Look at all this gray hair."

Kit bites the inside of his cheek. After a harsh silence, he speaks again, voice cracking. "I'm scared, Finn."

"You're fine, you've been fine living on your own." Finn says. His eyebrows furrow, worried about the rookie.

"No, I mean... I only signed a one year deal with the Thunder. I'm a free agent tomorrow." Kit murmurs. "And I don't think the Thunder want me back after the drama. A lot of teams don't want me."

Finn only nods. "You probably wanna get away from here, yeah."

"Do you think I was right?" Kit asks, desperately. "He called me shit that hurt, that no one should bring up."

"You ended a career," Finn says, soft. "But you defended yourself against a wrong, didn't you? He brought up your family."

Kit can't answer him.

[AUG 14, 2011, 4:19 PM]

It's vaguely comforting to know that development camps are basically the same throughout all the teams in the NHA. Full of strangers. Smelly. Hellish.

"How are you holding up?" A voice greets from behind Tomek. He turns and sees a shorter player, her long black hair in a low bun: Gail Charbonneau. She's the only San Francisco Blade Tomek had really talked to so far.

"Doing fine." Tomek responds, shrugging. "Apartment is big, roomy."

"Your paycheck is big." Gail snorts, her nose crinkling. "Which I find weird."

Tomek laughs at the half-flattery. "Stop it."

Gail just smirks. "So, you gonna start the drill?"

Tomek turns to see a teammate patiently waiting for a pass at the other side of the ice. He curses at himself, tosses a saucer pass, then skates up. But Tomek's not really embarrassed, no, and he keeps a smile on his face.

[JUN 17, 2000, 8:36 PM]

Tahnay has always loved performing haka. For his school, at weddings, when he used to play rugby.

Performing a haka on the ice, in skates, at the first ice hockey world tournament in which New Zealand and Australia are involved in is a little different.

By the end of the haka, the ice is all chipped and the Finnish team is tapping their sticks in appreciation, but Tahnay can see the somewhat frightened looks the Finns are giving.

Tahnay feels good, the team feels good, and Tahnay's near perfect performance in net allows Team Oceania to secure a win.

He's interviewed after the game and confuses the reporters a bit with the amount of words he is managing to get out. Maybe it's the accent, too.

The reporters disperse after a bit, and a shorter man approaches. "Pokiha?"

"That's me. You looking for something, mate?"

"Are you looking to play in the NHA?" He asks. The man is smiling, clearly excited. He pats Tahnay's shoulder hard enough that Tahnay feels the ring on it. "I know Minnesota's looking for a goalie, and a shutout against a powerhouse of a team is gonna draw attention."

"The NHA?" Tahnay repeats. He's still stuck on that. "The NHA wants me?"

"I'm just letting you know, Poki, don't be surprised if you get contract offers after this tournament."

"The NHA." Tahnay says, again.

The man nods, laughing. "Yes, the NHA. Good luck, okay?"

Tahnay shuts his mouth to keep from repeating himself again and smiles. He manages to say thanks, but he's still thinking the same thing, those three letters.

The NHA.

[OCT 11, 2016, 10:24 PM]

"I'm home." Angel calls into the apartment. He locks the door behind him and walks over to the couch. Tomek stirs from his sleep when Angel sits down next to him.

"Hi," Tomek softly says, reaching for Angel's hand. He gladly takes it, though hesitant.

"Hey." Angel studies his hand, tracing his finger on his freckles to make constellations. He looks back up at Tomek after a while, who was blinking sleepily and watching. Angel smiles at that, at this calm interaction. "You gonna sleep here?"

"Yeah." Tomek mumbles. "Don't wanna walk."

Angel snorts, then stands to pick his partner up. "That's not good for you. Come on."

Tomek has enough energy to wrap his arms around Angel, but it's more of a hug than a safe and steady grip. "You... best boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? Are you drunk?" Angel asks and he squints at Tomek. He walks rather slowly down the hall, secretly thinking about how Tomek's weight in his arms makes him feel grounded. It also makes him a little scared, reminded about the strain on his shoulders and mind from carrying an injured Kit off the ice.

"I'm not drunk." Tomek says. His face is red and he's struggling to keep his eyes open. "I didn't drink the Amsterdam beer."

"Wasn't it Belgian?"

"I said that."

"Go to sleep, Tommy." Angel lays him on his bed and tucks a strand of hair behind his ear lovingly. In response to his touch, he curls up and smiles. After just a few moments, he falls asleep. As he pulls a blanket over Tomek, Angel scoffs and wonders if this is how Tomek felt that first week of babying him and caring for him.

He turns the lights off, closes the door, and sighs as he heads to his room. There's a note attached to his door from Tomek, but his handwriting is strangely slanted to the left and angular, as opposed to his loose and bubbly lettering.

Im sorry. I love you but I cant help if you dont tell me whats wrong

Please I cant bear to see you so QUIET

Angel carefully unsticks the note from his door and holds it tight in his hand. He knows that worrying so much about what a former teammate he plays twice a season will think about him is a little ridiculous. But how about when that teammate has assaulted him? Purposely injured Matti and Kit? Scarred Skyler Iwata for the rest of her career?

Even with all of Angel's gel pens, papers, and notebooks, he can't explain his fear. He can't explain how staying apart is safer for the both of them as well as the team. He can't explain how much he actually loves him and how important he is to him and how much he really needs him.

Angel passes out in a pile of blank papers, the L-word not quite getting past the pencil.

[OCT 11, 2016, 8:02 PM]

Tomek has trouble counting the number of empty beer bottles on the coffee table. He can still count it in Czech, though, so he's not that out of it yet. That's what he tells himself, anyways, as he increases the volume on the TV and he yells at his teammates on the screen. His phone buzzes.

Sadie: JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE TEXTING ME DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE NOT DRINKING ALONE

Sadie: NOT A CHIRP I AM GENUINELY CONCERNED

Tomek doesn't like that logic. He texts Sadie, telling him he doesn't like that logic at all.

Sadie: I dont speak czech dumbass

Sadie: The translator app doesn't even do anything to that sentence

Tomek: sadie. I'm. Thinking. That Angel is mad at me.

Tomek:just....Look at him play? He's very? Mad??

Tomek: im scared. sadie. he doesnr like me

"Fuck." Tomek mumbles to himself. He can't, Angel had said. Can't. What does that even mean? Is it him? Was that supposed to be a soft rejection?

Tomek's phone buzzes again, and he flinches, thinking that it could be Angel. He shakes his head, watching as Angel misses simple cross pass from Charzie.

Maybe he is out of it after all.

Sadie: ...Tomek, it's clearly some kind of personal thing, he still loves you, he's just having trouble

Sadie: He just needs support

Sadie: YOUR support

Tomek stares at his phone, shivering. He punches out a response.

Tomek: i will try

[OCT 12, 2016, 8:23 AM]

Waking up in his own bedroom for the first time in five days is a relief. Kit feels safe and cozy with Trevor snuggled against him, the dying summer light filtering through the blinds. It feels normal for a second, almost like the team had just come back from a road trip, but a sharp pain shooting from Kit's foot to his knee shocks him back into reality. He feels the muscles in his legs begging for freedom. The stiff support keeps his entire left leg stationary, making it impossible for him to stretch out. His right knee is technically doing much better than his left, with only a soft brace, but it still can't hold Kit's weight without him collapsing.

Trevor senses his distress, wakes up, then groggily asks, "You need the pills?"

"Please, fuck." Kit murmurs, squeezing his fists so hard that his nails leave little indents in the palm. The bed shifts as Trevor stands, causing another jolt up his leg.

The dull pain is familiar, not new at all-- he'd taken a hit to the knees years back, but he had recovered within months. He knows that this is different, though. With the amount of damage to the ligament along with the knee, it's doubtful Kit will be able to walk again, much less skate.

"Hey." Trevor greets, reentering the room. "How're you feeling?"

"Not as immaculate as usual, Trevs." Kit says, and he gladly accepts the prescription painkillers and a glass of water. Trevor doesn't know, like the rest of the team, like the rest of the league. He just doesn't know how to break the official news that he'll never step on the ice again with them, he'll never slingshot around the net to backcheck, he'll never be buried in celebrating teammates ever again. He hasn't even told his agent and he has somehow dodged every single phone call he has gotten since he was hit. Kit places the glass on his nightstand and sighs.

"I tried to look for you, for a pass. Couldn't find you. Panicked and dumped the puck, turned it over." Trevor softly says and sits down on the floor near Kit. Kit reaches for Trevor's hand, and Trevor gladly takes it. "And Skyler called for you. Then later, she called me Matti. She... I'm really worried about her, she's not playing like she used to. Not even talking."

Kit doesn't know what to say. No one's playing like they used to. Sure, the Blades won against Edmonton last night, but it was disgustingly messy. Angel struggled to connect his passes with Charzie, the first line only scored accidentally, and the only reason why they had managed to win is because Tahnay held down the fort.

Kit gives a forced smile, but Trevor feels his growing bitterness and frowns back.

"I'll... I'm gonna go get groceries, do you want anything?" Trevor sits up, gently placing Kit's hand back on the bed and patting it.

"Can you get me pizza?" Kit murmurs. He smiles again, flashing that gap where teeth used to be. "No olives."

"I can't believe I love you so much as I do, Kitchi." Trevor laughs, then kisses him.

"Love you too, Hillsy."

Trevor scoffs at the nickname, and the two sit in content silence for a minute or so before speaking again. "You'll be okay by yourself, right?"

"You think I can't function without you?" Kit teases, but both knows that there's a little truth in it.

It becomes silent again.

[OCT 12, 2016, 6:29 PM]

The hotel room is warm and the colors are welcoming, but it's not enough to turn Angel's anger away from himself.

In his bag, along with his clothes, Angel had brought notebooks and pencils. On the plane earlier, he had stared at a blank page for ages. Tomek had been looking at him and his paper expectantly, but he eventually gave up and went to sleep, leaning on the wall of the plane instead of Angel's shoulder like he would usually do. It ended up frustrating Angel further. He goes over the printout of the road trip schedule again. Bow River Colts, then the Whulge Riptide. Then back over the border to face Seattle, then Minnesota. Tomorrow, breakfast at eight, skate at Bow River's practice facility at ten.

Angel sighs and places the paper on the desk. It's early, but Angel already feels exhausted. He's not in the mood for food and had turned down an offer from Tahnay to go out for dinner. Angel unzips his bag and pulls out the blank notebook along with a pencil. He vaguely remembers one of his childhood counselors telling him to write down what he feels, to visually organize his mind. In theory, it'll help Angel recognize what is wrong and unstress him a little. He writes:

Shit. Shit. Bow River, bus leaves early. Tired. Very tired because of last night against Edmonton. Tomek used to play for them thats when we met during allstar game. Didn't really get to know him bc too busy with self. I was kind of stuck up but we clicked well during the game. I miss him so much and I do love him but I'm just so afraid that

The tip of the pencil catches on the paper and it rips. Growling, Angel breaks the pencil in two, the wood splintering. He buries his face in his hands. *No, that didn't help.*

There's a rhythmic knock on his door and Angel appreciates the distraction.

Angel opens the door to a concerned looking Gail Charbonneau in sweatpants and a hoodie much too big for her.

"Can we talk?" Gail asks, soft.

It's strange seeing her like this. On the ice, she's usually upbeat and bright, but her youth has somehow disappeared. Instead, her expression is dark, her black hair messy.

Angel nods and lets her into the room, though unsure. "What's up?"

"About last night..." Gail says. She takes a seat on the bed and begins fiddling with her fingers, pulling and popping the joints nervously. "I'm still feeling bad. We're not playing together well."

Angel nods. He sits next to her, watching as she lets out a groan and flops backward onto the mattress.

"I don't think the new lines are working." Gail says, and she sounds defeated. "I was talking to Sasha on the plane. She was trying to reorganize the O-lines but nothing seemed to balance without Kit and Årud. Not even the call-ups that replaced them."

Angel nods again. "Yeah, I guess. We lost two of our best forwards, of course we can't bounce back that quickly."

A beat of silence.

"Angel?" Gail says, her voice cautious.

"Yeah?" He turns to look at her, but her eyes are focused on the ceiling, not him.

"What's wrong?"

Angel frowns. "What?"

"I mean, why aren't you talking with Turk?" Gail asks, point-blank. "Are you two okay?"

"We're fine," Angel says, defensively. It's such a bad lie.

"Look, Angel..." She sits up and pulls her legs to her chest, pushing her face on her knees. Her voice is muffled as she continues. "I can't stand to lose any more of my teammates. You have to make up with him before tomorrow's game, reform our defense. You're giving our coaches so much stress on top of injuries. Me and you, we're not compatible. I know you know that."

"I... I can't." Angel says. "I'm sorry."

She shakes her head, laughing. It's almost resentful. "Why the hell are you saying sorry to me?"

Her words burn into his heart and it hurts. He wants to explain that this is the best choice for everyone, that this is really for the team. Tomek's career deserves to go on without scars from Angel's past.

Angel is left alone in his room. *That didn't help, either.*

[OCT 16, 2016, 10:04 PM]

Quincy throws her helmet into her stall and buries her face in her hands. The locker room is murmuring, discontent, which makes Quincy even angrier at herself.

Gail sits on the bench next to her. "It's one game."

"It's my first fucking one this season." Quincy spits back. She pulls at her hair. "We even did the fucking haka before the game."

The other woman twists her mouth at that. "It's important for Tahnay to do it and lead it when he feels we need inspiration."

"Because I'm a shit goalie?"

"Quincy, no, you're good, just..." She desperately tries to refute her. "Our defense--"

"No. I know you like taking blame for me. Stop. I know I'm no Axelsson. I know I let in stupid goals."

Gail can only sit there to be there for her. It's really not Quincy's fault, the rest of the team knows it, especially Angel.

Quincy blames herself for the loss, but Angel knows that he caused it. Too slow. Bad passing. Messy systems.

All of that crumbling, with a single touch.

[OCT 17, 2016, 5:46 PM]

Waking up in a puddle of drool is disgusting, but hey, at least it was a good nap for Tomek, a good rest at home before the rest of the roadie. He rolls out of bed to head to the bathroom when he spots a bright pink note stuck to his door.

Sorry about the mess. Please don't freak out.

Angel

Tomek blinks, rereading it. "Angie?" He calls into the apartment.

"I'm on the couch." His voice responds, sounding rather sad.

The air feels tense as Tomek slowly walks towards the living room. He first sees Angel curled up on the couch, a pillow clutched to his chest. Angel is staring at him, expectant.

Tomek's widened eyes drop to the shattered coffee table and a broken trophy, then back at Angel.

"I, um... had an episode." Angel murmurs. His voice still has traces of panic embedded in the tone.

"Is that your Matthews Trophy?" Tomek asks, his voice quiet, almost scared.

"I mean. It was." Angel says. He avoids his eyes.

The figure of Matthews has her little hockey stick snapped in half and the entire base of the trophy had disconnected. All of this is laying in a pile of shattered glass underneath the empty skeleton of the table.

Tomek slips on a pair of flip-flops and carefully fishes out the pieces of Angel's past success. He places them on the couch next to him. "You should rest."

"Y-yeah. Okay." Angel stutters out. He carefully hops off the couch and tiptoes around the scene. Tomek flinches when he brushes against him and Angel pretends not to notice.

As he closes the door behind him, he looks at the wreckage in his own room that Tomek didn't even see. There's a mountain of crumpled papers in the corner, most of them blank. (He had blamed the paper and not himself for not being able to produce an idea of how to apologize to his roommate.)

His chair is stacked with sweats, jeans, and dress pants he hasn't bothered to put away in his drawers yet. The bed remains unmade from the morning, sheets everywhere. He kicks a pillow into the wall, and to his surprise, there's something under it.

Kit's lucky jock, in all its off-white glory.

Shit. Angel blinks, conflicted over how he should feel. Kit's still in a wheelchair and majorly struggling with physical therapy. Angel's not really all that superstitious, but maybe the lack of luck had caused all these bad things to happen.

He nudges it with his toe. Yup, it's real. He pinches himself. Still real.

Sighing, he picks it up. Shivers run through his body and he drops it instantly. It's the same feeling of enlightenment from the first time he shook Tomek's hand.

"Fuck," Angel slips out.

It wasn't Dylan Karr at all hurting Tomek.

It was *him*.

Angel was the one scaring Tomek off. Angel was the one making Tomek doubt himself. Angel was the one to push Tomek away, to push Tomek to drinking too much.

Grabbing the jock and stuffing it into his hoodie pocket, Angel makes his way out of the apartment without Tomek noticing and to the nearest train station. He needs to give the luck back to Kit.

[OCT 17, 2016, 6:31 PM]

"Angel?" Trevor answers the door with a concerned expression. "What's up?"

"Where's Kit?" Angel asks, shifting his weight back and forth on his legs. His hands are stuffed in the pocket of his jacket, snapping at the elastic of the lucky jock.

"Come in," Trevor widens the entryway to let Angel through. "He's at the table."

"Okay." Angel calls back. He notes that Trevor doesn't follow him, strangely enough.

Kit is leaned back on his wheelchair, typing furiously on his phone. He glances up and greets Angel with a measly "Hey."

"I, um, I found your lucky jock in my room." Angel says, bluntly, because he has no idea what else to say.

"Oh, shit." Kit murmurs as Angel hands it to him. He lets out a small laugh as he tosses it into a bin on the other side of the room. "And I thought Khai stole it."

"Yeah." Angel awkwardly agrees.

Kit sighs and shakes his head. "Have you eaten, kid?"

"Oh. No, not since noon." Angel says. "I'm not that hungry."

There's a tense quietness before Kit starts again. "Angel, just let it all out. Say everything on your mind. No judging."

Instead of talking, Angel takes a deep breath and instead shakes a snow globe on the table. It's a miniature of Boston, Trevor's hometown. He stares at the specks float down between the buildings for a long time, since it reminds him of that cold autumn morning when he had escaped the Wanderers. He had always stared at passing buildings as Zhenya and Jake drove him around, reliving his entire experience in Montreal from childhood. "...I feel like I know my dad as well as everyone else did." Angel finally says, quietly. Kit's taken aback, not expecting the topic at all. "He left when I was just a kid and died only a few years later. I really only know him through what Belrose had said about him, through the documentaries. He's just Gabriel Sheppard to me."

"I, uh, played with Belrose my rookie year with Scheyich." Kit mumbles. "He would talk about you and your family sometimes."

"Oh." Angel shakes the snow globe once again, watching as the glittering flakes fall between Boston skyscrapers. "What'd he say?"

"He... He would talk about sending gifts on holidays, but he lost contact when you guys moved or something." Kit says. "He gave me stuff when he retired to give to you, hoping that you'll go professional too, then I can eventually give you what he gave me."

"Like what stuff?" Angel asks, finally looking up. He watches as Kit wiggles a ring off his middle finger and places it on the table.

"That... That's yours." Kit murmurs.

"What?"

"You don't know, huh?" Kit looks up at him.

Angel picks up the ring, confused. It looks like a wedding band, complete with a row of carved roses. The letters SB are engraved on the inside, along with the phrase *For Love*. "These aren't my parents' initials."

"They're not, you're right." Kit says, softly. "They stand for Séraphin Belrose."

"Why do you have his ring?"

"It's-- it was Biel's ring, Angel." Kit explains, slowly. "They were together."

Angel slips the ring on. Everything makes sense now. *Séraphin*, who he knew as Uncle Finn, would write all about how great of a man his father was every single birthday card and would tell him that he was destined for greatness. His mother often took away the cards from him, her face bitter as she scanned them.

It makes so much more sense. Angel just never made the connection.

"Angel?" Kit softly brings him back to reality.

"Sorry, I just..." Angel says, twisting the band and staring at the light shining on the metal flowers. "God, I need to apologize."

"For what?"

"For being so selfish, I guess." Angel says. "I was never thinking for the team and I just wanted to prove Montreal wrong so badly."

"Don't apologize." Kit says. He forces a smile and pats Angel on the shoulder. "We've been improving the last few games, with the new lines and--"

"I'm still sorry, Kit." Angel insists. "Your knees. Matti's wrists. I felt like it was all me, and for nothing."

"Angel, don't say sorry. It's fine. You just wanted to win, and who doesn't?" Kit says, wheeling himself closer and ignoring his pity. "But now, I hope you know you don't have to prove

yourself to anyone. That's not what... it's what Rosey said was wrong. You only need yourself, Angel, to know your worth."

Angel sighs. "If Montreal beats us again, then..."

"It won't matter." Kit says, simply. "That's one game out of eighty-something. We're still top in the Pacific. For now, you focus on living to the next day happily."

Angel nods slowly. He twiddles with his thumbs before speaking again. "Can I use your phone to call Tomek?"

Kit exhales sharply, amused. He hands Angel his phone. "Of course."

"Thank you." He says. Kit pushes himself away from the table and towards the other side of the house, leaving Angel in privacy.

The phone rings for what seems like hours before Tomek answers with a tired "Kit?"

"Tomek, it's Angel."

There's a beat of silence, long enough for Angel to doubt himself, until Tomek responds. "Are you okay? Where are you? Have you eaten? Do I have to pick you up? Is--"

"Tomek, honey, I'm fine, it's just..." Angel cuts him off short. "I'm so sorry, okay? I-- I was only thinking about myself when I pushed you away. I thought it would be better for us. I didn't want us to end up like I did with Dylan. I was scared. I thought I was protecting you."

"Angel..." Tomek starts, slowly, making Angel nervous. "You know we're facing Montreal in a few days?"

"I know, I... I don't know if I can play them." Angel says. His voice is soft, almost a whisper.

"Yes, you can." Tomek firmly says. "You've got a whole team behind you, okay? You have me. And then we can finally get your to-do list checked off."

"I don't need to prove anything to them anymore." Angel says, rather forcefully. He looks at the ring on his finger.

"Oh." Tomek stops to laugh. "You've been so put on that since I met you. What changed?"

"I, um... You." Angel says. He hopes his words make sense.

"Me?"

"Yeah. I, um. I fell in love with you, okay?" Angel murmurs. "And I realized *our* happiness should be a priority, not whatever Montreal thinks of us. I was being so fucking selfish, Tomek, I was such an asshole. I didn't think about what you felt."

Tomek lets out a sound that sounds like a choke and a laugh and a sob all at once.

"Sh-shut up!" Angel manages through his embarrassment. His face is burning. He's glad he's alone in the room.

"Angel, no, I--" Tomek stutters out through hiccups. "I love you too, just... You're at Kit's?"
"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll be over in a few. This should be face-to-face."

The line goes dead and the phone redirects to Kit's home screen. It's a team picture of the Blades, where the photographer had instructed the team to "do something wacky."

He instantly spots himself next to Tomek in the lineup. Tomek, while sticking his tongue out, had Angel in a headlock. Angel smiles at the memory.

It's comforting to know that even though he and Tomek's relationship is still a little rough, they'll soon be back to normal. Bantering, going out for runs together, watching movies in bed. Tomek seems to have forgiven him and gone back to his usual chipper state. But Angel, oh, *Angel*-- he's someone entirely new.

[OCT 17, 2016, 7:02 PM]

"Look at them, Kit." Trevor points out to the driveway, where Angel and Tomek have been hugging it out for a normally uncomfortable amount of time, exchanging small kisses and probably whispering sweet apologies to each other. "Under the setting sun. How romantic!"
"Were we that mushy at first?" Kit asks, his hand finding his partner's. "I think we were pretty darn mushy our first year."

"You're making up what our relationship was at first," Trevor snorts, followed by an eye roll.

"We didn't even date until like three years after we started--"

"Let me live, Trevor. I know how we started. Just let me imagine."

[OCT 25, 2016, 6:27 AM]

The rustle of sheets wake Khai from her light sleep. She forces her eyes open.

It's Matti, of course, sitting at the edge of the bed, staring out the window to the clear night sky. It's Minnesota's sky, so it's darker in the morning, easier to see stars.

"Hey." Khai says, and she attempts to get Matti back beside her by pulling at him weakly.

"Matti?"

"Ja, förlåt. Jag tänker." Matti mumbles. He slouches forward.

"Thinking about what?" Khai asks. She manages to get herself next to him, struggling between the sheets along the way.

Matti laughs. "I'm thinking about us. You're a Scorpio. I'm an Aquarius."

"You're a Capricorn." Khai insists.

"I'm only a Capricorn when you like me." Matti says, pushing against her shoulder. "I was just trying to find our constellations. I don't even know what to look for, or if they're even out."

"We'll make our own damn constellations." She says. Matti ponders it for a moment and is about to comment on her profoundness before Khai tackles him back into bed, much harder than necessary, inciting a yelp from Matti.

"Do you mind?" Matti asks, the wind knocked out of him. "Wrists."

"Sorry. I just want to snuggle up, dude." She reluctantly rolls off his body, settling next to him with her arm possessively draped over his chest.

"That's fair."

After a long while of quiet contentedness and watching the sky slowly brighten, the alarm rings. Matti knocks the clock off the nightstand and it promptly stops beeping.

"What time do you need to get to the rink?" Matti asks. He runs his uninjured hand on her bare skin, trailing all the way to her hand.

"Not right now." Khai says, trying to hide her smile as she pulls at Matti's fingers intertwining with hers. "You coming to watch?"

"Of course. If they let me in."

"I'll let you in." Khai coos to him. "Don't you worry, Emu."

"On second thought, I dunno." Matti frowns. "I might hurt myself."

"Is that an innuendo, Årud?"

"Not at all, Captain Harper."

"Was that attitude?"

"Not at all, ma'am." Matti says, pulling her towards him again, trailing wet kisses from her neck up to her lips.

"Do you mind?" Khai says, wiping the spit off her skin. "Nasty."

Matti rolls his eyes. "I'm trying to be *romantic*."

"You're being *gross*." Khai snorts. She rolls out of bed and pulls Matti down with her.

"You're being childish." Matti says. He stretches his arms, trying not to laugh at Khai's forced, exaggerated frown. "Come on, Khayrat. We got team breakfast in a few."

"Who decided we should stay at a hotel with no breakfast buffet?" Khai says. She pulls a pillow off of the bed and stuffs her face into it.

"It's close to the arena." Matti says, propping his head up on his hand. "Plus, your favorite overpriced coffee shop is a few blocks away. I think that makes up for the breakfast."

"Leave me alone, it's organic and it's fair trade. You know how important that is?"

Matti snorts. "Really important if you care about it, I think."

"It *is* really important." Khai mutters. "Are you gonna get up or what?"

"Soon. I just miss this, okay?" Matti says, his voice soft and sincere. "It's been years since I've been able to hold you like this."

Khai scoffs. She gives in and lets herself be pulled in even closer. "I'm sorry. I missed you too, you know."

"I hurt you." Matti says. His fingers trace the muscles of her back. "Hurt our chemistry, hurt the team. I should be saying sorry."

"No hockey talk in bed." Khai says, trying to sound declarative. She just sounds sad.

"We're on the floor, babe." Matti thumbs at the tightness in her shoulders. "I just... I'm sorry I didn't see how much I was hurting you. I was so ignorant, I was just thinking about myself."

Khai squeezes Matti tighter instead of responding. She's shaking, her breathing shallow. "God, no, it was never your fault, you were the one who got hurt, it--"

"Khai, please don't, you know I can't stand it when you're like this." Matti mumbles, sitting up and laying her on his lap. He cradles her head gently. "Let's just go to breakfast, okay? A nice team bonding thing."

"...Do you remember how we met?" Khai asks instead, still shivering. Her eyes remain closed, fearing her tears prickling at the corners. "At the gym."

"That was embarrassing. I don't like to think about it." Matti says. Khai laughs.

"...How about that one team party?" She continues. "You know, when we told Trevs there would be a costume competition."

"Where I said--"

"Yeah, that one."

It's Matti's turn to laugh at Khai dancing around the subject. "You wanna say it first?"

"You go."

"Okay. Well, I lo--"

"I love you." Khai cuts him off. She's opened her eyes again and there's a smug grin plastered on her face. "Emu."

"...I love you too."

[OCT 26, 2016, 10:39 AM]

Jakey Goldstrom knows that he's at the wrong practice facility, at the wrong time, for the wrong team. He groans and bumps his head on the steering wheel, blaming his wet eyes on the rain, on his allergies, on anything but regret. He sighs.

Ten years. Ten years that Jake had thought Hans was dead. Ten years of silent mourning, a broken heart.

Jake didn't even bother to search them up, or ask around. He silently accepted it and moved on. He didn't want to talk about Hans or think about Hans.

It just happened.

And when it was announced that Hansel de la Cruz was coaching the Blades, Jake did not believe that it was the same Hans. He was unable to believe it was the same Hans, because he made it fact in his mind that they were gone.

There's a knock on the passenger side window that pulls him out of his thoughts.

Jakey looks up, eyes red from lack of sleep, from stress, from anything but crying. He opens the window a crack for the familiar face. "Hans?"

"Hey. You mind if I come in? It's, uh, raining." Hans asks quietly, then tries a smile. They look so old. It's been so long.

Jake can only respond with a "What?"

"Goldie, I want to talk. About us, I mean."

"...How'd you know this was my car?" Jakey asks, forcing himself to at least try and lighten the mood, forcing himself to hold his tears at the nickname.

"You're the only guy I know who'd buy a gold truck." Hans says, simply, opening the door and sitting in the passenger seat. They run a hand through their hair. "You... You always said you wanted one."

Jake lets out a laugh and they fall into silence, a pop song awkwardly blasting between them. The rain is still pelting the windshield. Is there anything left to even offer as an excuse, as an apology?

"You announced your retirement after this season." Hans says, slow. They turn off the radio.

"I'm pretty sure you have at least a few good years left."

"I can't live with myself for leaving you like that. I can't continue a career knowing you should've been right beside me."

Hans winces. "Jakey..."

Jake looks up, eyes wet. He tries not to look at the deep white scar on their neck. "I never really did get over you, Hansel. I really didn't know what to do."

The rain hits harder and harder, which feels worse than silence. Hans and Jakey sit there listening for what felt like ages before Hans sighs and the rain lets up.

"Will you live with me, then?" Hans asks, lightly touching Jake's shaking hand, offering. "Back to the Bay, in maybe in Puichon. When you retire, if you don't know what to do."

"We used to live near there." Jake laughs at the memories flooding back, memories of kisses and dates and jokes that he'd forced himself to forget.

Hans takes back their hand, concerned. "Goldie, sweetheart, please don't cry, I'm sorry--"

"Hans, I'm n-not..." Jake stammers, trying to find their hand again through blurry eyes. "And 'sweetheart' is my line."

Hans kisses his fingers softly. "...I'm sorry. For shutting you out."

"I'm sorry, too, for leaving you behind."

After a pause, Hans asks, "I'll see you tonight?"

"In the hallway." Jake says. "I'll catch you this time."

[OCT 26, 2016, 7:29 PM]

The ice beneath Angel's skates is rough, giving a scraping, screeching noise when he crosses over and chases the puck into the corner.

As a Montreal forward slams him into the boards, Angel flings the puck around the net, knowing Tomek is there, waiting for a pass. (In the crease, a paranoid Tahnay drops to a butterfly.)

Angel manages to shake off the hit and follow as Tomek moves the puck into the neutral zone. He passes it up to Skyler with a beautiful tape-to-tape saucer pass, who takes it into Montreal's third of the ice.

Angel and Tomek guard the blue line as their forwards battle.

Tomek steals a glance and sees Angel smiling.

The puck gets loose and Tomek has to chase it down for the backcheck, and the Blades go in for a change. He passes it to Angel, who then dumps the puck for their forwards to chase.

When both are back on the bench, Quincy gives the two of them a big smile. "Fifty, Tomek. Fifty-five, Angel." she says.

"Are you ever useful?" Tomek murmurs.

"I open the door sometimes." Quincy says, cooing. She flashes a pearly white smile.

Not long after they've sat down, the Wanderers pull their goalie. Angel spots those icy blue eyes from several feet away, focused too much on the puck.

Khai body checks him, almost flipping him, and the puck flies back into the zone.

The Bell is dead silent when Trevor pokes in an empty netter, making the game 4-0. Of course, the team stands and offers a hand for the active players to fist bump after a goal. Khai takes extra care to shove her smelly glove into Angel's face.

After a few more seconds of garbaged time, the final horn sounds and what's left of the home crowd murmurs in further discontent, save a few Blades fans cheering near the glass.

A few Wanderers players, including a familiar voice, shout curses at the team as they pour off the bench to congratulate Tahnay on his shutout.

As the team heads back to the visitor locker room, Angel and Tomek lag behind, even behind Khai.

"Good game, Angie." Tomek says, beaming.

"You did so well. Nice assist." Angel says. He then leans in closer, whispering, "Love you."

"I love you too." Tomek returns, hugging his partner and lifting him off the ice. "The greatest of all time, if I do say so myself."

Angel's wheezing when he's back on his feet. "You're way too sweet, Tomek."

[OCT 26, 2016, 9:28 PM]

The team decides that the way to celebrate Tahnay's shutout and Angel's "revenge" was to go out to a bar a few blocks down the street from the Bell Stadium. It's Wednesday, so it's really only them at the bar.

An hour or so in, Tahnay finds Angel in the men's restroom, staring at himself in the mirror.

"Angel?"

"Hey." Angel greets, not looking away. He leans closer to his reflection.

Tahnay awkwardly does his business and washes his hands in the sink next to Angel. "Uh, so. You proved Montreal wrong. We're top of our division as of tonight. You happy?"

"Yeah, but more for ourselves than making Montreal cry. You, especially." Angel finally looks up, his expression sincere. "Got a shutout. Gave me sage advice I didn't follow until Kit repeated it."

"Should that offend me?" Tahnay laughs. He shakes water off his hands and grabs a paper towel.

"Sorry." Angel says, and he winces slightly. "But I think I'm finally playing for... For the love of the game. Before, I was playing just to try to get revenge, but now, it's different, you know?"

"Now you play for San Francisco." Tahnay says. He glances at the ring on Angel's right hand, on his middle finger, and gives Angel a knowing grin. "Now you've got him."

Angel opens his mouth to deny it, but then decides against it, trusting his goalie. "Yeah.

Tomek's been way too good to me. I, uh, this isn't from him, but..."

"Buy him a drink." Tahnay tugs at Angel's arm, towards the door. "Come on."

Angel follows, laughing. He spots Tomek easily, chatting with some of the team at a long table. Kit and Matti are sitting by him, surprisingly-- players on the injured reserve usually don't tag along to road trips. Matti's leaning on Khai, honking and snorting at whatever Khai is whispering to him. Their hands on the table brush against each other and Angel finally sees their matching tattoos together, the sun shining with the crescent moon. Kit is absolutely animated, waving his hands and pulling ridiculous expressions as he tells a possibly fictional story to some of the team. He freezes mid-sentence when he sees Angel and Tahnay approaching.

"Coach, the whole gang's here!" Kit calls.

"Right, right." Hans comes stumbling from the bar counter, two margaritas in hand. "Everyone have a seat, we gotta do our honors for the night!"

Angel promptly sits next to Tomek and pats his shoulder. Tomek responds with his signature radiant smile. (Angel manages to fall in love all over again in a split second.)

"Tahnay. You know what you did. Have this. Goalie potion." Hans places the ridiculously large margarita glass in front of Tahnay. "You want a straw?"

"I'm good." Tahnay snorts, flicking the salt off of the top.

"Skyler, you get this one for that amazing penalty kill and goal." Hans says.

"Am I allowed to drink this?" She asks, giving a dubious look.

"Quebec drinking age is eighteen. Don't worry." Hans says, winking and sliding the glass down the table.

"Sky, give it to me if you don't finish it." Gail elbows her. Jax elbows Gail, displeased, but still somewhat amused.

After a moment, the team falls back to their own conversations. Trevor begins scolding Kit, realizing he is not wearing his knee brace. Quincy and Tahnay start arguing about Philadelphia's new jerseys. Angel and Tomek say nothing, but they share an amused glance

worth a thousand words. Hans gathers attention once again by tapping a fork on Skyler's untouched drink.

"Last prize! Our luck of the game goes to Angel!" Hans announces, and the team erupts into applause. Hans pulls something out of their back pocket and chuck it at Angel from across the table.

It's that familiar off-white color and not-quite-fresh smell. Angel groans. "Really? The jock?"

"You've fifteen seconds for your speech." Kit says. He leans back in his wheelchair and smirks.

"I shouldn't have given this back to you." Angel murmurs.

"Fourteen. Thirteen. Tw--"

"Okay, okay, fuck off." Angel laughs as he struggles to stand up between his chair and the table. He holds up the jock, a trophy for the team to admire. "I'm really glad that we found some luck and some love tonight. Thank you all."

A few clap out of politeness. Kit hisses, "That's a shit speech."

"You gave me fifteen seconds!" Angel hisses back, slapping Kit's arm.

"Do you want to say anything else?" Hans asks, their vibe killed.

"Uh. Yeah, sure. Wouldn't hurt." Angel says. He sees Tomek looking at him, almost expectant.

"So, uh. I'm serious about being thankful for all of you, for tolerating my bullshit for a couple of weeks."

Angel takes a breath before continuing. "You taught me that team is family, that we're supposed to love one another no matter what had happened in the past."

"How to deal with a rough past, with loss. How to apologize." Angel lists, glancing at his teammates. His heart swells with pride for the first time in months. "I couldn't have done anything without all of you. Really. Thank you."

Tomek is the first to start clapping, and the rest of the team soon follows along with whistles and hoots. Angel laughs, playfully shoving Tomek.

The bar becomes a little too loud when Tomek pulls him in by his jacket and presses his forehead to his.

"Hey, Angie, Mr. Lucky, my angel." Tomek chirps, tipping Angel's chin up with his hand. They both laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation and stay within hand's reach of each other for the rest of the night.

[JULY 6, 2022, 10:39 PM]

"This has to be a dream, huh?" Matti asks, amused as he walks down the hill, left arm carrying Kit, right arm carrying beer. The sporadic burst of fireworks lights the way for the two. "It's too pretty to be real."

"There's no such thing as a dream." Kit responds eloquently, sounding intelligent. His follow up is clunky, however. "Lots of people have, like, lots of ideas of what they want to do. You know what I mean?"

"I feel like you always try to quote Tahnay, but it's always wrong." Matti gently helps him sit down on the grass, next to Trevor. He takes his own place next to Khai.

"I don't need Tahnay to feed me knowledge. I'm immaculate." Kit insists, while Trevor fusses over him. "Trev, it's fine, Matti helped me down."

"*Where's your wheelchair?*" Trevor repeats, a little louder. "Kitchi Lopes, you truly are something else."

"This man lost it again, I bet." Khai pipes up. "How do you even *do* that?"

"Lots of people have lots of ideas of what they want to do." Matti mumbles, scoffing as he squeezes her hand. "Kit's trying to tell me that he'll be back on the ice next week with the rate of his new physio routine."

"I'll do sled hockey! That's what I meant!" Kit half-yells, half-snorts. His voice is lighter as he continues, "I'm macho as fuck."

Trevor, beside Kit, laughs at his partner's declaration and hugs him. Khai grins at that, then glances at Matti.

"Do I get a hug?" She asks, making her voice as sweet as she could.

Matti takes a sip of his beer and kisses her instead.

[JULY 7, 2022, 7:52 AM]

"Hey, Coach de la Cruz." Tahnay greets softly as he walks into Hans' little coffee shop, a sleepy Aisha trailing behind him. "What's the special for today?"

Hans, still putting on their apron, laughs. "Whole grain mango pies, Poki." Hans says. "Jakey says they're unhealthy, but I don't trust his perception of health."

Aisha grumbles something and waves at him with her free hand.

"I know you want to sleep. Do you want anything to eat, though?" Tahnay softly asks the tired lump. She nods and rubs her eyes.

"I have orange juice and mango juice." Hans offers. They start organizing the counter. "I can get those mango pies right now if you want."

"You and your mangos, Coach." Tahnay teases.

"They're good." Hans insists. "I'm gonna wake up Jake upstairs, help yourself to a coffee or juice or whatever I have out."

"Thank you so much, Hans. For what you did for the Blades." Tahnay says, sincere. He glances down at Hans' neck, at the faded scar. It's barely noticeable now, after almost twenty years of recovery. "I put in a word for you for the Hall of Fame."

"No, Tahnay, I just wanted you all to be happy since I messed up my own opportunity." Hans murmurs. "I'm better now. Everything's better. They really are this time. I promise."

[JULY 9, 2022, 2:31 PM]

The sun blazes fiercely upon the beach, making Skyler wonder how the hell ice hockey became so popular here.

"You like Pismo?" Timo asks, handing her a smoothie, complete with a strawberry on top. She smiles, reminded of her rookie season.

"It sucks here, I'm always sweaty. I prefer the Bay weather." She sips on her drink and flashes a grin at her wife. "Though at least I get to show off here. A hundred months on hormones, eh?"

"My weather? Just fine. Your weather sucks. And really? Fog? In the summer? Fuck off." Timo downs her daiquiri and laughs. "And you want to show off, yeah? Why, are you tired of me?"

"I'm joking." Skyler leans back on the beach towel and runs her hand through the rough sand. She pokes at Timo from under her towel. "I can never get tired of you, pal."

"Pal?" Timo scoffs and flicks Skyler's wandering hand. "Skyler, don't 'pal' me ever again."

Skyler blows a kiss in her direction. Timo sighs, pretends to catch it, and pretends to stuff it in her bikini.

[JULY 11, 2022, 1:48 PM]

Angel trips over something walking out of the bedroom and stumbles, his feet hitting the ground heavily. Tomek calls for him, concerned. "Angel?"

"It's fine, Tommy." Angel calls back. "It's just the mug."

Angel lifts the King Cup up and places it on the counter. He spots his name under the engraving from years ago with the Wanderers, accompanied with other names he'd learned to forget. He looks back towards Tomek, still on the bed, half asleep.

Angel manages to scratch out his own, incomplete-looking name from the Wanderers' roster, not caring what the league would do to him for it.

Scanning the trophy, he finds the most recent engraving.

"What's that, huh, birthday boy?" Tomek's soft voice asks, teasingly, as he wraps his arms around Angel's waist and peeks from behind his shoulder. "What's it say, Angie?"

He traces his fingers across him and Tomek's matching surnames with a grin on his face.

"Angel and Tomek Trčka-Sheppard."

Tomek kisses his cheek and Angel laughs.