After Me

by rayemars

Summary

In 2009 Kent "living Taylor Swift song" Parson goes first in the draft, moves to Nevada, and starts an NHL career that includes one Stanley Cup win, one league lockout, a lot of media manipulation, bad blood with several teams, a captaincy, big city politics, and the pressure that comes with some questionable sponsors for a club located in the gambling heart of the United States.

Meanwhile, the Las Vegas Aces learn how to work around the ghost of Jack Zimmermann.

(Not literally.)
The trick to their no-look pass is that Kent waits on it.

Pretty simple. No big mystique about it: he watches the ice, watches Zimms, and skates to where he needs to be when he sees Zimms is ready to catch a pass.

Okay, yeah, it's not that easy in execution. It hasn't always worked. But the concept is simple. The whole "Zimmermann-Parson no-look one-timer" ultimately boils down to one thing: Kent waits for Zimms to get there and then they make it happen.

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The draft is a nightmare that he smiles through except when he can drop it and not get called out. Usually when yet another reporter asks about Zimms.

Kent's starting to wonder how many times he'll have to give the same vague noncommittal soundbite about "hoping his recovery is going well" and "sorry to miss him this year" before they take the hint. He's not ending the whole rivalry mythos built up around them with an insult.

Being that much of an asshole would be a train wreck to his image. After everything they did in Juniors, he's going to be watched even more to see how he handles the transition to the show: to see if he really is what he's been aiming to be, if he really is what he's spent all this time working to prove he is and can and will be.

Or to see if the Aces just got second-best for their first pick, now that Jack Zimmermann's out of the draft.

Kent sticks to his soundbite and otherwise keeps his mouth shut. Kicking Zimms while he's down would put his new teammates off, and his parents would chew him out for the callousness once they're all off-camera.

Besides, it's not over yet.

It's not like Kent ended up in Edmonton. He's got options. And there's always re-entry. They've got options, if Zimms will just answer his fucking phone already.

*

It's a pretty dick move to break up with someone by text message, no matter how shitty you are at dealing with stress.

Kent almost writes that, deletes the response at the last second, and then glares at the phone with a clenched jaw for nearly twenty minutes.

Of all the--fucking fine, maybe Jack couldn't handle saying it to Kent's face. Fine. But he couldn't call? Would that have been that hard? Did it have to be--fuck, who else has access to Jack's phone?

Kent feels his stomach lurch even more.

Jack always immediately deleted texts he didn't want to answer or deal with seeing in his history later. Would this count? This would count. It'd count.
Is he still in the observation ward? How much privacy does he get there? Bob and Alicia must've vetted the staff that interact with him. There wouldn't be anybody stupid enough to lose their job for going through his phone after the fact. Are they allowed to do that?

Fuck, he doesn't know enough about overdoses. But if they let Jack have his phone back, it's some kind of good sign, right? Baby steps or whatever. It's not like they'd be worried about him trying to contact his dealer, he did this with legal pills.

Kent drags a hand through his hair and wonders if that matters. It was still an OD. There has to be protocols or something.

He should ask some of his cousins, they'd know. At least two of them are charge nurses, and he's pretty sure at least one still works in the ER.

He's worried over nothing. Jack would've deleted it. Nobody else is going to see it. No one would be allowed around him who'd use it against him later, even if.... But just how bad is the media going to keep dragging him through the mud? How far are the tabloids going to go?

He tries to make himself wonder if Jack would hand the text over to someone on purpose.

He wouldn't. Kent's pretty sure he wouldn't. He obviously didn't know as much about Jack as he thought he did, but there's no--that'd be beyond assholery. Jack wouldn't do that to him.

Right?

...He wouldn't. Not with the way Jack wrote this. The point of the text is pretty damn clear to Kent, but the actual words are vague enough to pass as unexceptional if anybody else saw it. It could be read out on Hockey Night in Canada or Sports Central and neither of them would start getting calls from the media.

Eventually the plane starts taxiing down the runway and the flight attendant's making her way up the aisle. She's already asked him to turn his phone off.

_Alright_, Kent writes back, one word he still has to retype three times because he's hitting the screen too hard to spell right.

He punches send and then shuts the thing down and stuffs it in his duffel.

He turns it back on while they're landing, in the last few minutes he's got on his own before the plane pulls into the gate and he gets picked up to head to the Aces' office. Jack hasn't replied, hasn't called, hasn't made any kind of contact. Apparently that's how finished they are.

_Fuck you too, then_, Kent thinks.

He rubs his eyes viciously and smooths down his hair and puts his hat back on, and gets his game face together as the deplaning message starts.

He's the goddamn 2009 first pick. He deserves to be here. Fuck anyone who tries to ruin that for him.

Fuck Zimmermann's neutral PR congratulations in the middle of telling him to stop calling and that everything that's done is done. They're--at the least, they were _friends_.

*
After several months, he's calmed down.

He splurges on new skates, carbon-fiber and kevlar-laced, as soon as the GMs confirm what equipment the club will and won't cover. Kent's not planning to change his play style, even if it started out with him adapting to the less expensive, less protective stuff he had to work with; but he's going to be a target on the ice and he knows it.

The first couple months in Vegas, if he goes out with any guys on the team, Kent never buys more than two drinks. If they start to rag him too hard, he tips the bartenders to give him water in shot glasses and dredges up memories of Jack at parties to act like he's getting drunk but hiding it well. If he still feels pushed, Kent drops a couple reminders about his age until the veteran defenseman he's boarding with comes over and tells everyone to knock it the fuck off before somebody calls the Sun. He doesn't relax until he's sure he's got down how all the guys on the team deal with each other.

He puts up with being chirped for constantly wearing tank tops and shorts until the guys get bored with it, because it's fucking hot. He makes peace with his hair forever looking wrecked if he takes his cap off for more than two minutes, because it's also windy. Freaking desert.

He sends his mom pearls for her birthday. He gives his dad an ATV for Christmas, only to have Mom ask why he's determined to make her a widow.

It stops feeling like the media's watching to see whether he's going to prove he was always second-best, the runner-up who made first pick by default. Kent drives McGuire crazy by constantly leaning out of the bench to watch video replays over his shoulder whenever he misses a shot or an assist, so he won't make the same mistakes again.

He buys the second-most ostentatious watch he's ever seen after he hits the ten goals requirement for his Schedule A bonus, since the guys would never let him live down the first-most. Also, he was a little worried he'd accidentally blind himself with it.

The Aces finish the 2009-2010 regular season ranking third in the Pacific, the first time the club's ever risen high enough to make the playoffs. They lose in the first round, but they got there. They made it clear to the league they're going to be a contender from now on.

Kent tours a couple apartments recommended by a relative of one of his linemates, signs the year-long lease instead of the six-month one, and moves out of Waller's guest room. He buys a good car after he gets the Calder.

He saves. Bob gave him and Jack plenty of warnings about what happened to guys who didn't keep enough in the bank to fall on once injury or age pushed them out. That's not happening to him.

He gets tapped for captain in the 2010-2011 season when it's clear Reboul isn't going to come back from the elbow surgery. The Aces name another one of the veteran d-men as their second alternate. During training camp Kent tries to herd the band of dumbasses that is his team into a group that's a little more likely to make it past the Cup quarterfinals this season and a little less likely to end up on an episode of Jackass.

After over a year, Kent can remember the good times again.

He still doesn't call.
The captaincy's more of a weight than he predicted, but he plays through it.

The front office gives him more media training. One of the PR guys tells him what escort services have known connections to TMZ--it'd be faster to just tell him which ones they'd be okay with him using, Kent thinks, but maybe that's too borderline procurement. His alternates are both in their thirties with experience he can pull on. And the first alt, Waller, has pretty clearly been told or just decided to mentor him since his rookie year. The Aces are just as invested in Kent not crashing and burning under the pressure as he is.

It's nice to know that management's got his back. Kent knows that ultimately it comes down to protecting their investment, but still. It's nice. Sometimes it feels like he's been on his own for a long time.

He knows he hasn't. The team's been good; the coaches have been good; his mom watches his games and brags about his wins at work and church and to the neighbors to a point it's kind of embarrassing. He's got a lot of people in his life who've got his back.

Just none of them are Jack, anymore.

He still fumbles a few infuriating times at the start of 2010's preseason, because there's training camp and then there's the actual cameras. The first couple games Kent has to fight himself to remember it's a C on his jersey now, not an A.

When Scrappy gets himself ejected for butt-ending the Sharks' d-man who boarded Waller after Waller kept hip-checking him, Kent asks himself what in the hell he's going to do with this team. He catches himself wondering how Jack would manage things more than once.

_Preferably without the spectacular failure at the end_ Kent tacks on a couple times, until the nasty aftertaste of the words finally trains him out of thinking any of it.

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Kent makes it through the regular season without a head injury, which is more than a lot of guys in the league can say. He chews out his center when he discovers Vichy lied about his TBI symptoms to stay to the end of a January game, and he drops by a couple times a week with some of Vichy's friends while he's off the roster recovering to help him make dinners.

The Sharks beat them out to become top of the Pacific, but the Aces still make it to the Cup playoffs again.

And then they win and move on to the conference semifinal.

And then they win and move on to the conference final.

And then they win and advance to the goddamn Stanley Cup finals in his first year as captain, and Kent spends the next six hours ping-ponging between so hyped he's ready to play the first game right now and feeling like he wants to throw up because he can't lose this.

At one point he thinks that if this is how Zimms felt all the time it's a miracle he held on for as long as he did.

And then for about an hour Kent adds wanting to curse until his throat's raw to the list.
He gets into a Twitter chirping war with a Bruins player instead, the obnoxious 2010 second pick Seguin. It lasts over that night and into part of the next morning, until Kent's exhausted and starts to worry about his phone bill and also remembers he showed his parents how to follow his account.

So he adds a post saying *Mom, don't read anything below this*, only to get dogpiled even harder by the Bruins and also his own team, the treasonous fuckers.

"Great teamwork, guys," Kent finally calls out a couple hours later to the bus in general, while they're heading to TD Garden for practice. Nobody replies out loud; his phone starts blowing up even more. Kent resists the urge to bury his face in his hands.

His name ends up trending on Twitter for the next couple days. He also gets a ridiculous amount of DMs after that post about how cute he is--metaphorically or literally, it's not always clear--mostly from girls, which at least shuts up his team. Kent has to spend way more time than usual that afternoon on roughly varied responses hitting the right note of appreciation and flattered rejection. He wants a nap when he's done.

But when the article goes up on Puck Daddy, the majority of it is about the "mom-friendly" chirps and not the really vicious shit he and Seguin wrote before their teams' PR managers got into their accounts and deleted it all, so. It worked.

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They win the Cup.

Kent keeps it hefted over his head during the circle even though he knows he's fucking up his cracked ribs more. The Aces fans are losing their shit in the stands, the arena lights glint off the dent Dallas left in 1999, all he can hear is his heart pounding in his ears and the screaming of all the people around them, and Kent has no idea what he's feeling. Still too keyed up to stop skating. So tired he wants to lie down and sleep on the ice. A little freaked out because he doesn't know how he's supposed to be reacting.

He can't go crazy like the rest of the team because he was supposed to do this, supposed to revive the Aces' struggling brand and haul them up out of obscurity. He's Kent Parson, one half of the legendary Océanic team of Zimmermann and Parson, the 2009 first pick that bad teams tanked for. This is only the first time he's going to hold the Cup. He's gotta act like it.

He hands the Cup over to Sunny since the man's been on their defense from the club's first year and then promptly gets swarmed by the rest of the guys, hauled into the celly of shoulder pounding and head butting and shouting because they're the *Las Vegas Aces* and they just won the *fucking Stanley Cup* and Kent's whole body is aching and his chest is pulsing with pain and so tight until it finally shatters like a flood sweeping through and he's raising his arms and yelling too, completely lost in joy with the rest of the team.

Of course that's the picture that ends up in the papers.

He looks beyond uncool, somewhere between unphotogenic and hopelessly bro. He didn't even know his eyes could look that squinty. "Goddammit," Kent mutters into his coffee, scowling at the Globe's sports section front page in the hotel dining room.

Across the table, Mitts shakes his head and then winces as it pulls the stitches in his ear. Kent prods his foot under the table and tells him yet again to quit that.
"Real fuckin' shame," Vichy commiserates, settling into a chair at the table beside them. "Sorry, Parser. Secret's out. People know you have actual human emotions under that smoother-than-the-fuckin'-ice exterior." He claps Kent's shoulder, carefully on his good side. "We're here if you need to, you know, emote about it."

"That'll be the day," Kent replies, rolling his eyes as Mitts snickers.

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The club convinces Toronto to lift the ban on the Cup going to casinos, but only for twelve hours and only for a charity event, and they're not supposed to touch it while it's in there except for "incidental contact." Scrappy and Mitts start a contest with each other on who can brush the Cup the most while posing with fans. Scrappy's winning by the time the keeper yells at them.

"Fuckin' Rangers," one of the defensemen gripes to Kent during a water break. "We can't even give Stanley the proper Vegas experience."

"Right?" Kent grins, waving at a couple people on the other side of the lobby who're taking a photo of them. "Probably for the best."

Showy rolls his eyes at the ceiling. "You are way less fun since they made you captain, Parse."

"Who was it that almost got arrested right in this building?" Kent asks. "Remind me. I think I'm forgetting."

"Almost."

"I can't believe they let us back through the doors."

"It's been over a year, worse people've come in," Showy replies. "Besides, we're winners now. That changes everything."

"No shit," Kent agrees, looking at the Cup again. It's still there. This is really happening.

He drains the last of his water and tosses the bottle at a nearby trashcan. "Alright, we're back up."

Showy shakes his head but downs the last of his water and leaves the bottle on the table as he follows.

"Great makeup, by the way," Kent adds as they're heading back to the Cup's dais.

"Fuck off, I know it is," Showy retorts. "One of the girls here put it on."

Kent laughs. "For real?"

"She said I couldn't go out with the bruise, my face'd scare kids right off playing."

"Damn right. Smart lady, you oughta ask her out."

"Fuck off, I already did. We're getting dinner after this," Showy says, and Kent laughs harder.

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His parents collect all the articles about the win that they can, getting relatives and friends and coworkers to send them the sports sections from different newspapers even though it's mostly the same Associated Press report. Kent presses a hand to his eyes when his mom shows him the
scrapbook after he comes home for his Cup party.

"Why?" he pleads. "That was the worst photo, don't save that."

"It was not," she retorts, shutting it. "If you don't like it, then get a better one next time."

"Yeah, yeah," he grins. "All right."

While she's putting it back on the bookshelf, his dad clears his throat. Kent thinks aw god, he's almost twenty-one do they really still have to do this Father-Son Moment stuff. He straightens his shoulders and braces himself.

"It's not a bad photo," his dad says awkwardly. "I can't remem--it's been a while since you've looked that happy."

Kent blinks, fumbles for a breath, then recovers and grins again.

"'Course I'm happy," he replies. "Everything's going great."

"Alright," his dad says after a moment. He wraps an arm around Kent's shoulders and gives him a one-armed hug. Kent holds in a wince. "Good job, Kenny. We're real proud of you."

"Absolutely," his mom agrees, coming over to squeeze both their shoulders.

Kent smiles more. "Thanks.

"But please hide that before the Cup keeper gets here," he adds. His mom snorts.

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It's not hard to catch up on Jack in 2011. Once the postseason and talk about the Cup finals end, news hits its usual lull before the awards and the draft; and whenever that happens, the media always turns to hockey's prodigal son, Jack Zimmermann. Especially now that he's wrapped up his coaching stint with his mites team, so they actually can talk about him again without the liability of getting minors and their angry parents involved. Jack's applying to U.S. colleges with hockey teams.

Kent's pretty sure that's illegal even if you're Bad Bob Zimmermann's son, but when he checks he finds the NHL added an unpublicized loophole to the rules a couple years back, for cases where injuries sabotaged a draftee's chances before the pick. A few other guys have already taken it up; Jack's just the most famous, and the only one so far where the injury wasn't physical.

Going the college route is a hell of a drop from the draft, but. Looks like Jack's getting back in the game, no matter what it takes.

Kent follows the news for a couple months more, learns what school Jack's picked, and alternately thinks and aggressively doesn't think about how there's still options.

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During the season it's easy to not date: there's no time, especially since Kent practically lived in the clubhouse his first couple seasons. There's team practice, workouts, games, roadies, personal practice and then more team practice, off-ice stuff to help the group stay cohesive, a legitimate concern that if he doesn't keep these guys on the ball they'll make another potato bazooka since that's the kind of bonding activity that gets the cops called. It's a good cover.
Offseason is harder, but parties and clubs cover that. Las Vegas has some really good ones, and when he goes to them with anyone on the team Kent's finessed a trick of disappearing, pissing out the alcohol and chugging water so he'll only be waking up tomorrow with a minor hangover instead of a massive one, and then returning about thirty minutes later grinning and saying "Gentlemen who don't kiss and tell get more pussy" when the guys hoot at him. It works.

He's not in denial or internalizing homophobia or whatever else navigating real life gets called. His parents know, which is why Jack never got to come down and visit when they were both going to be out at work, but other people could hang out at home alone with Kent.

He's not sure if the Zimmermanns know. They never had the same rule about him visiting for Jack, and they let them sleep in the same room the couple times Kent stayed overnight. He's pretty sure a couple guys on the Océanic wondered about them, but they never got caught doing anything that couldn't be written off as joking around while drunk. As long as he doesn't fuck up in Vegas, nobody can prove anything.

He's a realist. He's just getting started. Kent wants to make his name for what he does: he wants his reputation connected to his points, his plays, his assists and goals. To hockey.

He doesn't want to be shorthanded in the media to "that gay player" anymore than he wanted to be "that guy on Zimmermann's line."

So he manages that part of the game as well.

The Cup win means even media attention, so once his ribs are better Kent dates a woman he meets at a charity fundraiser during the offseason. She's only in Vegas for a month and a half longer, doing some kind of reorg change management more corporate buzzwords thing for Caesar's Palace, so the relationship has a deadline from the start. It helps.

Though if he's honest, the real reason he rolls with the hookup is because she's the opposite of a puck bunny. She knows Gretzky and Orr and Bad Bob, but that's it. When the Aces' PR manager who came with him and the other 'class of 2009' guys introduces them, she says: "Vegas has a hockey team?"

"Jesus," Kent replies, "you wanna drive that knife in a little deeper? Maybe throw some salt in there? We could go get some tequila shots after this, ask for an extra shaker."

She snorts and says, "I'll take you up on that," before adding, "So the Stanley Cup, that's some kind of trophy, right?"

"Now that's just rude," Kent answers, injured. She snickers into her program.

He finally has to turn off his phone ten minutes after they leave, because Mitts spread the news and now the whole team's blowing it up about it being goddamn time and seriously a fundraiser not a club? How old is he? Kent vaguely wishes success wasn't such a pain in the ass.

In addition to the deadline and the fact that he and Inez are both upfront about not looking for anything longterm, it also helps that she seems to write off the fact that his knowledge of straight sex is culled from porn and a couple awkward girlfriends in junior high as just being due to his age. Kent almost asks once how old she is, but then decides if he really is doing the Mrs. Robinson thing the guys are chirping him for, maybe it's better not to have details.

Their schedules usually only mesh for early evening dinner and booty calls and sometimes lunch
on the weekends. Kent eats probably more African food than he will in the rest of his life, trains up from decent to pretty good at straight sex, and learns how to milk the hotel industry for every possible perk. All in all, it's a pretty good time.

The last week she's in town Inez texts that her dinner partner got sick and asks if he wants to take the spot. Kent looks up the restaurant, decides it's worth the abrupt rearrangement of his plans since he'll never have the patience to try getting reservations there himself, and texts back to warn he'll have to head home by eleven tops because he has conditioning practice tomorrow and also to find out the dress code.

Wear your jersey, hockey boy. Everyone'll understand you didn't know better, he gets back.

A-chirp, Kent sends. Seriously, do I need a sports jacket?

Dress like it's a fundraising event, but not a fundraising dinner.

Kent sends back a thumbs up emoji and thinks about how much has changed in the last few years that that made perfect sense.

The food at Bartolotta is good but not what Kent would consider worth a two-week waiting list for a lower-level window table. But then, this is definitely a place to Be Seen as well as to eat, so.

Every once in a while, it still hits him just how much he's really living the dream.

The problem with thinking about how much has changed in the last few years is that eventually, he starts thinking about how that's true for more than just him.

It's early August. Jack should be heading to Samwell soon, if he's not there already for training camp.

Later that night, Kent checks the time on his phone and starts to pull up flights to Boston while Inez is in the shower. But then he makes himself stop and put his boxers and slacks back on instead, and goes to wash his face. He can check when he's home.

The Aces play the Rangers in early December, but that's pushing too late. There's the Bruins in mid-October. All the other east conference games were assigned to other teams.

Kent tamps more water on his cowlick and tries to figure out how much time Jack would need to acclimate to college before another new thing gets dumped on him. He tries to remember how well Jack handled abrupt changes that weren't on the ice. It feels like it was badly, but that might just be Kent's sour memories biasing the past.

The Bruins game is a better bet. It'll be a shorter trip, and besides, at the Rangers game his parents will want to see him. Kent was going to get them a hotel room and take them to breakfast in NYC before he had to head out; he'd have to visit Jack before the game to fit everything in, and he's not sure he wants to risk that.

"You okay?" Inez asks from the shower.

Kent raises an eyebrow in the mirror. "What's the tell?"
"You fuss with your hair more when you're distracted."

He makes a note to train himself out of that unless he's got a hat to cover it. "Thanks."

"No problem," she answers. "But, are you okay?"

"Yeah," Kent says, flattening the cowlick one more time before forcibly stopping. "Just...figuring out plans after the season starts. Nothing big."

"Ah." She makes a vague agreeing noise. "What's her name? Or would you rather not say?"

Kent gives the shower a confused look through the mirror; and then he replaces the pronoun and gets it.

"Geez." He jerks his head around to stare. "How--?"

She raises a hand over the frosted glass of the shower, ticking points off on her fingers. "One, it is literally my job to catch lies." Fair enough. "Two, I don't think I've ever heard you say 'plans' in reference to games before. Three, you're twenty-one. It is very obvious when you're talking about someone you were in a serious relationship with, both from your tone and because there's a limited amount of time you could've had a relationship that intense or started getting over it."

He's never dating anyone in industrial psychology again, no matter how handy her info about benevolent social manipulation's been for working with the team. "Jesus."

"Also, question retracted," Inez adds, pulling her hand back down. "Sorry."

Kent starts to drag his hand through his hair again, and then catches himself and grips the lip of the sink.

"It's not like that," he replies. "We're not--I don't want to date her anymore."

It's weird to say it out loud.

"Okay," Inez says.

Even without the pronoun swap, it still feels really weird to say. Weird enough that Kent's starting to wonder if he's been lying to himself these last few months.

He misses having Jack on his line. He misses the good times they had. Not the parties, since he's not sure when Jack started hiding how much he was drinking and it sours all those memories; but he misses the roadies, the pranks, cursing their coach's name under his breath beside Jack during bag skates, just hanging out.

It's been two fucking years and he still misses having Jack somewhere in his life. He misses having a place in Jack's. Even if the draft had gone the way it should've and they'd been picked for different teams, they still would've talked. It wouldn't have been like this, where the only stuff he knows about Jack anymore comes from the media.

Kent misses them being friends.

And okay, yeah, all right, if he's gotta be honest, having sex regularly again is making him miss it with Jack. It'd probably be better now, if they could manage not to be the macho dumbasses about it they were as teenagers. The past month has been okay and a definite step up from his hand, but all it's really done is make him remember how different it felt with Jack. How it meant more with
him. How Zimms always cussed at him in Quebecois when he was embarrassed, his fingers
digging into Kent's upper arms as he scowled at him and bared his teeth to hiss the words out, and
the fucking challenge there just spurred Kent on harder to--

--Aaaaaand he's going to stop thinking about that now, before his dick gets any more ideas. Kent
turns the cold water on and throws more on his face.

As he rubs it out of his eyes, he thinks that's probably an answer to whether he's more bi or gay.
Alright.

So. Yeah. Okay. He liked the sex. But even more than that, he misses Jack.

He shuts off the tap and dries his face before looking at the shower again. "Hey, it's getting late--
I'm gonna head out."

"Sure," she answers. "I need to consolidate some more reports tonight."

"Good luck," he answers, heading out to get his shirt and hat.

Kent pauses in the doorway, and glances over his shoulder again. "...See you Wednesday, lunch?"

"Still on if you are," she replies, and he can hear the easy smile even if he can't really see her.
"Have a good practice."

Everything about this has been so easy; and by the last couple months before the draft everything
with Jack just felt so fucking hard.

Kent can't want to date him any more. That'd be beyond stupid. But they could still be friends.

"Thanks," he answers, and leaves.

Kent grabs his shirt and pulls it on before leaving the suite. He fixes his hat in the elevator, and
doesn't use the brim to conceal his face from the hotel's cameras.

That'd defeat the point of this. Or make it look like he thinks there's something wrong with what
he's doing. He doesn't need to fuel tabloid fodder.

The quick lunch before Inez's flight out was Kent's suggestion, so he'd know they were closing
things on an official amicable note. If they're both done now like they'd agreed, he wants it clear
and the separation in person. No text-message-on-a-plane bullshit.

Kent fixes his hair one last time before tugging on his hat and heading into the deli.

Once this is wrapped up, he's finished with dating for as long as he can get away with it. No matter
how casual or useful. He'll go back to faking hookups in clubs if he starts feeling side-eyed again.

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A couple days before October, he checks bus routes from Boston to Samwell again and then
compares rental car costs. He prints a map of Samwell's campus and checks Jack's dorm building
off on it. It was almost disturbingly easy to find: Kent skimmed a couple issues on the student rag's
awkward website, read an article with a headline about escalating pranks between the Men's
Hockey and Men's Lacrosse teams, and there was the dorm printed right by Jack's name. At least
they didn't put in the room number, but seriously what the hell. Jack let that pass?
Over the week before they face the Bruins, when he's not focused on the coming games, Kent asks himself what the hell he's doing. Should he call first? Or at least text? Would Jack delete them without reading or listening? Would he take off so Kent wastes his time heading there only to find Jack's gone? Does he even have Jack’s right phone number anymore?

If he does and he doesn't call, how's he supposed to find Jack when all he knows is his dorm? Is he just going to walk around it until he finds Jack's room? That's some stalkery shit.

And he's only got so much time to do this. He has to be back in Boston by four a.m., five tops, so he's there by team breakfast and nobody wonders where he disappeared to and he doesn't hold up the bus. He's had to pay a stupid amount in team fines already this year with Patsy friggin' out to get him.

Just what the hell does he think he's doing?

Kent knows everything couldn't have always been this hard when it came to Jack. It just feels like it.

He finally decides on the rental car two days before they face the Bruins, and then he makes himself put it all out of mind so he can concentrate on the coming game. He's doing this; he'll manage the rest of the details as things play out.

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It's getting on evening when he finds a spot in a visitors' lot. Kent pushes the car door shut with his good arm and then exhales slowly when even that makes his ribs ache.

He rubs his eyes hard and stares at the campus lights for a couple seconds before fumbling his phone out of his pocket. It's not like Jack can tell him not to come now, he's already here.

When he hits Jack's number, it rings twice before an unfamiliar old woman's voice answers. "Bonsoir?"

"Uh," Kent replies. Shit. Jack did change his number. He should've figured.

"Qui appelle?"

"Sorry. Ah--désolé," he remembers. "Wrong number."

"Ahh," she agrees, and hangs up.

Kent does the same, and then jabs the phone back into his pocket. Alright, well, he fucking tried didn't he?

He tugs out the map instead, figures out where he is, and starts making his way to the dorm.

He was going to find the well first and take a selfie for the hell of it even if he couldn't post it anywhere, but that was before a Bruin boarded him so bad in the third period that his shoulder and torso still hurt even with ibuprofen. Kent really wants an Oxycontin, but there's no way he was going to take that before meeting Jack.

Worse, they fucking lost after Scrappy was penalized for catching up to Lucic on his next shift and cross-checking him from behind. Which, yeah, Kent appreciated it. But he would've rather won.
Christ, he wishes Jack had answered his phone. He's too wrung out right now to have no idea what he's heading into.

Kent passes by groups of people mostly talking about stuff he doesn't know as he makes his way to the dorm. He recognizes some history stuff from Jack, and one conversation sounds like something like feminism. Then there's...philosophy? And something about authors and cannons, what. So—English? Showy or Vichy would know. Doesn't anyone take math here? Fucking liberal arts schools. Fucking Massachusetts.

Kent breathes out steadily and reminds himself that college would've made him fall behind. He didn't even like high school, except for a couple classes. He's where he wanted to be. He can always go back for a degree after he retires, if he needs one.

When the dorm comes into view, Kent pushes the map into his pocket gingerly and then thanks the group of girls who hold the door for him as they see him coming up. It's passkey-locked; he didn't think of that. Fucking colleges.

At least it has an elevator. Kent scopes the lobby, adjusts his hat with his good arm, and tries to figure out where to start.

The people at the tables on the right aren't wearing any sports paraphernalia he recognizes except some football stuff in the school colors. There's a TV in an alcove to the left and he's pretty sure he recognizes the sound of ESPN, so Kent slides his hands into his pockets and starts that way.

It's not ESPN, it's NBCSN, playing the start of the Lightning and Capitals' game, which is a great sign. There's about six guys sitting around--that's Jack.

. . . Has he gotten taller? He was already six foot last Kent saw him, come on. He thought he'd finally almost caught up.

Kent wishes he'd had a couple more seconds, been able to check a mirror and make sure his smile was right, but he's already here. He heads into the alcove.

The group is doing a half-assed job of hiding the fact that they're drinking alcohol. Kent automatically starts to check if Jack has a cup in his hand, and then reminds himself that it's not his job to keep tabs on that anymore.

Most of the guys are facing the TV and not the door, but one of them spots him and almost drops his cup. "Holy shit, no way," the guy drawls, and the rest of them look over.

As soon as he sees Jack's face at the sight of him, Kent knows he fucked up.

He thought two years was more than long enough, but apparently not. He tried to go too fast, to capitalize on the Aces getting the Cup to get a verbal agreement laid out even if an official contract had to wait until 2015. He rushed the move.

But he's already here. So. Fuck it, nowhere to go but forward. "Hey, Zimms."

By ten minutes in, Kent's so pissed he needs to take off soon no matter how weird it looks. He doesn't know how much longer he can keep his face straight.

This was the stupidest waste of his time. He was prepared for Zimmermann to be angry at him for showing up out of nowhere, to be jealous about the Calder and the Cup, to still be pissed about 2009; Kent hadn't expected him to apparently hate his guts.
That's a lie.

Kent curls his fingers before he catches himself, then forces them to relax again before anyone sees.

He needs to just get up and go. They're creeping out Zimmermann's teammates. The captain's been trying to keep the conversation level despite Zimmermann's escalating edged comments, but the rest of the guys have fallen silent or started keeping their cups to their faces longer than normal. The one sitting closest to Zimmermann shifted so he's leaning slightly away, and he's been watching Zimmermann with genuine concern and disturbance for the past couple minutes. It's obvious none of them have ever seen him like this before.

Kent wants to demand Do you even see what you're doing? but that's not his job anymore either. Zimmermann can manage his own damn PR.

He sees Zimmermann glance at the guy next to him, and then look away from the group and shift his feet.

Like hell Kent's going to let him be the one to walk away first after this, so he seizes the next awkward lull in the conversation to check his watch.

"Hey, it's been cool meeting you all," he grins. "But I gotta head out."

Nobody calls him on it. The captain leans forward and shakes his hand, firm grip but mild shake. Must've seen the hit Kent took earlier tonight. "Pleasure to meet you, Parson."

"Same here," he nods. "Good luck on the next game."

"Same."

"Thanks." Kent pushes to his feet, then bites down a hiss when his shoulder spasms again. "Motherfu--".

He huffs to cover it and gives the room a final nod. "See ya."

He gets a chorus of similar responses as he turns to leave. Kent's in the archway of the alcove when Zimmermann asks, "How bad is it?"

Kent waves dismissively and keeps walking. "It's fine."

"You want to end up in the news getting pulled over because you couldn't drive steady?"

Kent jerks and nearly snarls Fuck you! before he catches himself.

Zimmermann adds, "I've got aspirin. If it'll help."

When he looks over his shoulder, Zimmermann's standing. His face is mostly blank now; but Kent can see his hands are shaking.

He's still grimacing in anger. Kent forces it off his face, and then covers by touching a hand to his side. "...Yeah. Alright. Thanks," he adds. "Preciate it."

Jack nods and starts heading out. The guy next to him rises from his seat too, but Jack shakes his head. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," the guy answers, sounding concerned but nodding.
Kent moves out of the alcove and into the wider space of the lobby before Jack can pass him. Jack's got his hands jammed into his pockets now. Probably trying to hide the tremors.

Kent told him, more times than he can count, that if he'd just hook his thumbs out of them when he did it he'd look more confident. Then he could at least fake it until he felt it.

But Jack never took his advice. Or maybe he was always too high to remember it for long. Kent gave up saying it eventually.

In the lobby, Jack starts for the stairs before visibly stopping himself. He hesitates a second longer, and then turns to the elevator instead. "...It's on the fourth floor."

"All right," Kent repeats.

Nobody else joins them in the elevator, which both sucks and is a relief. Kent lets himself slump against the wall after the doors shut. Jack stays on the opposite side, as far from him as possible.

"You should've called first," he says tersely, glaring at the doors as they start rising.

Kent doesn't even bother replying. He tugs his phone from his pocket, pulls up his contacts and hits Jack's number, and then puts it to speaker and holds it out between them as it starts ringing.

Jack looks at it. Three rings in, the old woman's voice comes on. "Bonsoir?"

"Désolé," Kent says, catching Jack's gaze and holding it. "Wrong number."

"Mm," she answers, sounding crosser than last time. When she hangs up again, Kent wedges the phone back in his pocket.

Jack rubs his face and exhales tiredly.

"...Still," he mutters, as they hit the fourth floor.

"Whatever, man," Kent answers. He pushes away from the wall with his good shoulder as the doors open. "Why don't I just leave. See you around."

"No," Jack says. "Just." He rubs his face harder and then catches the edge of a door, holding it open. "It's on the counter. This way," he nods to the left.

Kent huffs a breath out through his nose, but steps into the hall.

Jack takes the lead in a couple of strides, and Kent follows him down the hallway until he stops a few doors down and pulls out a key. "I'll be back in a second."

"Whatever, Zimmermann," Kent finally bites out. "I'm not going to fucking stand around in the hallway waiting." He jerks around back the way they came, clenching his jaw as he heads for the elevator.

He can buy more ibuprofen from any convenience store he drives past. He doesn't have to put up with this insulting bullshit. It was stupid of him to think Zimmermann would want on the same line as him again. They're not kids anymore.

This was a waste of his time. All it's done is answer one of the questions Kent never wanted resolved.

"Fine," Zimmermann growls out. Kent hears the sound of metal scraping. "Just--" he hisses
something else harshly. Kent's forgotten some of the little Quebecois he knew, but it sounds like a curse.

He exhales slowly through his teeth, jaw still clenched, but makes himself turn around.

Kent waits until Jack finally steadies himself enough to get the key in to unlock the door. He shoulders it open, storming inside; Kent has to catch it with his good arm when it bounces off the wall.

The inside of the dorm room is so ridiculous Kent can't help snickering despite how pissed he is. "What's with the odd couple setup?"

Jack gives him an irritable look over his shoulder where he's stopped by an built-in counter. Kent just gestures widely at the room, eyebrow raised, biting down another snicker.

Jack huffs and goes back to shifting books and pulling clothes off the counter. "He said he'll clean it up soon."

"When'd he start saying that?" Kent asks.

"...September." He finds the bottle. "It's not that bad," he adds, more defensively than Kent expected.

He gives the room another look. It's really not--Kent's roomed with guys who shlubbed up hotel rooms way worse over just a night--but even mild clutter looks bad next to Jack's obnoxiously tidy space.

It's kind of weird to see. He's only sure which side is Jack's because he recognizes that old blue-gray comforter. The desk, with its post-it notes and casually stacked journals, is all that looks normal for him: organized without being overkill.

Two years suddenly seems even longer.

"What dosage did you take?" Jack asks, and Kent turns back to him. He's got the bottle open. His hands have stopped shaking.

"Eight hundred milligrams," Kent answers. "Ibuprofen. About..." he checks his watch "--three hours ago? Four-ish."

"It shouldn't have worn off yet," Jack replies, but he shakes out two pills. "Get looked at if it's still bad in the morning."

Yeah yeah, cap, is reflexively on the tip of Kent's tongue; but he catches himself.

Jack holds out the pills. "One now's okay. But wait at least two hours on the second."

When he first noticed how much Jack knew about dosages and times, Kent thought it was because he wanted to stay in top condition or it was just something he'd picked up from his dad. And after that, he'd thought it meant Jack was managing his anti-anxiety medicine well. It took a while before Kent finally figured out Jack was so precise because he was calculating the maximum amounts he could take or mix with alcohol and not die.

Zimmermann hassled him a lot about the work Kent put into his image, but when it came to hiding behind a front Kent was never a match for him.
"All right," he says, holding out his palm. Jack drops the pills into it, from just high enough he won't even accidentally brush Kent's hand.

Kent shoves the second pill into his pocket as Jack crosses over to the bed and rummages under it. When he pulls out a can and straightens up, Kent snorts.

"For real," he drawls. "Ginger ale."

"The bathroom's down the hall if you want water," Jack says evenly.

Kent snorts again, quieter, and pops the aspirin. He catches the can by the bottom so their fingers won't touch, since that's apparently how they're doing this. Jack releases it.

Kent hooks a foot around the nearest desk chair and settles into it more gingerly than he let himself do in the lobby, cracking open the soda. Jack shifts on his feet before crossing to the other side of the room.

He leans against his desk after a couple silent moments. "Who's the hit from?"

Kent notes to himself that Jack apparently didn't watch his game, which shouldn't be a surprise but still feels like a slap.

"They didn't run clips?" he tests, because he's a masochist.

Jack shrugs a shoulder.

Over four years since they first met in the Océanic, and still Kent's never a hundred percent sure if Jack really pulls this crap because he doesn't think about the impact of what he's saying or if these little digs are intentional. Even knowing how Jack sounds when he genuinely is trying cut a person down, slights like this always seem so fucking obvious to Kent that he can never fully believe Jack doesn't realize he's doing it.

He's not going to say anything in reference to the Cup when Jack's finally backed down, so Kent shrugs his good shoulder. "Third period, s'all."

"Mn." Jack looks past him, fingers curling around the desk.

Kent exhales through his nose and takes another sip of ginger ale.

The tiredness is really hitting him. Maybe he should've waited in the hall, even if it felt like Jack was spiting him. It would've kept him on his game, being in public. It's going to be harder to get it back up now.

It's not like he hates that part of being a celebrity. It's never been a burden, not like it was for Jack. But he still needs a break sometimes.

Not that this was the place. Kent's been fucking up left and right tonight. He shouldn't let his guard down around Jack the way he used to. They're not those kids anymore.

Kent pushes a foot against the floor idly, turning the chair so he's tilted away from Jack's bed. The comforter is starting to weird him out. It's too familiar, when everything around it is new and abnormally different. He drains the soda.

"Why are you here?" Jack asks. He's looking at the wall, not Kent.

Yeah, no. He doesn't feel like being rejected yet again tonight. Jack's made it pretty fucking clear
how he feels about the Aces or Kent being part of his life again.

He shrugs once more. "Was in the area, thought I'd say hi."

Jack looks back at him, expression flat and disbelieving.

Kent tosses the can at the trash across the room and mentally gives himself a point when it goes in. "It's not like I'm in Massachusetts much."

"Why are you here, Kent."

He kicks the floor again, pushing the chair until it hits the opposite wall. Jack's fingers are still tight against the desk, but he won't stop looking at Kent like he sees right through him.

"I was here," he says shortly. "What's so weird about that? I missed you, I wanted--"

Kent cuts himself off sharply and clenches his jaw. "...If I'd known you were gonna be like this I wouldn't've bothered."

Jack's still looking at him like he doesn't believe him.

Screw this. "Whatever. Thanks for the aspirin." Kent pushes himself out of the chair with a grimace. "See you around."

"...Kenny." Jack exhales slowly. When Kent glances over, he's slumped against the desk, looking exhausted. "Why are you here?"

"I told you--" Kent starts, and then he presses a hand to his face and rubs his eyes hard.

...It's not like this is the first time Jack just can't fucking believe what Kent says to him. It never mattered how many times Kent told him things would be fine or that the game was good or he was just saying shit in the moment and didn't mean it, Jack never really believed him. The only things he ever took as Kent being sincere was the bad stuff. He never accepted the good things.

Kent already knew he did that. He already knew Jack would probably do it again. He saw this coming.

So--fine. Fine. All right, whatever. Not everything has changed in the last three years, and of course it's the stuff Kent wanted to see Jack get over that's remained. Fine.

He's here anyway. This shouldn't--it doesn't have to be a waste of his time. It's not like there's much more to lose. Nowhere to go but forward.

Kent rubs his eyes harder and then drags his hand away and looks over again. "You're going the college route?"

Jack's shoulders tighten. But after a breath he nods.

"Got anywhere in mind afterward?"

Jack makes a short, harsh laugh that he swallows down quickly.

Kent thinks without wanting to about some of the media comments when it first came out that Jack was going to Samwell: how he was abusing the loophole to get back in.

Of all the things Jack picked to wreck his career with, it had to be drugs. Anything else, he could've
gotten away with nothing but a couple months' bad press and some league fines. But no, he had to pick substance abuse. The one vice the whole sports world won't tolerate, because talking about it could reveal just what a grist mill the game really is.

In the back of his mind, almost subconsciously, Kent decides to skip the Oxycontin tonight.

"It's too early to say," is all Jack offers at last.

"It's a good time to start prepping," Kent replies, adjusting his hat and watching Jack closely. "If you were going to consider Vegas."

Jack doesn't flinch at that, which is...something. But he does swallow and look away.

Kent finishes with his hat and waits.

Jack finally shrugs a shoulder jerkily, curling his fingers back around the edge of the desk. "I'm not . . . I don't know yet. I have to--I'm committed to Samwell right now, and anything after that is...." His knuckles are going white. "It'll depend on how I play here. So I can't--I don't know if--"

Chrissake, Kent thinks reflexively, crossing the room. Fine, so their baseline is excellence, but they set that themselves didn't they? It's not arbitrary, it's what they do. He catches a handful of Jack's hair and tugs. "Zimms. Quit it."

Jack jolts and then grabs his wrist tight, teeth bared.

--Yeah, okay, right. Right. It was reflex--it was one of the few things Kent could always count on to get Jack out of his fucking head for a minute so he'd listen--but they're not those kids anymore. Kent lets go and keeps his fingers splayed open. "Okay."

"I'm not saying give me an answer now," he adds, easing the stakes since Jack's not meeting his eyes. "I know you're obligated 'til you graduate. But, like--give me an idea by Winter Classic. That'll still be enough time. I've got capital to draw on," he points out. "I can start seeding the idea, get the groundwork down. Make sure we've got the cap space in 2015. Then when you're done here, it'll all be ready."

Jack swallows again, harder, still looking more at his shoulder than his face. He's holding Kent's wrist tighter now. "I don't...."

Jack grits his teeth a couple short breaths later. "I can't think about it now," he finally says. Evading. "I can't get ahead of myself like that, Kenny. We've barely even started the season. I can't--"

"So don't give me an answer now," he interrupts. "There'll be plenty of time in January. Get back in, win some games, think about it. Give me an idea by Winter Classic."

Kent tugs his phone out of his pocket even though he has to use his bad arm to do it. Jack hasn't let go of his wrist yet; and he doesn't want to pull loose.

Or really, just one part of him doesn't want to--the dumbass part that still remembers the good times, the part that keeps reminding the rest of him how easy it used to be to get this close and how goddamn long it's been since Kent last saw him. No matter how much Kent wants that part to shut up, it's still there. "Look, what's your new number?"

Jack exhales heavily once more, shoulders slumping. It puts them closer to the same height than before, and Kent keeps his eyes off Jack's mouth. That's not what he's here about.
"I don't..." Jack says, and then he shakes his head and lets go of Kent's wrist. Jack turns and looks at his desk.

"I don't remember it yet," he mutters, fishing a phone up from beneath his wallet and a couple pencils.

"It should be under your settings," Kent replies, shifting his phone to his good hand.

Jack thumbs through the cell until he finally retrieves the number, and gives it to Kent. It's a U.S. one now.

"...It'd be four years," he says afterward, not looking up. "If it's anywhere."

"It's gonna be somewhere," Kent replies, replacing the number in Jack's contact. "And that just means time to handle the prep work. It's gonna be fine, Zimms."

Jack's hands clench around the phone. "Don't act like it's so easy to--"

He hisses out another breath. "I know you listen to the news."

"A bunch of average players who do media because they couldn't go better after getting forced into retirement," Kent retorts. "Everybody mediocre hates talent if you show you're human too. It'll be fine, Zimms. They talked shit about me at first too, and now look."

"That's you," Jack says, bitter.

"Don't do this," Kent replies, shoving his phone back into his pocket.

Yeah, he had the origin story the American media loved--lower-middle-class kid breaks into the sport, does good and matches up with second-generation Canadian hockey royalty--and yeah, he exploited it whenever it helped. But it's not like Jack didn't have his advantages too.

It's not like Kent didn't tell him how he could use his own story: how Jack should own the way the media always talked about Bob when they talked about him, how he should make that into an underdog angle, get people to root for him as he made his own name even while he carried on the legacy. It's not like Jack didn't take the advice sometimes, at first.

Jack grips his phone tighter before abruptly shoving it back onto his desk. "I know you listen, Kent," he says tersely. "The Aces are finally succeeding. You really think they'll risk that by taking on a liability like an addict?"

"Oh, fuck that," Kent says in exasperation. "Yes, they will. The chance to be the team that has you and me both again? Of course they will." He tries to grin. "I mean, c'mon Jack. It's Vegas. They've always been on thin ice with the legalized gambling, what've they got to lose?"

It doesn't work. Jack just shakes his head again. "Don't push it, Kent."

"Dick," Kent thinks; but instead he snorts. "For who? Unless some kid comes up in the draft that's better than either of us, that'd be the dumbest possible thing they could do."

That also doesn't work, because now Jack has that bitter look on his face again. "Yeah," he says flatly. "I guess it would."
The jealousy is another thing that hasn't changed that Kent really, really wishes had, because he's so sick of this. "I earned this," he bites off. "All right? It's not like this just comes to me, Jack. I worked for this."

"I know," he replies, back in that neutral PR mode. Kent clenches his hands into fists and then hisses when it makes his shoulder spasm again.

He moves back, pulling away until there's a tiny dorm room's worth of carpet between them. It's not enough.

This--this is why he shouldn't have come here. Why he should've taken the breakup as an opportunity to make his name stand on its own without having "Zimmermann" somewhere nearby. To move forward and never look back. What was he expecting to happen?

Jack was never going to consider the Aces. He can't even stand being in his dad's shadow; he'd never be willing to be in Kent's too, skating under his captaincy.

Jack Laurent Zimmermann always has to do everything on his own, because if anyone else gives him an assist then it doesn't really count. Because if anybody dares try to fucking help then it means he's failed to be better than Bad Bob.

Why did he want this back in his life?

"Good," Kent replies. And then he doesn't stop himself from adding, "One of us had to."

Jack clenches his jaw again, breaking that PR face at least. "Just--leave, Parse."

"Yeah, sure," he drawls, turning toward the door. "See you around, Zimmermann."

Jack doesn't reply. Kent sees himself out without looking back.

He uses the warped reflection of the elevator doors to make sure his face looks at least mostly neutral before he hits the lobby. Kent keeps it in that expression as he crosses through it, eyes on the exit, not looking over at the alcove.

He gets off the campus and heads up the highway back toward Boston, cruise control set to two miles over the speed limit because his uncle volunteered for Citizens on Patrol and told Kent when he was learning to drive that it's not worth an officer's time to pull anyone over for that. He stays in the right lane and lets other cars pass him even when they're douches about it.

Once it's dark he exits the road at the first superstore he sees.

Kent skids the car into a parking space far enough from the store that no one's going to walk by but not so far that it'll catch anybody watching the security cameras. He cuts the engine and punches the steering wheel.

And then he does it again, and again and again and a few times more, until his fist's starting to go numb. Kent finally forces himself to stop, because the last thing he needs is some article about "Aces' captain vandalizes rental car after Bruins loss" or worse yet for one of Jack's teammates to talk about him coming by Samwell and somebody to put two and two together.

Why did he ever think he wanted this shit back in his life? Why did he come here? All this did was answer one of the questions he never wanted resolved.
If he'd realized how bad Jack was getting Kent never would've helped him hide it for so long.

He noticed when Jack started drinking more at parties--but they'd all liked to drink, they were *teenagers*. And Jack was good at hiding the empties so no one could tell how much he'd actually had. And he didn't do it before games, so it's not like it affected his ability to play.

Kent learned about the anti-anxiety meds when they started rooming together on roadies in their second year, but at that point he'd already noticed Jack stressed out about stuff way more than him. And anyway, his dad was Bad Bob Zimmermann. Stressing seemed reasonable. It wasn't like it was that noticeable when Jack was on the ice.

It wasn't until Kent had absently read the label on the meds' bottle while he was trying to find Jack's razor after the handle on his own cheap travel one had snapped--when he'd learned what a discrepancy there was between the dosage Jack was supposed to be sticking to and the number of pills he'd told Kent were fine--that Kent realized Jack didn't have his shit together half as much as he pretended.

Even then, he thought Jack would get better. Kent had gone clean after fucking around some, so of course Jack could too. He thought they'd go through the rest of Juniors, get drafted, Jack would stop stressing so damn much, and then their futures would go on the way they were supposed to. He thought it was just the circumstances.

Being so good at the game was stressful, Kent got that. But you kept going. If you *had* to freak out for a while or have three extra beers one night, fine, whatever, they'd all done that. There were always going to be rough patches. But you kept moving forward. It was Jack; the only direction he and Kent were supposed to be going was up.

He thought it was temporary. He thought he'd been helping Jack cover it up so he wouldn't get in trouble with the coaches until he shook the nerves off and got back to normal. He hadn't thought that was normal for Jack.

He hadn't thought he'd been helping Jack almost kill himself.

Kent wrenches his hat around to yank it over his face and slumps down in the seat, shaking.

If he'd realized, he would've tried to stop it instead of just monitoring it. Would've gone to the coaches if he couldn't. Or gone to his parents. Gone to Jack's parents if that's what it took, even if Jack made good on the threat to cut him out of his life if he did. That fucking happened anyway, so it wasn't like Kent had anything to lose. He *would've*. He didn't understand how bad Jack was managing. Kent knew he was stressed; but he thought Jack would play through it.

He doesn't know if Jack knows that. Or if Jack....

Or if Jack thinks he was doing it on purpose. To get rid of the competition.

Jack looked so fucking furious when he first saw him tonight, it couldn't have just been jealousy. Kent told himself he hadn't expected Jack to hate his guts after two years, but that would be a good reason for him to. If he thought Kent was deliberately enabling him.

Kent couldn't get into the hospital to visit in the couple days before he had to go to the draft; Jack's visitation rights were restricted to family only. Every phone call or text he sent was ignored until Jack texted him on the plane. He's seen the Zimmermanns occasionally at charity or promotional events--usually Bob but sometimes also Alicia--and they've always been polite even if there's an undercurrent of tension since none of them want to mention Jack first. But it's not like that means
anything. They both know how to manage a public face too, and they'd never do anything to stir up more rumors around their son. Kent can't trust that smiling and shaking his hand when cameras are around doesn't mean they don't think he played a part in the overdose.

He did. He should've told someone instead of helping Jack hide it. Kent knows he played a part in it. But it wasn't that one. If he'd fucking realized he never would've--

Jack's called him vicious before when all Kent was trying to do was point out how the game worked. If all he ever believes from Kent is the bad stuff, why would he think any better about him on this?

He's never tried to ask if that's what Jack thinks. He doesn't want to know. If Jack thinks he's that despicable, if his best friend thought he would do that on purpose, if the person who he's been more honest with than anyone else in his whole life thinks he's that much of a monster, Kent just doesn't want to know.

He scrubs at his eyes and nose harshly with the sleeve of his shirt.

He should've just fucking told someone. But he thought Jack would throw him out of his life. The worst fight they'd ever had was the night before the start of the Memorial Cup playoffs, and they'd yelled at each other so much that the guys on one side of the hotel wall had banged on it and tried to get into their room to see what was wrong and a guy on the other side had gotten the coaches.

They were hauled into the coaches' room and lectured on acting like the captain and alternate they were. The men told Jack and Kent that meant they had to keep the team's morale up and not pull this crap, and then tried to make them say what was wrong.

He should've said something then. But without Jack they might have lost the playoffs; and the reason for the fight felt so petty and stupid Kent didn't want to talk about it; and Jack's hands had been clenched in his pockets and he kept glancing at Kent like he was terrified Kent was going to rat him out.

Jack had been lower on points that year, and he'd had a bad practice that morning. He was locked in the bathroom when Kent returned from the hotel's gym, claiming he was reading and that he wanted some peace and quiet; but Kent could see the book he'd brought on the trip sitting on the table under their stuff and he was sick of Jack thinking he was too stupid to know when he was being lied to. It was around then that Jack's phone started buzzing.

After the third text came in under five minutes, Kent finally checked the phone in case it was something he could use to talk Jack out. But they were all from Bob.

Bob sent back an okay and a good luck for tomorrow, and that was it.

It wasn't like Kent even read the texts. He got the vague impression they were about coordinating something for Alicia's birthday, or an anniversary, or whatever. He wasn't trying to snoop. He was just trying to buy more time to get Jack out of another goddamn slump.
But when Jack did finally come out, and later checked his phone after dinner and saw what Kent had written, he'd lost it. Even though all Kent was trying to do was help. He wasn't selling Jack out to his parents, he was just trying to help, not that Jack appreciated how goddamn hard it was to deal with him sometimes.

By the time the assistant coach banged on their door and ordered them to open it, Kent was so enraged he wanted to slug Jack. The only reason he hadn't was because he couldn't: Jack had him boxed against the wall, using their height difference like an asshole.

That was the only reason Kent hadn't hit him.

He slumps deeper into the seat and hisses when it makes his side and arm ache more. Kent wrenches his hat further over his face and scrubs at it again, harder, before finally laughing hoarsely.

. . . He should just. Never seriously date anyone again. Never have any kind of sincere relationship again. That's the simplest solution. Then he'll never have to learn if this was a one-time thing, or not.

If this is just how it always gets between him and Jack, fine. It's not fine, but at least it means it's just him and Jack who can't get their shit worked out off the ice. They could still play together; they just have to keep it all business, and stay away from each other the rest of the time. That's not impossible. It sucks, but it's better than doing this over and over again.

But if this isn't just him and Jack....

If this is the way Kent's always going to end up acting in any real relationship he's in, he's not sure he wants to know that about himself.

So. Better to never find out.

He finally gets it together again later. Kent balls up his over-shirt and throws it on the passenger floorboard since it's covered in tears and snot and he's not wearing that out in public. He goes into the store and rinses his face in the bathroom and buys a couple bottles of water, and gets back on the road.

It's almost eleven when he returns the car and gets back to the hotel. When he finally lets himself into his room, he finds Vichy and four more guys playing poker.

"Look who the cat dragged in!" Vichy grins.

"Fuck's sake," Kent groans, exhausted. "I'm getting a shower. Beat it before I'm done or I'm putting on--clown porn or something. Bears in masks. Get out."

"Goddamn, Parse," Waller says, and fuck's sake now they're all looking at him seriously. "What happened to you?"

"Fucking Bruins," Kent mutters, shoving his over-shirt deep into the laundry bag. "Out."

"Ain't what I was asking," he barely hears Waller say under his breath, and then Patsy's reaching into the cooler to snag a beer and crack it open.

"You are obviously a man in dire need," he says, pushing the can into Kent's hand. "Your charm's slipping."
"The fuck do you think you know, Kent thinks.

"Whatever," he mutters instead. He chugs the beer.

When he drops the can on the bureau, Patsy starts to grab another one, eyebrow raised.

Kent holds up a hand. "Not 'til the painkillers wear off," he says. "I mean it. Bears in masks. It has to be out there. Beat it."

When he comes out of the bathroom every single one of those assholes is sitting exactly where they were, which is honestly pretty much what Kent expected.

It looks like they're starting a new round. Kent settles on the edge of the bed and holds out his hand, wriggling his fingers. "Deal me in."

Patsy does. "Put a shirt on, pretty boy, who're you trying to impress?"

"Your mom," Kent answers, sweeping up the cards from the floor. "We're Skyping later. I told you to leave, can't say you weren't warned."


"Young enough to be your son," Kent grins. "You really oughta talk to her about that fetish, it's gonna get weird soon."

"Jesus," Scrappy groans, waving at the cooler from the chair he's got his leg propped up on. He catches his ice pack when it starts to slide off his knee. "Someone give him or me another two beers, I don't care which."

Patsy tosses him another can while Kent cackles until Vichy pelts him in the face with a shirt. Not his. He's not sure whose. Kent slides carefully down to the floor and settles against the bed to give his back more support, tucking it behind his head. "What's the game? Snarples?"

"Go Fish," Vichy answers.

Kent pinches the bridge of his nose and wonders what his life is. "Sure, why not."

"Nobody's playing for money with you," Waller replies. "Not with your poker face."

Kent clucks his tongue and watches out of the corner of his eye as Scrappy organizes his cards. "Don't get jealous just because you're bad about giving tells."


Kent recognizes it's a reference but doesn't know what to. He snorts derisively and shakes his head to cover, then stops with a wince when it pulls on his shoulder. They settle into the game.

*

Next time he sees an image of Jack again, in a news blurb about Samwell's last few games, Jack's cut his hair.
Rest of the 2011-12 season

Kent does another interview and minor photoshoot in Dude's Health over Thanksgiving after his agent tells him he could beat out the NFL and Hollywood for the cover soon, if he has another top season.

No pressure, Kent thinks dryly.

He scores points with the photographer's assistant while dicking around with a flag during a break and a black mark with the stylist for doing it. "Look at this!" the man demands, squishing Kent's jaw to make him stare in the mirror. His cowlick's sticking up again. "All my work, wrecked."

"Sorry," Kent manages to reply. "But hey, I don't have a broken nose or missing teeth yet, so easier fix, right?"

"Sports," the man growls, with so much infinite disgust that Kent laughs even though it doesn't help his case.

The assistant links to one of the photos on her personal twitter with Shot @kentparson wearing nothing but an American flag on the last job. Great time which is probably the best trolling assist he's gotten in years. He retweets it, loses some followers, but gains more than enough to make up the numbers. His grandpa calls to ask what the hell is going on in Vegas.

It generates a couple articles from bloggers on slow news days and a minor amount of arguing in Puck Daddy comments, but the overall thing everyone seems to leave with is that he's still a young player who doesn't take stuff outside of hockey seriously.

"Reading more people besmirching your character?" Waller asks while Kent's skimming the tail end of the comments section during a pitstop.

"They're not," he replies absently, propping his heel on the edge of the ice cream freezer and stretching his hamstring. "Teams're gonna see this and think the Bruins lost to us last playoffs 'cause they can't manage young talent. Some of the Aeros'll go in tomorrow subconsciously underestimating us. We can exploit that."

Waller's silent for a couple seconds, long enough that Kent registers the weirdness and pulls out of the stretch to look at him.

"You ever read Sun Tzu?" Waller asks, opening the drink fridge and getting a water.

Kent pushes the phone back into his pocket. "Yeah."

Waller nods once. "Figured." He cracks open the bottle. "You remind me of the line about dead spies."

Kent's shoulders tense.

He slides his hands into his pockets, hooking his thumbs out as he half-smiles and raises an eyebrow. He already went through this shit about being manipulative with Jack, goddammit, why hasn't he learned to keep his mouth shut since then-- "Yeah?"

"Ain't saying it's bad," Waller replies, looking at him. "I stayed here so Marlene and I could settle down, but I knew the Aces were third-tier. I thought we were gonna get scrapped and transferred to
a new city. And then you came on and suddenly we've got the fucking Cup." He shakes his head.

Waller takes a long drink of water and then swallows and looks him in the eyes. "You're the best thing that's happened to this team. So. It ain't bad to be that kind of general, Parse."

Kent's face feels weird. He rubs it with his forearm, and realizes he's smiling for real.

"...Thanks, man," he says.

Waller nods once, and claps him on the shoulder as he heads for the check-out.

He fidgets with his phone on the bus for a couple hours afterward, opening his contact list and closing out of it again. Kent finally puts the phone away without scrolling down to the Zs.

It takes over a month and a five-game winning streak before Kent finally contacts Jack again.

He opts for a neutral text, to re-emphasize that Jack's still got plenty of time on the deadline but that there was a deadline. *The offer still stands.*

Jack doesn't answer until almost a day later, which says a lot. A couple hours later, and he would've been responding after finally checking his phone and noticing the text. A few days to a week later, and he would've made a note to answer and then forgotten until he saw the reminder. But this twenty-four-hour cycle usually means Jack saw the message, didn't know what to do about it, and kept revising responses until he finally found one he felt okay with.

Unless that's changed about him too. Kent should stop assuming. Maybe Jack just saw the reminder earlier than usual.

All Jack sends back is a statement that his options are open, but he has to fulfill his commitments to Samwell Men's Hockey before he can consider future offers.

*You pull this PR bullshit on me one more time Zimmermann and* Kent starts, and then he makes himself delete the response.

Five minutes later, he gets sick of feeling like he's pleading in every damn thing he writes. Kent answers *Alright* and chucks the phone on his sofa.

He tried. Zimmermann's made his position clear. He's made it clear for over two goddamn years now. Kent needs to quit this shit, it's pathetic.

He rubs his face and then shoves a pillow over the phone in a fit of pettiness, and decides to head into the clubhouse early.

*

New Year's comes, but Winter Classic gets delayed a day with the shit weather in Philly. Kent spends January second in the Aces' clubhouse, listening to the available Road To episodes on his tablet while he goes through his workout.

Most of the guys are still away, but Scrappy comes in during the morning to use the gym while Kent's still there. "You still watching this, Parse?"

"Yeah," Kent says shortly, counting off crunches.
"It's all media bullshit," Scrappy tells him as he programs his run into the treadmill, like Kent's too stupid to know that already. "Half that shit's staged at minimum."

"Lies tell me what they're trying to protect," Kent replies. He adds, "I'm counting."

Scrappy's silent after that, so Kent thinks he got the message.

But then Scrappy breathes out through his teeth, and says, "All right, whatever, Parse."

Kent finishes the rep and then looks over at him; but Scrappy's just put on earphones and started his jog. Kent stretches, gets water and listens closer when the episode hits one of the Rangers' new captain's scenes, and then moves on to weights.

The delay gave Jack an extra day to make a choice. Kent refuses to check his phone until he's finished watching the game with Scrappy at the clubhouse and gotten back to his apartment, and then refuses to admit it stings when there's still nothing from Jack.

He knew there wouldn't be. He knew. He needs to quit this shit.

*  

As they ramp up to the end of the regular season, Kent notes that despite the young carefree talent image he's been working, the rest of the division is taking them a lot more seriously this time around. Behind the scenes, he throws himself into countering for it.

He tracks the weaknesses among the Aces that need to be either trained up or balanced out, and talks with the assistant coach on line arrangements. He persuades Coach Kurlansky to get the head coach and the GM to okay the money for a month of extra ice time for the rookies. When they do, Kent and the goalie drill with both Cross, the newest guy up from the AHL, and Hens, the Aces' 2011 first-round draft pick who's fast but needs more focus on his shots when he feels someone coming up behind him.

Kent studies the feeder team's games. He crams in a flight to Kansas to attend one for confirmation, spends all his time on the plane wondering why the AHL won't put teams on the West coast because this is a pain in the ass, and keeps his hat low on his face as he watches the game.

Once he's back in Vegas, Kent maneuvers the head coach into convincing the GM to bring Johns into the Aces and send Crosley back to the Sovereigns. He makes it look like it was Coach Lewis's idea so there won't be any dissatisfaction between Kent and the guys Crosley's already friends with.

He goes to a few of Vegas' ECHL team's games now that they've gone independent, but it's almost pointless. Kent doesn't have much interaction with the assistant GM, and he can't think of a way to recommend any of the team's players to the GM or coaches without showing his hand and maybe making them take a lot longer look at the motivations for Johns' call-up.

He already went through this shit about being manipulative with Jack. He learned.

*  

Kent stays on the ice later and later after practices are over, playing around more with the All-Star sticks he's collected, working on rebounds and on his backhands and wristers and snap shots.

He starts holding back his line and and his alternate captains and the second line's primary center whenever he can make them stay, because the team's been getting too predictable about their
tactics.

His first alternate's been an overall better player since leaving his enforcer status behind in Central: Waller's a slower skater and he doesn't take many goal shots since a shoulder injury he got before Kent joined, but he can read third period ice like some of the best.

But other teams are recognizing it's Waller and Fils' pairing that Coach Lewis is sending out the most in the final period, and that the man's doing it because he overplayed their top defensemen during the first two. Add in the extra time Sunny can end up stuck on the ice talking with refs as the second alt, and Kent knows the Aces' first and second lines have produce better to counter for the coach's decisions if the Aces aren't going flounder in the wake of last year's win.

Waller and Sunny tolerate most of the extra practices, because they get purpose. So does Kent's center; and when Vichy's got his back Kent can usually wrangle their left-winger into staying behind as well so he and Vichy and Mitts can run through full-line plays.

Mitts puts up with the extra practice half the time, because when it's just the three of them on the ice he and Kent got in the habit of ripping the hell out of each other until one of them misses three shots in a row. Kent's winning the game, but not by as much as he wants. Mitts is a dick.

The second line's center, Chazzer, finally loses his shit with him and tries to pick a fight after the twelfth time Kent harasses him into staying behind to practice backhand tip-ins off Kent's rebounded snaps, which is three times more than Kent thought he'd get out of him. Burr finally shoves them apart and then gives Chazzer a long, silent look when the man punches his catching glove for it.

"You done, Chaz?" Burr finally asks, while the man's shaking his hand out. "Wanna slug my mask too, dumbass?"

"Fuck off," he mutters. "And fuck you, you fuckin' perfectionist," he snarls at Kent. "Why're you riding everyone's goddamn ass lately, what d'you fucking want?"

"Lewis is overplaying our lines," Kent says, since the coach left the ice already and they're too far away for any fans or press watching to hear. "If you're gonna get your guys a breather, you need more goals or to force the goalie into freezing the play more. This'll work either way."

"I'm out," Burr says, skating off. Chazzer is staring at him.

He finally shakes his head, and then smacks the puck by them into Kent's skates. Kent just raises an eyebrow.

"Can't believe the shit you say sometimes, bro," Chazzer mutters. "Fuckin' fine. You got five more minutes, Parse."

Past them, Burr shakes his head when the goalie coach asks him something. Kent watches him skate back into the cage, and then turns and follows Chazzer to the other side of the rink, taking the puck with him.

Kent starts keeping a spreadsheet of injuries on the team, both the current ones after each game and any past ones he learns about that're bad enough to have potential long-term effects.

He keeps a second spreadsheet tracking all the penalties the Aces receive, and cross-references them after each game. Kent figures out which teams have someone smart enough to be targeting
their checks to the Aces' past reported injuries, and then narrows down what three players on which
two teams are out to get them.

A week before they're scheduled to play one of those teams again, Kent asks for time to show his
data to Coach Kurlansky and then almost changes his mind at the last minute.

Managing coaches was always his worst area in handling a team. It's been better on the Aces--
especially since he was made captain--because the coaches treat him like a young player but not
like an actual kid, so there's less of the weird sorta-paternal-figure stuff that always got under Kent's
skin in Juniors. Back in the Océanic, whenever Kent or Jack had to get the coaches' backing on
something, by eight months into their first season it was always Jack who went to them since he
could get the men to listen without thinking he was being cocky or insubordinate.

Kent never pinpointed how Jack pulled it off. Maybe it was a class thing, or a Canadian thing, or a
Bad Bob's shadow thing, or maybe Jack just responded better to authority than Kent did. Or maybe
it was some mix of all of that. But it got stuff done, and it kept Kent out of the coaches' office, so it
worked.

He's already asked for the time to talk, though. Kent knows the head coach is getting frustrated
with the way he's been improvising plays on the ice lately instead of sticking to Lewis's designed
game plans, even though if Kent stuck to his plans they'd be fucking losing more. But still. If the
head coach is getting fed up with him, Kent doesn't want to piss off the assistant one too by looking
flighty.

Kent deletes the copy of the spreadsheet he put on Gdocs and instead asks Kurlansky about line
assignments for the coming Aeros' game. He tests the situation by mentioning the weird
coincidence of how Farkas and Skalski only ever checked players who'd reported injuries during
the last game against them.

Coach Kurlansky lowers his brows at that. He looks up from the clipboard where he'd been
pencilling notes, staring at Kent.

"You think so?" he asks a couple moments later.

That's the tone of someone who thought the same thing, but wasn't sure. Or was told he was
wrong.

Kent makes a note to pay way, way more attention to the interactions between the front office and
coaches from now on, and nods. "Yeah. Might've been a coincidence, but the same thing happened
with that new d-man in the Avs, too."

Coach Kurlansky narrows his eyes a little more and taps the end of the pencil against his clipboard.

"All right," he says at last. "Good eye, Parson. I'll talk to Dan."

Kent nods again. Kurlansky asks if there was anything else he wanted to talk about; and when Kent
says no, he dismisses him.

Once he's home Kent puts the spreadsheet back in Gdocs, but strips out all the information he's
collected on everyone but the Aeros and the Avalanche. Just in case.

The next morning he gets called out of the rink's locker area after practice to meet with the
coaches.

Kent wishes he could've at least washed his face as he heads for the small office the club rents from the Ice Center for the coaches to use, and figures he fucked up. Looked like he was trying to do their job for them, maybe. Or do the head coach's, unless he read Coach Kurlansky wrong. He's been pushing his luck a lot the last couple months, especially with the work of cutting Crosley's dead weight.

Sometimes he really misses the days when Jack managed the coaches.

The three of them discuss how Johns is coming along--a little overwhelmed and not really bonding with the team yet, but otherwise good--and Coach Lewis asks Kent how he feels last month's extra ice time is helping Hens--also good, he's a lot more confident on his shots and it's showing in his numbers, which is pretty obvious so Kent's not sure why it's coming up but he doesn't say that part. The men talk to him about probable line arrangements for the upcoming games. Kent nods and waits for whatever's the real point of the meeting.

Coach Lewis glances at the assistant coach once and then looks back at Kent, holding his gaze as he starts tapping his fingers on the desk. "Paul said you thought some players on the Aeros were targeting ours last time we played?"

Coach Kurlansky shifts slightly in his chair before going still again.

Wow. Alright, something's changed recently, because there's no way Kent neglected a whole realm of the Aces enough to have missed this. Excessively intense eye contact, impatience, obvious tension. There's some something going down in management.

Kent decides fuck it anyway and takes the gamble. He doesn't want to lose because of this Monday if they can plan for it now.

"Yeah," he agrees, pulling out his phone and logging into his account. "Farkas and Skalski did the hardest hits, and almost all of them targeted an injury on our guys."

"That's a pretty strong accusation, Parson," Lewis says tersely. Challenges. "You willing to put that on your record?"

All right then.

"Sure," he answers, pulling up the spreadsheet. Kent holds Lewis's gaze as he sets the phone on the desk and turns it to face the other man. "It's a statement of fact. I left out checks I saw and stuff we didn't publicize and only referenced recorded hits and penalties to our guys' listed injuries. The info's there for anyone to check, if they have a problem with it being said."

In the side of his vision, Kent sees Coach Kurlansky arch an eyebrow before dropping it a breath later.

Lewis looks through the spreadsheet, frowning harder. "Why'd you make this?"

"Playoffs are coming," Kent answers. "I wanted to keep an eye on the team, make sure we're in top condition."

"That's my job," Lewis replies; and Kent just watches him.

The man seems to reconsider a few moments of silence later. "But it's good to know you're taking captain status seriously," he adds, at last.
"When the fuck did I ever not?" Kent thinks. He nods once and keeps his eyes on the coach.

"All right," Lewis says finally. "I'll consider what to do with this."

He picks up the phone and frowns at the spreadsheet again. "You have these password-protected?"

"I don't keep them online," Kent answers. "I just put it on there yesterday and hadn't deleted it yet. I can print you a copy for tomorrow."

"Email it to me," Lewis replies.

Nope. He's not tying this to a personal mail. Kent says, "I'd rather print it, if that's cool. After that crap with News of the World hacking phones, we can't be too careful, right? If the other teams never know we figured this out, we've got the advantage."

Lewis works his jaw. "I need it if I'm going to review the lines I planned."

Kent nods agreeably. "Okay. I'll swing by home, print it out and be back." He holds a hand out for his phone. "Should take an hour, tops, as long as traffic's good. Will you still be here, or back at the clubhouse?"

For a minute he thinks the man's going to refuse to hand his phone over, and Kent's not a hundred percent sure how to respond to that. But finally Lewis pushes it back across the desk. "Fine. I'll be here until one."

Kent nods and slides the phone into his pocket and starts to rise from his chair. "Anything else, Coach?"

Lewis shakes his head once, expression still tense. Kent nods and says bye and gets the fuck out of there.

He catches Waller in the parking lot. "Hey, you got time for drinks today?"

"I'm sanding the deck," he answers; but then he gives Kent a longer look. "Is this clubbing or work drinks?"

"Work," Kent says.

Waller pulls his phone out. "Probably, yeah."

"Cool," Kent answers. "I gotta do a thing first, no rush. Can you text me when you know when's good?"

Waller raises an eyebrow but doesn't call him out. "All right."

Kent knows the second alternate's already left, and while their goalie's been around since the team's third season like Waller, he never talks about the front office. Kent adds, "Did Patsy leave yet?"

Waller's eyebrow goes higher as he nods. Kent exhales shortly.

"Want me to see if he's free too?" Waller asks, and Kent nods. "Alright, kid. Sergei's place?"

"Yeah," he agrees, glad the man caught the play.
Kent prints the spreadsheets at the nearest library branch, copying everything into a new document to obliterate any personal tags. As he returns to the Ice Center, he curses the traffic and the fact they're stuck using public-first facilities like they're not a goddamn professional team, and wonders where the bottleneck is on building Vegas a real arena. The front office's been bickering over scheduling at the Ice Center with the ECHL team and private customers since the day Kent came here, and there's no way they can keep using Orleans Arena for long after last season's PR problems with scalpers and playoff ticket fistfights. How much more revenue do they need to generate for the club to prove itself to the city?

Kent hands the printouts to Lewis with minimal small talk. He got a text on his way into the rink that Waller and Patsy have arrived at Sergei's, so as soon as he's done he drives there.

Kent puts his Cup ring in his pocket and swaps out his Aces hat for a UNLV Rebels one he keeps in the car. He sets the brim face-forward before heading in.

It takes him half a minute to spot Waller and Patsy through the dimness once he's inside. The place is technically a restaurant, but Kent's been warned to never eat anything there and to only get beer in cans or bottles. It's main sell is the fact that the paparazzi stay away for some reason Kent decided not to ask about. He finally catches sight of the men and heads for their table.

"What the hell is up with Lewis and Kurlansky?" Kent asks as he drops into a chair.

Waller and Patsy--the two oldest Aces players, the ones who've been with the team longest after Sunny--look at each other.

"Called it," Waller says.

Patsy mutters and pulls out his wallet, and waves at the chola-wannabe texting behind the bar. "Yeah, alright, shut up. Round's on me," he adds to Kent.

"Sure, great," he replies, "but then what the hell is up."

Neither of them answer until they've ordered the beers and the girl's brought the bottles. Kent makes himself wait.

Once she's gone, Waller takes a long pull of his drink. Patsy looks at Kent over the rim of his own and says, "You know about some of the silent investors?"

"Nnnn," Kent replies.

It's pretty obvious where some of their money's coming from, just from looking at the ads in the arena. And Vichy gives all the new guys a heads up on which casinos and restaurants getting recognized as Aces' players will improve their service and which places they should keep their mouths shut about the affiliation.

But Bruckheimer's already sued one paper for libeling the team he owns. And frankly, Kent doesn't want solid confirmation, because then he'll lose plausible deniability and also have to seriously reconsider if he wants Jack to come to Vegas or if it'd be smarter to wait his own time out until he qualifies for free agency.

"Yeah," is all Patsy says. "Anyway. The best I know, there's something going on with money. Lewis's contract is under internal review."

Kent raises both eyebrows high.
"Haven't heard anything about that," he replies.

"Ain't a league thing," Waller says. "Aces weren't the dark horse for the Cup bets, but they weren't the sure pick either. Lotta people won money. Not as many as lost, and now the stats've been re-ranked so their odds aren't so low, but still. Might've helped some organizations if Lewis had been a little more forthcoming about how much the team improved over the last season." Waller takes another pull of beer. "It's made some people wonder if proxy betting was going on."

Kent stares at him.

He double-checks reflexively that no one's in hearing distance when he realizes why Waller's talking about the team in the third person; and then he drags a hand over his face and chugs his beer.

"Yeah, pal, I didn't want to know that much, thanks," Patsy drawls. "Ignorance is fucking bliss."

"This is why you aren't an alternate," Waller replies, and Patsy punches his arm with a "Fuck you."

"Christ," Kent mutters. "How do I track that?"

"You don't," Waller replies immediately. "You're the team's face, kid. You keep separate from that shit. You make us look good with fans and the league; front office deals with the town." He looks at Kent across the table. "I deal with the front office, you work with me."

Kent raises an eyebrow again.

Waller lifts a shoulder. "I told you, I stayed here so Marlene and I could settle down, keep Julie in a good school. I don't got a lot of years left in the game." He takes another pull of beer. "But I've got an offer to transition to the front office when I do have to retire."

Patsy looks over at him.

"Whatever Pat, your memory ain't shit," Waller replies. "You got time."

Patsy narrows his eyes. "You said it was getting better."

"It's never getting better," Waller replies. "I said I was dealing."

Kent waves sharply at the bar. When the girl comes over he and Patsy order another round; Waller shakes his head.

"Concussions?" Kent asks, once she's brought the beers and gone.

Waller tips his unfinished bottle toward him.

"I knew what I was getting into," he says. "It ain't as bad yet as they say it's gonna be. But if I start forgetting plays during a game, you tell me, Parson. I wanna go out before I start fucking up."

Kent swallows and then takes a pull of beer to cover it. "Alright."

Waller nods. "Good."

The conversation dies after that. Kent and Patsy get a third and fourth beer respectively. Waller pulls out his phone when it buzzes.
"You need to get back to the deck?" Kent asks.

"Nah, we traded," Waller answers, finishing his text. "She's doing it, I've got dinner next week."

Patsy snorts as he pushes out of his chair. "You are so whipped. Be back."

"No I ain't," Waller replies. "I love her."

Kent chokes on his beer.

Patsy laughs out loud. "Two against one."

"Take your divorced ass for a piss," Waller replies without annoyance. "I don't need to hear from you or a playboy."

"The hell?" Kent replies, and Patsy laughs even more as he leaves. Then Kent remembers the act he's pulled in clubs the last couple years. He fell off it this season; there's been more important stuff to do. "Never mind."

Kent rubs at his mouth a couple seconds later. "...Wasn't a shot at you, man."

"Uh-huh," Waller says dryly.

Kent shakes his head. "It wasn't. It's just--weird to hear. Out loud. He scrapes the edge of his bottle against the table. "Never mind. Wasn't a shot."

"You went through a real shit relationship, didn't you?" Waller replies.

Kent clenches his beer.

"Sometimes love makes you feel like shit," Waller eventually says, when Kent never responds. He shrugs. "Sometimes it doesn't. Takes luck as much as effort."

"I just said it was weird to hear," Kent says shortly.

And then--because he's had two and half beers before lunch, and because they're the only ones at the table, and because he trusts his first alternate as much as he's been willing to trust anyone since he was eighteen--Kent adds, "We both fucked up. In it. It wasn't just--Christ. Whatever. Never mind." He downs the rest of the beer.

"Alright," is all Waller says.

Kent rubs at his face and barely keeps himself from saying Thanks.

Instead, he asks, "So I deal with you? Not Vichy?"

"Vich's a different thing," Waller replies, mostly into his bottle. "Let some things lie, Parse. Vegas ain't like other club towns."

"All right, all right," Kent says, since he is from New York, even if it's upstate. He's not an idiot. "Just checking."

*

Lewis revises the lines in their game against the Aeros.
Scrappy gets moved off the fourth line and onto the third to skate with Johnny, who took a hard hip check last week; and most of Waller's ice time coincides with theirs. Hens, with bruised ribs that weren't announced but were clear to anybody watching the last game, is put on the second line with Chazzer. Mitts gets shifted to it as well to keep an eye on him, swapping places with Holler to do so. Holler--the least hurt guy tonight with a bad bruise on his left thigh--goes out as left wing on the first line with Kent and Vichy.

They're 1-0 against the Aeros and eleven minutes into the second period when Kent sees Farkas cross-check Holler in the left thigh.

He's got an open line to the Aeros' net. He's also got a decent line to Vichy, who has a fair chance to make the goal. Kent's the closest to Farkas. The ref hasn't whistled. If management's messed up then the guys have to hold together if the Aces are gonna keep winning. He's captain, it's his job to make that happen.

Kent doesn't waste time cussing to himself.

He wrists the puck to his center, throws aside his stick and gloves, and goes after Farkas.

Kent doesn't fight in games. It's a waste of time he could be spending handling the puck; he can skate away faster than almost anyone who tries to goad him into going; it's stupid as hell since ninety percent of the guys on the ice have more inches or pounds on him; and it doesn't do anything useful except make a point. Kent can do way worse damage with words than fists.

The upside is that he doesn't have a record and his PIM is one of the lowest in the club. The downside is that he sucks at fighting.

At least he gets a couple good punches in before Farkas wrestles him to the ice. By the time the refs force them apart, Kent's face feels like crap, his knuckles hurt, and he's pretty sure he just humiliated himself on television and the Internet. Fucking awesome.

"The fuck was that for!?!" Farkas spits from the other side of the ref. "It was just--"

"Quit targeting my guys, asshole!"

Farkas blinks and then tries to cover it. "The fuck're you--"

"Fuck you," Kent snarls. "You think I don't know what you and Skalski're doing?! Back off my team!"

A linesman and Holler grab Kent when he starts skating at Farkas again. Farkas falls back, eyes narrowed.

They get shunted off to the sin bin. Kent ignores the Jumbotron's taunting, glowers at Farkas through the glass, and watches the terse, restrained conversation between the ref and Coach Lewis from the corner of his eye. Waller skates up to the box.

"Watch out for 28," Kent calls, over the noise behind them. "He's gonna pull the same shit."

"I warned the guys," Waller answers. "We got this, Parse."

Then he half-smiles. "You wanna become a rat, you're gonna need practice. Thought I was
watching a puppy dog yipping at a Great Dane."

"Get the hell out there and get us another goal," Kent grumbles.

Waller taps his knuckles against the glass and skates over to the face-off.

The Aeros score while he's still stuck sitting out his penalty. Kent raps the butt of his stick on the ground as he waits for the timer to open the door, swearing under his breath as he skates back onto the ice.

He assists Vichy another goal in the final period and the Aces manage to end with a win, but Kent still feels sour and pissed off. He sees the coaches arguing lowly while the guys celebrate on the ice for a few seconds, before one of the d-men throws an arm over his shoulders and blocks his view.

Lewis chews him out later on the bus, but not as much as Kent expected. His face still fucking hurts.

By the time they return to the hotel, he's got a hell of a bruise on his cheekbone. Kent downs a triple-strength ibuprofen and makes a note to get a refill on the prescription soon, and then goes to find a vending machine and ice.

Scrappy's already loading up his bucket when Kent finds the alcove, so he goes to the vending first. Scrappy nods at him. "Nice shiner."

" Heard it from Waller already." Kent jabs a dollar into the machine.

"You did decent," Scrappy replies, and Kent has to snort.

"Like hell," he drawls. "I sucked."

Scrappy shrugs a shoulder. "You didn't act like fighting's beneath you," he replies. "You could've just taken the shot instead."

Kent looks over at him.

"I was the closest to Holler," he says after a second. "Somebody had to show those dicks they couldn't keep getting away with that."

"Yeah," Scrappy replies. "But you could've left it to someone else." He shuts the ice machine's lid. "But you didn't. It's good knowing--fuck, I dunno. The Aces aren't just a stepping stone. The team means something to you. You did decent."

Kent raises an eyebrow. "It's been three years, you thought this team wasn't important to me?"

"You're a pretty fake person, Parse," Scrappy says, closing the lid on his ice bucket and tucking it under his arm, staring at him. "It's hard to know when you're doing shit because you mean it and when you're doing it because it looks good."

The painkillers haven't kicked in yet. He's worried about the ultimate fallout of what he said on the ice, and of what'll happen if whatever Lewis and the ref were talking about afterward gets publicized, which of course it will somewhere. He's still pissed about getting humiliated losing a fight, being taunted by the rival team's barn, getting dressed down by the coach in front of
everyone on the bus. His face fucking hurts. Kent says, "What's so fucking great about being real? All you do is give people more to screw you over with."

Scrappy scowls. Kent hisses his breath out through his teeth and turns to glare at the vending machine.

"Look," Scrappy starts, "we aren't all suicidal fuckups like Zimmermann, oka--" and Kent slams a hand against the glass.

"The fuck do you think you--!"

Kent cuts himself off and clenches his jaw, and looks away again. He can still see Scrappy staring at him from the corner of his eye.

He's breathing way too hard. Kent tries to calm down, tries to tell himself to not fuck up something he hadn't even realized he'd been fucking up, fails on both. He tries to at least breathe normal again.

"Don't bring back that rumor," Kent says tersely. "It wasn't a suicide attempt."

That might be a lie.

"Huh," Scrappy says, quietly, like he'd been taking it as true all these years. Kent's fingers curl on the vending machine's glass.

"He made his own choices," Kent mutters.

And then, because he hates the way it tastes in his throat, he adds, "But there was a bunch of other shit going on. And we were teenagers. Like nobody's ever made stupidass choices as a teenager. The media just kept on fucking going after him because it made a good story."

"Okay, man. All right. Whatever," Scrappy replies. "My point's--whatever went down before, Parse, just. Quit assuming it's the same here, alright? You don't have to keep up a front all the time. Nobody's out to get you or whatever."

"The fuck are you even talking about," Kent says derisively, and Scrappy throws his free hand in the air.


He stomps out of the alcove. Kent turns his back on him and stabs at the buttons on the machine, ordering the first chips he sees. He takes them back to his room, makes himself eat them so the ibuprofen won't make him puke, and then collapses on the bed.

He doesn't know if he lied or not. He never had the chance to ask Jack if the overdose was an accident, or intentional.

It was out of the news almost as soon as it was first suggested. Bob and Alicia's lawyers separately filed suits of defamation almost as soon as Cherry slipped the insult. It would've been funny, the unintentional coordination, if it'd been about anyone but Jack.

The cases were settled out of court, but the rest of the media took the hint. It didn't come up again. But it'd still been said; it was still out there.

Even if Kent'd had the chance to ask, he wouldn't have.
He doesn't know how he'd deal with either answer: that Jack almost lost everything because of an accident, because he miscalculated one day and took too many goddamn pills in too short a time and it was just dumbass fucking luck his billet mom found him before brain damage or death; or that Jack almost lost everything because he wanted to.

But Kent knows it'd change how he looked at him. Probably forever. You don't forget that.

So he doesn't want to know.

Waller comes into Kent's room later, through the connecting door. Vichy must've given him the card to his room, that fucker. "You need to come play cards."

"No," Kent says without lifting his head from the pillow. "I'm done for the night. Tell 'em to get someone else."

"We've got plenty of guys," Waller replies implacably. "But you need to come play."

"Waller. I said no."

"You've been off your game all night," Waller tells him. "The guys like Scrappy. He's a good kid. Come play cards and get this shit mellowed out between you two before it sets into the team."

"Christ," Kent snarls; but he knows the man's right.

He gets what Waller's trying to do. The team has to stay together if they aren't going to screw up and make last season look like a fluke.

Kent forces himself up on an elbow. "Fine. What's his problem, anyway?"

"Scrappy's the kind of guy who doesn't like feeling distrusted," Waller replies, leaning against the TV stand. "Even if you tell him there's good reasons for it and he understands, it still pisses him off."

Kent shoves his hair back from his face. "What the fuck? When did I ever 'distrust' him?!

Waller gives him a long, long look; and finally he exhales heavily through his nose.

"None of us are going to live up to Zimmermann," he says instead, and it throws Kent enough that he doesn't call out the change.

"What?"

"Parse," Waller replies. "We know you're a fuckin' rarity. You got talent and you got brains and you're goddamn ruthless. Nobody here's going to be able to keep up with you like Zimmermann could.

"I'm not saying you make anyone deliberately feel like that," he adds, as Kent curls his fists into the blanket. "You go outta your way to avoid it. You're a good captain. But that's a hard fucking bar to meet. And when you fall off your game like tonight, it gets even more obvious."

"Christ," Kent mutters again.

"You know how hard Scrappy works," Waller tells him. "He's a simple guy, Parse. He doesn't like feeling like a failure. It gets under his skin. But whatever he said about Zimmermann, he feels
lousy about it now."

Kent looks over. Waller shrugs. "He wouldn't say," he answers, and Waller's tell is that he hooks his left thumb in his front pocket when he's lying.

But if Scrappy said anything to anyone besides him, he'd warn Kent. Kent's pretty sure he'd warn him. If he knew about it. Scrappy and Vichy are pretty tight.

"It's obvious he regrets it," Waller finishes. "So if your face ain't broken, come play some cards and get this mellowed out. We can still wrap it up tonight. We've got enough shit to deal with with Lewis."

Kent makes himself take in a deep breath and exhale it slowly.

He pushes off the bed and drags a hand through his hair once more, and then winces when it makes his face throb. "All right." Kent breathes out again. "All right, man. I get it."

"You need something?" Waller asks with a gesture to his face, as Kent grabs his wallet off the nightstand.

"No," he replies. "I already took ibuprofen."

"'S'all you ever take anymore," the man comments; and Kent knows he's edging back toward what he was originally going to talk about. Given the earlier lie, Kent's pretty sure what it is.

He trusts his first alternate as much as he's been willing to trust anyone since he was eighteen; but there's a point where it stops.

Since ultimately, it's not just about Kent. It never is.

Jack always comes up too, sooner or later.

In hockey, in rumors, in everything. Jack's always still in there somewhere, a reference point to all Kent does. It doesn't matter how different their trajectories have been since the draft, they--he--still can't get their names separate.

Every once in a while, Kent can understand just how godawful it must be for Zimms to live under the shadow of his father.

"I don't like the way other stuff makes me feel loopy," he replies, waving a hand at his head. "Almost walked into a wall once on Oxycontin, decided 'fuck this.'"

Waller gives him another look, but it doesn't last as long as the first one. He shrugs. "All right."

Kent shoves his wallet into his pocket and adds, "Tell me we're not playing Go Fish again."

Waller snorts through his nose and opens the door. "Nobody's fuckin' playing poker with you anymore, Parse. Get over it."

"Cowards," Kent half-grins.

He steals some of Scrappy's ice to make a pack for his face after the first round of blackjack. Scrappy gives him a few half-hearted chirps for it, but lets him. The tension in the room stays for a while; but by the time everyone else's on their third beer, it's easing up.
Kent nurses his first one for as long as he can, but eventually it's empty. When Holler tries to harass him into a second after Kent says he's waiting for the ibuprofen to wear off, Kent considers just taking it and pouring it out in the bathroom when everyone's too buzzed or into the game to notice. He thinks about how he's already talked too much about Jack tonight; he thinks about how authenticity is a sucker's game and he still doesn't get why it matters so much. He thinks about how the team has to stay steady.

Kent shifts his jaw for a breath and then says, "I'm not mixing pills and alcohol."

The guys look at him for a couple seconds.

Then Holler sticks the beer back inside the case. "Okay. Cool."

Kent lets out a quiet breath and returns to his cards.

*

Whatever Coach Lewis and the referee talked about following his fight in the Aeros' game, it doesn't get published anywhere Kent finds. But Lewis's attitude toward him goes to hell.

Kent keeps his mouth shut and his jaw grit and plays through it. He keeps his points up even though Lewis starts splitting up him and his normal center and starts sending Kent out more and more in the d-zone. He listens when Lewis is still giving good advice. He shakes it off when the man tries to hold him to an impossible double standard, talks about hothouse talent after a loss or makes comments about how Kent shouldn't get cocky just because he's no longer exempt from waivers. He thinks *You fucking moron, you think I'll fall for that?*

There's being great, and then there's being perfect. One's possible; one's not.

Thinking he had to be perfect to be worthy of being called great almost killed Jack. It's not happening to Kent.

He keeps the coach out of his head, keeps his face straight when he gets scratched from games, plays through the bullshit in the dressing room after each period, and waits.

*

After You Can Play debuts in March, Kent keeps track of it and also of the reporter who's been springing questions about it on players. When it comes up in an interview, he's ready.

"Absolutely for it," Kent grins. "Like Walczak said last month, I'm proud to be part of the sport that started this. If you can play, get on the ice and let's see what you can do."

Yerby nods. "The Aces have had a few players now declare support for this program. Any particular reason why?" he asks. Challenges.

Kent raises an eyebrow.

"Because we're not homophobic jerks?" he responds.

Kent keeps talking over whatever Yerby's about to reply. "I've seen your interviews asking guys about the program, which, nice work on the publicity for it." He lifts the corner of his mouth in a grin and bumps the man's shoulder with his knuckles. "But I don't think I ever caught your opinion. What do you think about You Can Play, man?"
He watches Yerby flounder, and keeps smiling as he waits.

But then the guy rights himself and narrows his eyes slightly. "I think it's great," Yerby says, doing a hell of a job of sounding sincere. "It's helping bring the sports world more in line with the way the country actually is."

_You douche_, Kent thinks, grinning wider. "Yeah, we want all our fans to feel welcome, too. They're supporting us, why wouldn't we support them?"

"Kent." One of the PR guys, O'Toole, leans into the camera's range, pretending to be giving an aside while his voice is obviously pitched so the mic will catch it. "The filming got rescheduled, we need you ready in twenty."

"Check," he murmurs back. "Thanks." Kent shakes the reporter's hand and closes out the interview.

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Kent?" O'Toole asks, after they've left the club's PR wall and started heading back to the dressing room.

"That guy's a dick," he replies. "I thought he covered Northwest, why's he here?"

"Freelancer," O'Toole answers. "Anything you _don't_ want to tell me but would still be useful for us to know going forward?"

Kent's initial contract with the Aces is nearing its end. Even though the Schedule B bonus he got after the Cup win slaughtered the team's salary cap last year, another club wouldn't have to eat much of it if he's traded. The same thing that makes Kent valuable to the Aces makes him just as valuable as a swap piece, especially if they can get someone that fits the club's culture better doing it.

It's the front office's job to salvage this season. Trying to handle Kent in a way that gives him a sense of security so he'll keep working hard for them through playoffs and won't go off-script about Lewis to the media would be a smart maneuver.

And then they can trade him in June, and shuck off the potentially toxic asset of the league's first outed player before the media's inevitable tabloid-commentary reaction. They'd be in the clear before it negatively impacts season ticket sales and the club's ability to attract other players when free agency starts.

Kent knows better than this. His career on the ice has maybe fifteen more years. Nineteen max. All contracts are ultimately temporary. People's and the media's bullshit isn't.

"Nope," Kent replies.

O'Toole gives him a sidelong look.

Then he shakes his head. "All right. But next time, give me a heads up if you plan to savage anyone else in an interview, huh?"

"That was nothing," Kent scoffs. "Asshole's been baiting people all month, he had it coming."

O'Toole shakes his head slower. "Just give me a heads up, Kent."

*
Lewis resigns before the end of the regular season, for "health reasons."

One of the first things the front office does is all but outright tell Kent they want to offer him a new five-year contract. It's implied it'll come with an immediately activated no-move clause.

Kent talks it over—as a hypothetical situation, so the GM isn't fined for doing this before July—with his agent for three hours, and spends about fifty minutes of the time wishing he could ask Bob or Jack for advice. He non-verbally indicates he's agreeable with signing once offseason comes.

He asks Waller about the resignation once. When the man says it's better if he just goes with the public story, Kent doesn't ask again.

He makes certain to emphasize how different things are with Coach Kurlansky while the front office scrabbles to hire a new head coach. He makes certain the team stays steady under Kurlansky and that the guys know things are being handled. All the team needs to think about is how they're going to play. All they need to talk about to reporters is how they were glad to have had Lewis while he was with the Aces and how the man worked hard during his duration there, and that they hope his recovery goes well.

The soundbite is Kent's, because he knew it would come up in the first interview he had following the resignation. The rest of the team more or less echoes it until the media figures out it's their party line. Coach Kurlansky always just says he can't comment during the hiring process.

One of the rookies flounders when the really sharp blogger culls him away to grill him on the rumors of agitation between Lewis and Kent before the head coach's resignation, but he manages to recover and get loose with some vague and neutral comments. Waller gives the rest of the guys a line to use after that, about how both Lewis and Parson are professionals and have always behaved like it.

The whole hassle just reinforces how stupid it is not to stick to an image; but Kent doesn't bother pointing that out to Scrappy or anyone else. It's obvious.

* 

The Coyotes beat them out to become top of the Pacific, but the Aces still enter the Cup playoffs.

And then they win and move on to the conference semifinals.

And then they lose to fucking Phoenix in their own barn.

Kent can still hear the clapping of the fans when it was obvious they were going to lose the round ringing in his ears on the way back to the dressing room: the applause of the people who bothered to stay to the end thanking them for the season, the worst sound in the world. Kent detours into an unlocked supply closet and wedges himself behind a shelf of cleaning supplies and bashes a fist against the concrete floor until it begins to hurt through his glove and he starts thinking about time.

He forces his breathing back into something close to even. Kent pulls off his glove and checks that his hand isn't bruised. Then he gets his game face back on, and slips out of the closet once he's sure no one's in the hall. When he returns to the dressing room, he chucks his gloves onto his seat and breaks up the yelling match between Chazzer and Hens. Once he gets Chazzer to cool off, Kent starts stripping out of his gear, as silent as the rest of the guys.

If anybody noticed the couple minutes he was missing, they don't say anything.

*
Once they're in postseason, most of the media focuses on how the head coach's abrupt departure affected the Aces' last month. They still rip the team apart, talking about all of them like commodities instead of human beings; but they scrutinize the disorganization and miscommunication Kurlansky had to manage in the interim more than any individual players' size or price or stats.

It's probably the best Kent could hope for. He tells himself that a couple times, and then quits because it's not helping.

When he's done with all his official wrap-up duties, Kent gives himself one day to just stay in his apartment and ignore his phone and be exhausted and pissed.

When it's up, he goes back out and gets started on the unofficial wrap-up: dinner or clubbing with some of the guys, catching a basketball game over in California with others, an afternoon at a casino with a few more. Kent leaves the blackjack table once the dealer starts eying him suspiciously and a security guard takes up a position against the wall several feet away, and joins Mitts with a whiskey at the table where he's watching the other couple guys play craps.

Their conversation goes from their new coach out of the NCAA who the front office just announced, to the club's trend of trying and failing to grow its own young players, to how the NCAA operates in general. Kent was trying to explain why hiring Moss makes sense for Vegas, but he gets derailed breaking down the causes for systemic behavior problems in the sports that use colleges as a minor league system until he realizes Mitts is staring at him wide-eyed.

"If you know they know they're in a system that's designed to overwork them until they're useless for the majors, of course you're gonna ignore it if they over-party or screw their girls up or start fights as long as they're not caught. You just cancel the scholarship as soon as they're injured and let that take care of--what?"

"This is amazing," Mitts says in awe. He catches a passing waitress by the elbow. "'Scuse me, can I get another beer, and give him a double of--" Mitts looks back at him. "What is that, whiskey?"

"Water, thanks," Kent tells her.

"And a double of Jack Daniels neat," Mitts says. Kent shakes his head, but the woman just says "Okay" and extracts herself.

"I'm not drinking that if it comes."

"Suit yourself. Tell me more."

Kent narrows his eyes. "Why."

"You're the most media-ready perfect pro-club dude I've ever met, and now you're like 'fuck that bullshit the entire system's abusive as fuck and here's exactly how, you fuckers would all see this if you weren't part of the problem.' Like I know shit sucked with Lewis, Parse, but goddamn." Mitts shakes his head slowly and downs the last of his beer. "Is this what's going on in your head all the time, holy shit. That's terrifying. Tell me more."

"See you later, Smith," Kent replies, pushing away from the table. Maybe the dealer that realized he was counting cards has gone off her shift by now.

"I know where you work!" Mitts calls. Kent flips him off over his shoulder as he walks away, until he remembers to think about cameras.
Waller invites everyone who hasn't left town yet to his daughter's junior high graduation. They proceed to embarrass her as much as humanly possible by being the loudest group there, even though someone else brought like thirty relatives.

And then it's all over and they're in the long stretch of offseason.
When Kent goes back to New York for his birthday over the summer, one of his cousins badgers him into fighting lessons in his uncle's basement.

"No, because you suck," Danny repeats, when Kent tries to wrap it up after half an hour. "Get back here."

"I said I'm done," Kent bites off, squirting water on his face before rubbing it out of his eyes.

"Know how popular that shit fight with the Aeros still is?" Danny replies. "Pretty sure I put your name in YouTube, it'll come right up."

"Fuck off."

"Get back here," his cousin says. "Someone's gonna talk shit about your team or your boyfriend some day, you gotta punch better. Live up to the family name. Can't fuckin' believe Uncle Isaac's Quaker crap got in that bad."

"Back off Dad, Danny," Kent says colder.

His cousin makes a disparaging noise under his breath. "Get back here." He slaps his hands together and then falls into the wide-foot stance Kent's given up telling him is useless on the ice. "Time to be Claude Lemieux, Kenny."

Kent gives him a long look.

Danny grins wide. "I know what I called you," he says cheerily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Got a problem with it, try and actually hit me."

"You're a goddamn asshole," Kent replies, but he goes back.

After he returns to Vegas, he doesn't go out much before the awards ceremony. Some jerk gets a picture of him when he's grocery shopping and posts it, so Kent has to put up with the team chirping him for his black eye and pestering him for an explanation over the next couple days.

*

The Aces send Kent's agent his new contract first thing the day negotiations open. Allan comments on its similarity to the hypothetical situation Kent raised a while back and argues with him over it.

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't tell you not to rush this," Allan says flatly. "You're worth more than five years, even at this salary and with the clause."

When Kent doesn't reply, his agent finally exhales slowly. "But. Given the situation with the PA...."

Allan looks over the desk at Kent. "Are you satisfied with these terms?"

It's plenty of money for everything he needs while still letting him save. The Aces are clearly trying to keep themselves room under the cap; but the no-move clause guarantees they'd have to buy out his contract to get rid of him, which seems like a pretty solid investment given Kent's status.
as a potential PR timebomb if he gets outed.

And they've committed to keeping him through the first two seasons Jack's going to be in the league, if he signs right out of college. They'd take on that inevitable media gauntlet. That's something.

"Yeah," Kent says.

Allan frowns down at the contract; but eventually he hands Kent a pen. "All right."

Kent signs, even though he gets where his agent's coming from. It's obvious the league is barreling toward another lockout.

By the time informal skates start, it's so obvious there's no way to manage the tension in the dressing room. Kent still tries, especially with the prospects and the trades who came into Vegas early.

He knows he's in the dark about a lot of the Aces' overall organization, for reasons he's fine with. And he's been watching himself more around the front office staff ever since the former head coach started getting so fed up with him, so he doesn't hear stuff like he used to.

But Kent still knows enough to understand the club should've been in a better position than others. They're a lesser part of their owners' portfolios, and he's pretty sure they're a minor asset to the silent investors.

But at the same time, the recession's still visibly impacting ticket sales. And the youth hockey club hasn't grown much over the years despite Kent's and everyone's PR work with it. And they're a hockey team in a desert city that's constantly obsessed with water.

It all just comes down to the math. The team's a team; but the club's a business.

* *

When September's stalemate drags on, Kent meets with his agent again and discusses the impact to his brand if he signs with a European team.

"The good thing is you set yourself up as city- and family-focused from the start," Allan tells him, scrolling through a tablet. "The charity work, looking after your parents, those old 'mom-friendly chirp' articles. You're still sending money back each month, right?"

"Yeah," Kent answers, trying not to tap his fingers agitatedly on the arm of his chair. "Direct deposit." He'll have to sort that out if he goes over. And currency exchanges.

"Good. We can use all that, set up some moral, filial arguments to counter any 'greed' or 'play for love of the game' ones," Allan says. "Start laying the groundwork now whenever you can, so it's ready when the lockout hits."

Kent raises an eyebrow. "'When'?"

"They've been planning this for a couple years," Allan tells him. "It's crap that it's coming now right when you young guys are hitting your stride, but that's the point. They're betting you won't risk your careers after what happened in 2004."

Kent exhales through his teeth. "This is such bullshit."
"Yep," Allan agrees calmly. Kent exhales again and slumps deeper into the chair, and thinks at least the man's prepared. He's glad he took Bob's advice about potential agents. Allen starts scrolling through the tablet again as he asks, "Are there any specific teams you're interested in, once the lockout begins?"

He sure as hell isn't not playing until this is worked out. And he doesn't want to end up in the AHL. But Kent doesn't want a PR risk if the league and the union get their shit together soon after he signs to play elsewhere. "I'm not sure about it yet."

"We can work it either way--not wanting to abandon the U.S. or not wanting to go idle and lose your skills. You've got probably a week to give me a solid idea," Allan says. "What languages do you know?"

Kent tenses a little in the chair. "English. Some French."

"Quebecois isn't French, trust me," Allan tells him. "All right. Let me know by next Thursday."

*

The last day the Aces' bought ice time for guys to skate is September twelfth. That afternoon, the clubhouse kitchen is loud as guys check their news feeds and try to harass info out of the assistant coach until a phone call pulls Kurlansky away. The head coach's been absent since half an hour into the skate.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," Chazzer mutters, glowering at his phone. "Fuck you assholes! This is bullshit!"

"Welcome to the NHL," Kent's first alternate drawls.

"Fuck you," Chazzer snarls at Waller in reply, before throwing his phone onto the table. It bounces off onto the floor. "Fuck. It's gonna be a lockout, isn't it."

"Yeah," Waller agrees. "It's been coming, Chaz. As long as we don't cave like 2005, it's not the end of the world."

Vichy rubs a hand over his eyes and then braces his face in his palms, slumped heavily over the table. "Shit."

Kent spends most of lunch trying to talk down the new and the angry guys, so he never makes it over to his liney. But one of the times when he looks over, Kent sees Vichy leaning hard on the counter by the sink. Waller's got an arm around his shoulders, talking to him quietly.

Eventually Vichy finally laughs wearily at something the older man says, before exhaling slowly and dragging his fingers through his hair. Waller thumps Vichy's arm with another comment; and Kent figures he's got it under control. He focuses his attention back on Chazzer.

*

After the farce in Manhattan the next day, Kent calls his agent and says he's willing to sign on to a team in Europe.

When they've wrapped up the details, Kent tosses his phone on the couch and keeps pacing through the apartment.
It's a gamble. A really big one. Fans are already enraged over the idea of a third lockout in less than twenty years, scapegoating the players that've talked about joining a European league and threatening to quit following hockey entirely. Kent knows most of it's grandstanding bullshit, but still.

But the alternative is not playing. And he's not doing that.

He didn't peak in 2011. He's not hothouse talent. He's got plenty more he can and will do.

* 

The NHL cancels the preseason, and Kent signs a contract with Fribourg-Gottéron in the NLA.

In under a week he sublets his apartment to one of Vichy's high school friends, gets a travel agency to expedite booking his one-way ticket and hotel room in Switzerland, sorts out the sim card thing for his phone, locks his Cup ring in his bank box, and heads out.

He doesn't see anyone before he goes. Only a couple of the guys live permanently in Vegas; the ones that didn't head to Kansas to play for the feeder team went back to their offseason homes. Vichy already left for Yekaterinburg and the KHL.

Kent meets his parents in JFK for a weird not-lunch-not-dinner during the layover on his flight to Geneva. He spends most of the flight watching the Swiss league's tapes and going through a French phrasebook.

He half-sleeps on the train from Geneva to Fribourg, and wakes up groggy and jet-lagged when he arrives. He doesn't immediately remember any of the French he drilled himself on, but he manages "bathroom" and "coffee."

The Swiss team's head coach texted while he was dozing, in very precise English that makes Kent think vaguely of Vichy's parents and Bob Zimmermann. The man wrote that the club can get him solo ice time this afternoon to adjust to the rink, and work him into the morning skates starting tomorrow. He wants Kent in the Saturday game if possible.

It feels like multiple tests in one message. Kent checks his watch and gets out the carefully marked map the travel agent gave him, and writes back Okay, I'll be there.

He gets his luggage and sets out for the hotel, hoping he'll have enough time to power nap before catching the bus for the rink.

If not, fine. He'll play through the jet-lag and do a good show. He can handle a breakneck pace. If he has to run with this until the lockout ends, he can.

He has to, so he will.

* 

It's still exhausting.

Kent readjusts to someone else being captain. He uses every second of time the coaches give him to learn the ice, and watches tape in his hotel room in the evenings. He skates out with the second line on Saturday and makes an assist.

He tries to adapt to a new team. He tries to ignore how he has no idea if he'll still be here in a week
or five months, and how he doesn't understand eighty percent of what anyone around him is saying.

He has to. Signing with the NLA will definitely damage his brand if Fribourg-Gottéron doesn't consistently win while he's with them.

So Kent puts in extra practice with teammates whenever he can get it from them, and gets as good a feel for the guys' dynamics as he can. He stays on the ice before and after practices for as long as the staff allow it, working on adjusting his game to the larger rink. He keeps track of the standoff between the league and the union. He never gets around to unpacking his suitcase except for the two suits and four dress shirts he hangs up.

He gets less sleep than he knows he should.

Kent tries. It's not like Jack didn't constantly harp on how he had to stop when he was getting gassed. Not that Jack always listened to his own advice.

Not that Jack would need it here. His accent would be back in full force already, he'd know what everyone's saying. He wouldn't be shut out by that language barrier Kent can never seem to clear no matter how many damn years he's been doing this.

He tries to sleep enough. He's not an idiot. But there's too much else he needs to do more.

*

The time difference in Switzerland becomes a severe hindrance when Vichy starts a minor shitstorm after the Sun prints an article translating a Russian interview he did complaining about the league.

Kent runs the original article through a few different translator programs, and makes enough sense out of the resulting gibberish to see Vichy talked about being frustrated being away from home, and worried about the impact of the lockout when Vegas is still recovering from the recession--he still has friends on unemployment after the last round of casino layoffs, and this isn't helping.

It's all so on point with the valuable-to-the-community-and-economy tactics the PR team used last season to push tickets and counter some of the water-usage grumbling that Kent hopes the club stays smart and lets this blow over quietly. Or at least pushes back if the league tries to overly vilify Vichy for being so blunt.

For the first time since the lockout--for the first time since midway though last season--Kent wishes he could talk to someone in the front office. Just so he could know what the long-term game plan is. It's crap being in the dark and isolated over here.

By the time Kent's done with practice the next morning, he's already gotten emails from media looking for comments.

He wonders just how much of his life he's gonna spend running PR intervention for lineys, and emails back all but one of the reporters with a genial but supportive response referencing Vichy's comments about his family. He makes sure it can be easily broken down into reprinted excerpts.

He sets up a Skype call with the last blogger to give it over verbally. Collins never asks about Jack unless it's actually relevant or Kent brings him up first; he can make time for her.

It takes him longer to stage the call than it does to actually hold it. He wants to keep the window out of the background to limit reminders of how he's in Switzerland playing for a different league now; but trying to rearrange the room becomes such a pain in the ass that finally he just rents one
of the hotel's meeting rooms. Kent sets his laptop so he's got a neutral, blank wall in the background.

"My Russian's pretty weak," Kent admits, after Collins gives him the heads' up that this is being recorded and asks about the article. "So I've gotta trust that the translation accurately reflects what he was feeling. I haven't been able to talk to him yet, with the time difference. But really, that sounded right for him."

Collins manages to catch herself as she's raising an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah," Kent smiles warmly. "Klimentov was born and raised in our city. He's been a Las Vegan all his life. The impact of the recession is personal, to him and his family and friends and all the people he's grown up with. I know how proud he is to be part of the Vegas Aces, and how seriously he takes our community connections."

Kent laughs slightly. "Y'know, when I first moved there, Vichy's the one who filled me in on all the history of Las Vegas and Nevada. So I know he was talking about how much he cares about our city. I guess a nuance got missed in translation or something. Translating's difficult work."

"I see," Collins says. They talk a little about Fribourg-Gottéron and some upcoming NLA games; and then she says, "Well, thank you for time, Kent."

"No problem," he smiles.

Vichy texts him a few hours later: My agent thinks you're gunning for his job.

Thanks, Parser.

Kent flags the waiter, gets the check and a box, and calls Vichy back.

"You're lucky I answered," Vichy mutters when he picks up.

"Vich."

"I know."

"Why?!" Kent demands.

"I didn't fucking know he was recording!"

Kent pauses in the middle of dumping the rest of his steak in the box. "That's legal there?"

Shit. He's been assuming Switzerland's recording laws are the same as Nevada's this whole time, like an idiot. He should've looked into that already.


"Watch your back," Kent warns, dropping his francs on the table before heading out of the hotel's restaurant. "It's in their favor to feed the lockout and keep us here. Especially the KHL, with that television deal."

"Jesus," Vichy growls, "you gotta be paranoid about everything, Parser?"
"Lemme know if trusting starts working out better for you, Vichy," Kent replies flatly, and the man tells him to go to hell.

Kent keys into his room, kicks the door shut behind him, and drops his food on the desk. "You got some time?"

Vichy hisses out a breath. "I know, captain. I'll be smarter in the future."

"I know," Kent replies, checking his watch and trying to remember the time difference. It's six, so--ten there? "But do you have time? When do you have to head to sleep?"

"Why?" Vichy asks, sounding more confused than wary.

"I don't have a game tonight," Kent replies. "You got more time to talk?"

"About what?"

"Whatever's eating you so bad," Kent replies. "You're smarter than getting caught complaining. Tell me what's up."

Vichy's silent on the other end of the phone.

Finally, he exhales again, quieter. "Okay. Yeah, I've got time."

"Great." Kent sets the phone to speaker so he can finish eating while he listens.

After over an hour they switch to Skyping instead, because this is seriously wrecking Kent's minutes.

Vichy's accent fades while he talks until Kent doesn't have to concentrate to understand; but he's still dodging the question. He talks, but it's mostly about Vegas: a bunch of history and a lot of digressions into politics. Kent wonders if he's homesick.

Kent runs through his evening stretches and eventually dumps the tablet on the bed so he can stretch out. Vichy interrupts himself soon after. "You gotta sign off?"

"I'm good," Kent says, because it's better if he gets this out of his system now and to a teammate.

Vichy shakes his head. "It's all right, man. Your team's got practice tomorrow, right? I'm fine."

"The Aces are my team," Kent replies. "I'm good."

Vichy doesn't answer immediately. When Kent lifts his head off his folded arms and peers at the screen, Vichy's looking down and combing his fingers through his hair.

"Do you need to head out?" Kent asks. It's probably late enough they're keeping his relatives up, if the walls in Vichy's place are thin. "When do you play again, tomorrow?"

"Day after," Vichy answers after a moment, looking back up. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" Kent asks, and Vichy says "Yeah."

"Alright," Kent says, pulling an arm free and looking at his watch. "Say when you gotta go. It's after midnight there, right?"
"Okay."

"Good," Kent tells him. He half-smiles at the screen as he tucks his arms back under his head. "Live up to that Russian work ethic."

"I'm not Russian, I'm American," Vichy says bitterly.

Way, way too bitterly.

Kent props himself up on his elbows. "...You okay?"

Vichy scrubs his hands over his face. "I'm just fuckin' sick of--they're letting me stay here, but I know they're mad Mom and Dad fled after the anthrax scare, and Shayanov's pissed he used up the foreign spot on me instead of Lupul when I can't fucking keep up and--"

Vichy cuts off, clenching his jaw and swallowing hard. He presses his hands harder to his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he mutters.

"Sure," Kent says, sitting up on the bed.

When Vichy grits his teeth harder and doesn't answer, Kent asks, "Do they give you access to the tape?"

Vichy pulls his hands away, frowning. "Why?"

"Tell 'em you want to take a copy home to review it, and show it to me," Kent replies, because he recognized the name of Yekaterinburg's head coach. If the Avtomobilist's doing something that's compounding how touchy Vichy is about his extended family, then this is a problem. "If they're not adjusting the lines right to fit you to get your best, that's on them. We'll just have to figure it out."

Vichy looks at him in disbelief. "The hell do you think I'm gonna do that?"

"We'll figure something out," Kent repeats. "Worst case, if they won't give you the file, record it on your phone and we'll work with that."

"Parser," Vichy starts to argue, and Kent says flatly, "I'm not letting a shit coach fuck up your stats. Just get me some tape, or tell me where I can find your games online, got it? It's fucking on them if they aren't playing you right."

Vichy stares at him for a long moment.

Finally he combs his fingers through his hair again. "How'm I supposed to get it?"

"I don't know," Kent answers. "You know 'em better than me, Vichy. Tell the video coach whatever you have to to make him hand it over. You're good at making guys see sense." Kent turns on the TV and sets it to mute. "I'll talk to the front desk and see if I can pay to get the games. Or check if there's online access. If the instructions are in Russian you can walk me through account setup, right?"

"Yeah," Vichy says.

"Good," Kent replies. "Worst case, I'll email you screenshots and you send back the translation. It's gonna be fine."
"Alright," Vichy says. "--Gimme a sec."

"Sure."

Kent keeps going through the TV channels as Vichy leaves the screen. He looked for hockey stations when he first moved in; but maybe the hotel's made changes.

Vichy gets back a few minutes later. He must've washed his face--he's rubbing at his reddened eyes as he settles back down in front of the computer. "Fuckin' soap here."

Kent makes him sign off a little later, now that Vichy's finally starting to look less tense and worn down. Vichy tells him thanks and goes.

*

More NHL players come to Europe and Russia through October, but only a few sign with the NLA. Kent's glad. It's been weird to see familiar play styles pop out of the mix of total strangers, but he adjusted. More people coming over means doing it again, which is another extra hassle he doesn't need.

By now, the only teammates Kent hangs out with much off the ice are the Canadians, the one lone American, and the German-American transfer from the DEL. He had to choose between learning more French or practicing more hockey; hockey won.

Since he can barely talk to most of the guys here, he's already got a shaky connection with the majority of the team, shallow in the worst way. The last thing Kent wants is more distractions.

Forced immersion helps him learn enough French to navigate the buses and to chirp the double hell out of Seguin when their teams face each other. Kent considers both a victory, even though eventually he gets hip checked into the boards by another Biel player who mutters "Fucking twenty-year-olds" in English as he skates off while Kent's staggering back to his feet.

Fribourg-Gottéron wins in overtime. Kent half-salutes Seguin like an asshole as Biel skates off the ice, because it's not like he has to worry about cameras for once. Seguin flips him off over his shoulder.

He talks with the Aces' GM once when the league permits communications, but there's not much to say. Kent's not interested in staying in Switzerland if there's a reasonable opportunity to go back home. He's not going to sign a bad deal. He's not going to comment one way or the other how he feels to the media; he's not Ovechkin.

He reviews KHL games with Vichy when they can both be online at the same time, and Kent watches what game footage he can get in the interim. He sends recommendations on how Vichy should change his style to work better with his KHL lineys, since it's clearly a one-way street there.

They talk less and less as they get deeper into the season. And half the time when their schedules work out Vichy looks so tired at the start of the call that Kent signs off soon after. But he can tell that Vichy's doing better.

Even when they can't talk, Kent can see his linemate's taking the foundations of his advice and
breaking it down and adapting the components and reapplying it to new guys whenever he gets moved around on lines, because adaptability's always been Vichy's strongest skill.

When Kent first came onto the Aces, he couldn't figure out why the other man was being wasted on a static fourth line instead of being set as the core center of a fluctuating third one. Vichy and Scrappy have great chemistry, but it should've been saved for a special team. The fourth line wasn't getting near enough ice time under the former coach to justify keeping him down there just because of that.

The former coach wasn't fucking with the team to rig their rankings at that point, either. The previous captain should've said something a long time ago, instead of leaving it as another goddamn mess Kent had to take on while trying to get the Aces closer to playoff level.

But that's their loss now. And Kent's gain.

The coaches finally noticed how Kent and Vichy were working well whenever they messed around with pucks at the end of practices and started playing them on the same line, and Kent got a center again who could do something with most of the passes he sent. And then once the former coach stopped being stupid trying to make Vichy hit more when it just affected his reaction time and instead called up a winger from the feeder team to do the dirty work on the line, Kent finally had a good enough line to really kill it on the ice.

He'll wait and see what this new head coach does, whenever the season finally starts. Moss seemed decent at the offseason skates; but Kent's not risking anything that he's worked so hard for a third time.

*

In late October the NHL cancels all of November's games. Kent negotiates with the hotel to pay a discounted full month rate, calls his parents to say he won't be back for Thanksgiving again this year, and gives two assists in his next game.

*

He plays like absolute shit on October thirtieth.

Kent heard from a couple teammates in New England after the hurricane before he had to get ready for the game, but nothing from any of his family except the most upstate relatives. Nothing from Jack.

He keeps himself up watching tape until more phone lines and cell towers start functioning. His family's okay. A cousin's stuck in the Midwest because all the airports closed on her, and his uncle had to evacuate. But everyone's alive.

The Aces on the west coast keep him updated as they hear more from or about their people in the east. All the guys in Europe talk to each other for a couple days, checking in on each others' people. Kent calls his and Jack's old billet families, just in case. He and Seguin get over their past shit-talking because whatever, there's bigger things.

Kent's reminded just how small his world really is.

Eventually Jack finally texts that he's fine, and then that Bob and Alicia don't have power yet but otherwise they're fine.

*Fine bullshit Kent snaps back. Samwell flooded*
Just the basement Jack writes, even later that evening. We're fixing it.

Do dorms have basements? Did Jack move somewhere else?

He starts to ask but gets preoccupied answering some emails. Later, Jack sends another text asking about Kent's parents.

Their ok Kent answers. Everybody checked in You?

Everyone's all right here. Upstate New York is better off.

Jack adds Get some sleep, Kent.

He rubs his eyes. I'm good

Go to sleep. Jack repeats.

"Piss off," Kent mutters, deleting the text.

Maybe half an hour later, he hits a lull. Kent drops the phone onto his chest and sinks deeper into the bed and thinks Whatever, Zimmermann.

*

The NLA does a game break the first week of November. Kent spends his free time on more of what he's been doing all along: sleeping, weight training, and playing on outdoor rinks.

Those are a pretty nice plus to being out here. Kent tries to get to the one by his parents' house when he visits on Christmas breaks, but it usually doesn't work out. And here in Switzerland, he's got an advantage he hasn't had in years: with a hat and scarf on, nobody recognizes him. He plays left-wing or center most of the time anyway, just in case.

Kent works on speed when he's alone and fancy plays whenever he joins up with other groups out on the ice. He tests moves and shots and rebounds, and generally just screws around with the puck the way he hasn't been able to since he got famous enough that he couldn't afford to be caught fucking up and dicking around.

He reminds himself more than once that the lockout's an opportunity. He's not falling behind. He's not hothouse talent.

*

His agent calls and says he was contacted by Caesar's Palace: there's a charity game planned for Hurricane Sandy victims in New Jersey in a couple weeks. The corporation thought it would look good for the Aces if Kent signed on to play since New York was his home state.

Kent's pretty sure there are layers there that he doesn't really want to know about, because plausible deniability is great.

The coach releases him from Fribourg-Gottéron's schedule on the twenty-third and twenty-fourth. The last scheduled game is the twentieth, so Kent actually does make it home for Thanksgiving for the first time since he became captain. He spends it helping his dad on a Habitat for Humanity project and spends Friday practicing with Team New York.
Integrating into a new team is easier this time around, though most of the guys all know each other in a way Kent's only got with other players in the Pacific division.

"Gave up on Switzerland?" Richards asks as they're getting dressed for practice. Ribbing.

Kent's pretty sure it's ribbing. Richards is trying to get a roomful of guys comfortable enough to have a valuable practice and play a good game tomorrow, trying to keep them focused even though games for the first two weeks of December were canceled the other day. It doesn't seem like a challenge.

"Nah," Kent grins. "But I couldn't leave a sister org of one of Vegas's finest hanging dependent on a King." He shrugs casually. "Had to step up, represent that Aces pride, y'know?"

Richards snorts and some of the other guys laugh. Someone paraphrases it to a blogger after the game, and while he never hears from the front office a V.P. at Caesar's Palace sends him a gift basket. Kent gets back to Fribourg to find it in his hotel room, and thinks You guys gonna fucking get on with building that new arena now?

He hangs on to the business card.

He gets more messages from the rest of the Aces than usual afterward. The majority are kickstarted by Vichy in the group text, the first time he's done that in weeks: You finally come back to the U.S. and don't even go see your teammates? Cold.

Las Vegas is literally in the opposite direction I had to fly

Shocking news, Parser: the world is ROUND.

You've been awol in Russia you can't talk

A+ keepin the rivalry alive a guy adds, a couple moments before Waller sends Good job, kid. Nice pr.

One of the d-men, Patsy, says What was all that fancy stick handling r you trying to make us look bad

What was that fucking hit to Williams!? Scrappy demands. Are you a Swiss rat now? Did the Swiss make a Parse doppelganger?

Kent makes a face and a note to look the word up. Scrappy wtf

Your twitters been dead clearly youve been replaced with a cheap double Mitts answers.

Another d-man sends 2ed--th fuk was that hit who r u what'd switzerland do 2 parse

I am not a Swiss double. Seriously wtf

w/e parse u miss us

Yeah he writes.

His phone doesn't buzz again after that, for long enough that Kent gets toothpaste on his brush and registers just how weird the radio silence is.

He's picked up the phone to joke it off when Vichy finally replies again: HOW DO I FUCKING
**SCREENCAP ON THIS?**

*Mitts give me that.*

Their liney delivers the screencap a moment later.

*The day Kent Parson accidentally expressed real emotion. Immortalized.*

*Your mom should scrapbook that by the Cup pic* Mitts says.

*I take it back guys*

**TOO LATE, PARSER.** Vichy answers, and Kent can practically hear the glee.

He groans and thumps his head against the bathroom mirror and wonders what he's done to deserve this.

*

When Fribourg-Gottéron signed Desharnais in early November, it took Kent a couple games to adjust to playing with him.

But it's nice to have another NHL guy around to commiserate with, as the days drag on and the league and union fuck up mediation. They have common ground, they're associates but not friends; it's shallow in a good way.

The two of them hang out at the end of a table during post-game drinks one night after Kent returns, and Kent talks about what the charity game was like: how the fans were into it like it was a Cup final, like they'd been starving for months. It finally fully hits him how much he misses the NHL.

He loves hockey. Kent wouldn't have flown to the other side of the world and wouldn't keep struggling daily with a foreign language if those weren't the current requirements to play professional-level hockey. But what he really loves is playing hockey in the NHL.

Kent wants to be back on his own team, in his own rink. He wants to be back in front of his own fans, playing to the people that chant for the Aces and bang on the glass and gamble on their skills and love the game and love them.

The love's fickle as hell, sure. And quadruple as many people hate him. And he knows eventually the Aces will trade him or stop extending his contract once he starts getting too old.

But it doesn't change anything. When his team's on a peak, when they're in the spotlight, when they're tearing their way to the top of the division and holding down their position, it's the best. It's everything Kent ever wanted, and even if he wanted some parts to be different he made it right where he was always aiming for.

And he's sick of being locked out of it.

He's only got about thirteen years left in the game. Eighteen max. He'll wait this out because he has to, but it grates. He wants back in.

*

Kent quickly learned that Fribourg's outdoor rink is mostly for skating and not rec hockey, so he uses ones in nearby towns. When he doesn't have time to deal with bus schedules, he uses a smaller
rink outside the city that the German-American DEL transfer told him about.

Kent assumes it's public too, until the day he's out on it practicing drop passes with the guy when a man comes up to the boards and starts snapping at them in terse German.

Schäffer goes to talk to him, but finally he just raises his hands in a placating gesture, says a couple more words, and skates backward toward Kent. "So, we should go."

"What, did they make this off-limits?" Kent gives the ice a wary look.


Kent gives him a long look as they head for their shoes. The older man is still standing at the edge of the rink, arms folded and glowering them.

"We've been breaking onto some guy's property for weeks," Kent says, "and you didn't feel like mentioning that?"

"I didn't think we'd get caught!" Schäffer defends. "I know his son. Kurt said he'd be gone until January."

Kent tchs audibly and starts on his laces.

He avoids that rink for about a week.

Kent and some of the team are drinking to celebrate their win over the Davos when a dark-haired man comes into the cafe and starts talking to Schäffer. It's in German, so Kent gets up to grab another draft.

He decides to close out afterward. They've got another ten day game break coming up, but he couldn't get much extra ice time during it, so he's gonna be stuck with more bus trips out to other rinks. The Davos signed a Stars player four days ago, bumping the number of Pacific guys in the league up even more; Kent can't afford to slack off.

When he returns to the table, Schäffer breaks off his conversation and gestures at him. "That's Parson. The teammate who was with me. This is Kurt," he introduces. "Conrad Lehmann. We played together junior year in the UVM Catamounts."

Kent switches the beer to his other hand and shakes Lehmann's. "Good team. Sorry about the breaking and entering."

Lehmann shakes his head. "I apologize for the scene," he replies. "I thought he would be away until next year. I would have warned you two."

Schäffer says something quiet and off-hand in German, and Lehmann makes an "ah" noise.

"Don't worry about it," Kent answers as he sits down. "Do you want to join us?" he adds, since Lehmann's still standing by Schäffer's chair. "All the old guys already split."

One of the guys snorts from his seat across from Kent. "I'm telling Mauldin you said that."

"So I'll get more speed practice in the next couple days."

"And Desharnais."
"Whatever," Kent tells Lauper. "Four years older is old. Canadiens are Eastern conference anyway."

"'Eastern conference'?" Lehmann repeats with a frown, as he pulls a chair up. "Are you one of the NHL transfers?"

Schäffer breaks out laughing.

"Kurt, are you asking if Kent Parson is a transfer? Man whose team won the Stanley Cup his first year as captain? Man all those Canada papers wouldn't shut up about in 2009?"

"Ohhhh," Lehmann says, snapping his fingers. "That's you?"

Kent props his elbows on the table and buries his face in his hands.

"This town is killing me," he groans, while Schäffer laughs more and Lauper thumps his shoulder mock-sympathetically.

* He gets more active on his social media accounts again during the break. He fell off to focus on more important short-term things; but this is long-term important. Kent reminds himself of his priorities and gets back on it.

He keeps the lockout in mind. He doesn't mention hockey beyond brief lines about his own wins, retweets of wins or good plays by the guys in the Aces who were waived into the feeder team, and Vichy's plays and wins with the Avtomobilist. Mostly Kent posts stuff about Fribourg.

Lehmann seemed to take it as a personal challenge that the majority of what Kent knows about his town is the arena, the buses, his hotel, and the train station. Kent ended up escalating it for fun until he found himself aggressively agreeing to a vehement dare to be toured around the city. It gives him easy fodder for posts.

*Who first invented fondue anyway. Delicious but weird idea*

*12 has some good moves.* He adds a picture of the mites playing hockey in Fribourg's outdoor rink, once he gets Lehmann to translate so he's sure their parents are cool with it.

He puts up another picture of their table at lunch a couple days later, because it's safer than complaining about the NHL canceling games through the end of December like he wants to.

*Realized I drink more wine than beer now. Getting classy*

He starts getting chirped later as morning hits in the U.S. Lehmann reads over his shoulder occasionally, getting Kent to translate acronyms or whenever the lack of punctuation throws him off. "You have a funny team."

"I have a team of jackasses," Kent replies, grinning as he responds to Scrappy. "I'm gonna get back and find they've made a potato cannon now or something, swear to God."

Lehmann snerts into his glass.

There's not enough alcohol in Switzerland for when the rumors come out about the NHLPA trying to dissolve and pursue an antitrust suit. Instead, Kent texts Lehmann back and answers that he's down with riding the cable car that night once they're both free.
A while after he posts a picture view from it, when they're grabbing a drink in the hotel bar, he gets a text from Chazzer: What's with all the kitschy shit lately Parse? You dating?

"What?" Kent says, making Lehmann look up. He starts to send back No

But then he stops, and scrolls back through his last few days' posts.

Chazzer texts again: Bro

??!?????!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I'm not dating Kent sends.

Sounds fake, took too long

My phone isn't glued to my hand like yours Kent replies, rolling his eyes. I'm not dating

Chazzer doesn't reply. Soon after, a screencap of their messages appears in the group chat; and Kent wonders yet again what he's done to deserve this team.

Chazzer follows the screencap with Not shown: the 5 mins dead silence after question 1

It was one minute because *I have a life*

Nah lies

They can see the time stamps Chazzer

You have a dating life, Vichy says, because of course he shows up for this. That year-plus dry spell is finally over, Parser. I'm so proud of you.

Wtf why were you counting

So it IS over. Vichy replies, and Kent locks his phone and sets it facedown on the next seat and finally orders his wine.

It starts blowing up before the bartender's back. Lehmann raises an eyebrow and looks deliberately over the table to where Kent's now smothering the silenced phone with his thigh. "Do you need to answer?"

"No," Kent replies.

Five minutes of almost non-stop buzzing later, Lehmann asks, "Are you sure?"

"I'm gonna get these dicks back," Kent mutters, tugging his phone free.

Real glad to see the teamwork guys he sends, about the same time Patsy adds You still have to come back

sry parse r we interruptin ur DATE

So sorry, captain.

Im not

Appreciate the honesty, Mitts Kent says.
Lehmann leans forward to look at the phone. Kent almost takes a picture of him so the guys will see who he's with and shut up; and then he stops himself because that is a really bad idea for so many reasons.

"They'reragging on me for all the pictures I've been posting lately," Kent explains instead. "Since it's all tourystuff they're acting like it's from dates."

"Ah." Lehmann reaches for his glass. But instead of telling Kent it wasn't touristy, he says, "I wasn't sure."

Lehmann's fingers tighten slightly on the glass stem. "But they could be."

Kent looks at him.

Then he pinches the bridge of his nose. And then he cracks up before he can help it.

"Or no," Lehmann adds. Kent holds up a finger, hand still clutching the phone.

"No, I just," he manages. "Need a minute to--deal with how bad my game is apparently, holy shit. Wow." He rubs at his face. "I thought you were. Being European or something."

Lehmann gives him that one particular look he's gotten a lot in Switzerland, the one Kent's come to interpret as "you hopeless American." He cracks up again.

*  

"Motherfuckers!" Kent swears when he gets the news early on the fifteenth about the league's counterattack on the union. It's still dark outside the window of his hotel room. He startles Conrad awake.

"Was ist?" Conrad rubs his eyes and shifts on the bed toward where Kent's glowering up at his phone.

"If the PA dissolves they're gonna try to cancel our contracts." Kent stabs at the phone, scrolling through the article. "Make us free agents. *Fuckers.*"

Conrad starts to ask something else in German, still groggy; then he switches to French before finally remembering Kent speaks English. "And that is bad?"

It means he could go anywhere.

It means the Aces aren't required to keep him--but would they be that stupid? The former head coach is gone, and while Kent hasn't had a lot of time to get to know the new one, he seems better. And Kent's done nothing to actively be a liability to the front office. He's worked hard to be one of the team's biggest assets, a valuable player and a good face for the franchise. He's got great numbers. He puts in the community outreach. His salary isn't detrimental to the cap.

It means he isn't required to stay with the Aces, if something better comes up. That no-move clause will be null. It means everything would be open.

It means he could sign somewhere in the Eastern conference. Somewhere in the Atlantic or Northeast. Back closer to--home. If he wanted.


*
On the seventeenth, Kent sends in his vote on whether or not the union should dissolve.

On the eighteenth, he posts enthusiastically about Fribourg-Gottéron's shut-out game against the Lions, because the Lions signed the Kings' captain back in November and it never hurts to feed the rivalry story.

On the twentieth, the NHL cancels games through the first two weeks of January.

Kent pays another week's rent upfront on his hotel room. He starts to wonder even more if this is going to be a repeat of 2004 and he'll really be stranded over here for the whole season.

* 

The NLA's regular games are suspended for the Spengler Cup. Kent sticks with Fribourg-Gottéron, and they make it to the semifinals before goddamn Team Canada knocks them out.

He swears over it for about twenty seconds to Desharnais as they're heading out of the dressing room, until he realizes why the other man is looking at him like he wants to laugh. Then Kent decides he might as well keep moving forward, and throws as much New York accent into his voice as he can. "Canada, Davy."

"Right, eh?" Desharnais replies, over-the-top stereotypical. Kent snorts through his nose.

He goes back to Fribourg and spends New Years' Eve at Conrad's house, watching the final between Canada and the Davos on TV and staying the night since he doesn't need to be anywhere until tomorrow afternoon.

Getting back in habit of having sex with someone takes him a while. Once, Kent tried to determine just how long ago his short-term hookup after the Cup win was; but then he stopped because his team would chirp him straight into the grave if they ever found out that was the last time. Better not to know--if he doesn't know, it's easier to lie.

But it was definitely long enough ago that readjusting takes a while. The first time Conrad drags his hands a little too hard down Kent's back while they're in his hotel room, accidentally scratching him, he pins the man's forearms to the bed reflexively. It isn't until Conrad breaks the kiss with a chuckle and teases about him liking rough things that Kent catches himself and lets go.

It's not like with Inez a couple years ago. Obvious reason aside, it was easier to remember not to get pushy with her, because it was just one more part of straight sex to practice on. And her teasing was never challenging. So Kent has to figure out how to carry all that over to this, while also getting past how strange it is sometimes to be with a different guy.

Conrad openly says what he likes and doesn't. He doesn't fight back instead if he's embarrassed, or bare his teeth in challenge to hide how he's really feeling. That part is like with Inez, weirdly.

It still feels good, but Kent always has to shake a vague sense of dissatisfaction.

It's different not feeling a hand in his hair most of the time during sex, but he doesn't really care. Jack just had a thing about wanting to see Kent's face during sex for some reason, and Kent let it go because he had his own odd stuff he liked. It wasn't like Jack pulled his hair, except sometimes if he was mad. But Kent can't shake the feeling that something's missing.

Conrad likes having sex with him, but he doesn't need it. There's nothing in his head he needs Kent's help getting away from for a while.
It's weird.

On the other hand, having sex again with someone with more experience, and without having to worry about anyone else coming into the room or about counting how much time they've got before somebody notices they're gone together is pretty great. So Kent adjusts.

*

When the union lets its opportunity to dissolve expire and the league puts the breaks on the talks again--because "What did they expect, the dumbasses," Kent demands when he caves and Skypes his first alternate because he has to rant to someone or he's going to lose his goddamn mind--the PA starts to reconvene a new vote. Kent watches for his notification and keeps playing.

And then, finally, the NHL and the PA seem to get their shit together.

Kent talks to his agent about whether and when he should return. Allan's as suspicious as him; but since one of the contingencies is for the season to start on January nineteenth, and there's an obligatory one-week training camp before it, Allan advises him to get ready to return as soon as the league ratifies the agreement.

Once they do, Kent spends that evening packing up what little of his stuff is still out and getting in touch with the travel agency to expedite his return flights to Vegas. Allan talks to Fribourg-Gottéron to resolve his contract.

The next day Kent picks up the last of his equipment from the club and tells the guys on the team good luck with tomorrow's game. He meets Conrad for a rushed not-breakfast-not-lunch at the train station, and they bypass the whole hassle of trying a long-distance relationship thing and just say goodbye.

And then Kent takes the train to Geneva and gets on the first of his flights back home.

*

When the plane finally reaches Las Vegas, Kent's startled awake by the announcement. He stretches his legs groggily and opens the window shade to remember what time of day it is.

Vegas is sprawled out below, gaudy neon and sodium lights bright against the night's darkness, a giant screw you to the desert the city decided to make its own. It's bright and obnoxious and arrogant and insane and shallow and fake and shouldn't work at all but here it fucking is anyway, despite every setback and attack and problem it had to overcome to do it.

Kent keeps watching out the window until the plane lands and begins taxiing to the terminal, grinning for so long his face starts to hurt.

*

Forty-eight games is bullshit, but that's what they've got so that's what they'll play.

Kent and his first alternate arrange a "let's fucking do this" party at Waller's house the day before training camp starts, bringing the team and management together to clear the air before the crush of games starts. The GM caught the flu in Manhattan during all the lockout talks, but he Skypes in for a few minutes until Waller's wife tells him to go back to bed before he passes out.

Kent spends most of the evening working the room, readjusting to being around guys he hasn't physically seen or talked to for months. He puts up with a lot of ribbing and does a lot of joking.
He keeps an ear out for how the front office, and the guys that had to rent their ice time or got pushed down into the AHL or CHL, really feel about the last few months.

He spots Vichy down the long hall past the bathroom at one point in the evening. The other man's staring out the plate window and drumming his hands on his thighs.

Kent heads over. "What's up?"

"Nothin'." Vichy shakes his head. "Nothing. Just thinking."

Kent takes a sip of his wine. When Vichy doesn't add anything else, he finally says quieter, "You doing okay?"

Vichy stills his hands and glances over; but then he snorts and looks out the window again. "Yeah."

Kent leans back against the wall and folds his arms, and waits.

"... It's just. Talking with some of the guys there," Vichy eventually says. "I'm glad I was born here. I don't.... It was weird. Seeing family I never really met before. Hearing--I dunno. Everything was so fucking weird."

He starts drumming his palms again before stopping abruptly. "...I'm glad Natty stayed behind."

Kent frowns slightly. "Everything's good with her visa?"


"Okay," Kent says at last.

Vichy shakes his head. "It was just weird," he says. "Everything's fine. Thanks for the help back then, Parser."

Kent shrugs. "No problem."

Vichy drags his fingers through his hair and then visibly makes himself stop fidgeting again. "You need anything?"

Kent pushes away from the wall. "Nah. Just going around the place."

Vichy nods and turns toward him. "Okay. I'll come with."

"Cool."

"That wine classy enough for you, Parse?" Scrappy asks as he and an AHL guy pass the two of them coming out of the hall.

Kent takes another sip and makes a so-so motion. Scrappy and Robinson continue into the kitchen, snickering.

There's still frustration in some of the guys by the end of the night, but it's manageable. Kent stays to see the last people out, and then argues with Waller when the man refuses to give him his keys.
"I'm not drunk!" he replies.

"I know," Waller answers. "But driving under the influence of fatigue is still a DUI. Stay here tonight and get some sleep, Parse."

"Quit--" he starts automatically, and then he realizes why he's so irritated.

Kent presses a hand harder to his face and tries not to think about that last deleted text from Jack. ". . . Is it that obvious?"

Waller furrows his brow, but then shakes his head. "You don't look like you're gonna faceplant in the next five seconds," he answers. "But you've been moving since you hit the ground, Parse.

"Marlene already made up the room," he continues, and Kent can see what he's doing. "You'll get more sleep if you stay here instead of driving back."

"Waller," Kent interrupts. "Okay. I got it, you can quit handling me."

Waller snorts and claps him once on the shoulder. "I can do it less now, kid. You know where it's at," he says. "See you at breakfast."

Kent grumbles and heads down the hall.

* *

Their first game back, they're heading out of the dressing room when the piped cue music cuts off abruptly and three seconds of silence follows instead of their usual theme. When Kent glances up reflexively, in his peripheral vision he sees a couple of the guys doing the same.

"Uh--" Johnny starts to ask, and then music finally kicks in.

It's some guitar-heavy, old-sounding song, weird and out of place. Kent has several seconds to wonder what the hell, and then the lyrics start: *Guess who just got back today? Them wild-eyed boys that've been away.*

"Ha!" he says before he can help it. A couple guys start laughing; Kent glances back and sees Mitts bouncing on his skates as he heads up the corridor.

"Don't wreck your blades," he calls back, right before the announcement hits: "And now, it's *your Las Vegas Aces!*"

They skate out through the fog and lasers. The crowd yells and beats the glass even louder than they did during the warmups, the seats in the arena look filled as far back as he can tell, the music's still blaring *The boys are back in town!* over it all, and it sweeps through Kent that he's finally, finally back where he always wants to be.

He grabs Waller and the goalie before they can move past him. "We're gonna salute the fans. Get the guys, c'mon."

"What?" Burr says over the music. Waller asks, "Now?"

"Now, they showed up, c'mon before we lose the moment!"

They get everyone alerted within maybe three seconds. Across the ice, Kent sees the other team's captain figure out what they're doing a breath before they raise their sticks; the man says something that looks like "showoff motherfucker" and gets his team to do the same. The crowd cheers back.
Kent high-fives a kid through the glass as he skates toward center ice. And then he takes his spot to wait as they prepare for the anthem, and lets the noise and energy of the crowd settle him, and focuses on the coming game.

*

The first game back he's too pumped to catch it; and the next two are away. It's not until they come back that Kent realizes why the arena feels dull even in good games: somebody's padding the seats, more than usual.

Waller tells him to let it go when they win a hard game 3-1 and it might as well've been a shutout loss for all the crowd gave a damn afterward. "The season's been shit, Parse. We need the revenue."

Kent exhales hard through his teeth but makes himself nod. "Yeah, alright."

*

Their first game against L.A., some smartass on the Kings calls them the Foreclosure City Aces early on and Vichy--like a moron--reacts.

The Kings' player notices. And then he targets Vichy for the rest of the game.

Their liney eventually starts hanging closer to Vichy whenever the clock stops. Mitts shoulders the King away whenever he skates up alongside Vichy to insult him as they're heading toward the dots; but by that point they've pretty much lost Vichy mentally.

"Focus," Kent orders loudly when Vichy snarls back insults at the other center instead of concentrating on the coming face-off. The d-man next to him tries to shove his stick back further while he thinks Kent's distracted; Vichy clenches his jaw and shuts up.

Vichy gets steadily more vindictive with his hits the longer the Kings' player rips him, so it's not a surprise when the refs finally call him for it.

Kent argues with them--it wasn't a full cross-check, the guy's not bleeding, he should be able to take a little shit in a game, the Kings' whole deal is being a physical team--but L.A. still draws the penalty. Kent skates with Vichy to the box long enough to tell him "Quit doing what they fuckin' want already, Vich" and then clears off the ice for the PK team.

As he goes, he sees the Kings' player call something to Vichy that makes him turn around sharply before the ref pushes him back toward the penalty box. Vichy snarls something and goes; the Kings' player watches with a half-smirk.

Kent thinks, All right then.

The Aces almost get a shorty on the PK, but Chazzer turns over the puck before he can shoot at the net, and after that they're just trying to keep it out of their zone until time's up. Kent watches the ice, and waits.

During the next commercial break, he gets his extra sticks from the equipment manager. Kent tapes over the strip of blue tape on the butt of the handle as he listens to the coaches lay out strategy, checking that it's smooth until he's tapped. He gives himself one shift on the ice to
readjust to the harder composite; and then he reacts.

For the rest of the game, Kent does everything possible to humiliate the Kings.

He skates hard enough to make their best offensive d-men look like pylons. He uses the boards and dashers to send passes exactly where he intends. His line goes where he tells them and Kent gets them the puck, and they do what they do best: Vichy drives at the net, Mitts gets him and Kent space on the ice and cleans up the trash from Vichy's misses, and Kent wrists rebounds into the gaps the goalie leaves from guarding against both Vichy and Mitts.

By the end of the game they've beaten L.A. 5-2, with three of the goals coming from Kent's hat trick.

The guys nearly dogpile him as soon as he gets back on the ice after the buzzer. Kent keeps an arm around Vichy's shoulders and his eyes on the Kings’ player who challenged them at the start.

Kent watches with a smirk as the guy who tried to fuck with his center has to skate off the ice in defeat; and only after he's gone does Kent turn his attention back to the rest of the Aces.

*

At practice the next day, the head coach tells Kent he's moving him off the PP team.

"Is this about yesterday?" Kent asks. He should've known better.

"Yes," Moss replies. "I want you on second unit PK."

"...Okay," Kent answers.

"You know where the puck's going to be, not just where it's going," Moss says. "Combine that with your speed--and you're hitting stronger this season."

"Uh. I guess," Kent says, since this conversation has not gone where he was expecting. "The NLA, guys couldn't blow off steam fighting, so they hit harder." He shifts his grip on the stick and shrugs a shoulder. "Had to pick it up fast."

"I can't imagine you ever pissed anyone off enough to make them want to fight, Parson," Moss replies, so deadpan it takes Kent a second to realize it was a joke.

"I mighta repeated some stuff in French I heard from other guys," he says casually. "Couldn't really tell you what it meant. Maybe it sounded like something else with my accent."


"If a guy on the power play rags the PK team, they get pissed and work harder," Coach Moss says. "But if a guy killing a penalty goes after the PP team, and he can see what they're trying, and he can move fast enough to intercept, and he's comfortable with hits, and his team kills it right, at end of the minutes that's a hell of a boost to his team. And the power play team's now humiliated, and they're gonna play like it.

"It's a different style of play than the PP," Coach Moss adds. "You haven't been on that team much, right?"

"Not really here," Kent answers. "I was second unit some in Juniors, but then we got a new coach."

Moss just nods. "I'm moving you off the PP for now so you can concentrate on learning this. Later,
we'll come back to it and see what we need most as the season goes."

Kent rubs his wrist against his face and realizes he's still smiling slightly, and forces it away. He
doesn't want to come off as cocky.

He nods. "Got it."

"All right. PK meeting is at one, so go there after lunch instead of the training room. You'll start
skating with them tomorrow."

"Okay."

*

"Jesus Christ," Kent swears under his breath, when the NHL updates with the final score of the
Blackhawks' latest game while they're heading back to the hotel on the bus. "Did Toews sell his
soul to Satan? Did Quenneville sell all their souls?"

"What?" one of the rookies, Toby, says across the aisle.

"Fuck," Vichy groans in the seat ahead. "Still on that goddamn streak? Reg win or overtime?"

"Win," Kent mutters, locking his phone.

They play the Hawks again a week later. Kent watches the ice silently between his shifts, tapping
his fingers agitatedly on his stick, and hisses out a breath when Towes shoves away one of their d-
men and shakes off another hit. "Harder."

It was supposed to be under his breath, but Scrappy leans past Vichy to look at him. "What?"

Kent exhales shortly. "If we could just get him hard, we'll get a window."

"They'll put out Bolland," Vichy answers.

"Before that."

Vichy frowns. "What?"

Kent exhales harsher, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. This is a distraction. "Guys like that won't
leave. They think they should be better and play through it. He'll stay 'til they pull him off, and
we'll have twenty, fifty seconds while he's out there damaged."

Scrappy mutters something under his breath; but then Coach Moss taps his shoulder and he sits up
and gets ready for his shift. Past him, Kent sees Waller shaking his head in the edge of his vision.

He's been chirping some Blackhawks hard enough all game that it's finally getting into their heads,
but Kent still hasn't been able to capitalize on that beyond a couple turnovers. At one point his seat
on the bench is close enough that a pissed Hawk calls insults across the gap between while the
reporter between them shakes his head. Kent keeps his eyes on the ice and yells back that it's
Kane's own fucking fault for getting distracted.

"Keep your head in the game if--" and then he sees Waller break aside and come up behind Toews
to crush him straight into the center boards. "Shit!"
Another Hawk responds as the refs whistle, wrenching Waller away and slugging him while Toews is struggling to get on his feet. Kent leans over the board and frowns as he watches Waller grab the guy's jersey and wrestle him to the ice, trying to figure out what's weird about how he's moving.

Toews shakes his head when the refs check on him. Waller skates for the penalty box as the refs start directing him there, and Patsy hisses and turns to the coaches.

"Aaron you gotta pull him," he says. "Somebody else has to sit it. His arm," and Kent thinks *Fuck, shoulder, surgery, 2008* and *Why?*

Moss swears and flags a referee.

They take Waller to the back. Moss sends one of the third-line forwards to serve the time as Kent and the rest of the penalty kill team take the ice. Toews stays into the face-off, grimacing visibly as he fights for and loses the puck. When his shift ends, the Hawks pull him.

The Aces still lose.

They never catch up to the Blackhawks' second goal. Kent thumps Burr once on the back as he and the goalie skate off the ice, and keeps his face straight.

He detours from heading to the dressing room to check on Waller. One of the medics lets him in; they've got Waller's shirt and pads off, checking as he gingerly rotates his shoulder. "Damn, Walls. How you doing?"

"Might be out a game," he says, voice tight. "Unless they're talking about suspension."

Kent leans against the wall by the cot and starts unlacing his skates, watching him carefully. "Hadn't decided last I heard. At least it's not worse."

Waller exhales through his teeth. "Would've been worth it if we won."

"The schedule's too tight," Kent answers. "We can't afford you sitting out. It'll be all right, Waller. We got a couple months, we'll get another shot at 'em. If we keep getting points, we'll see them in the playoffs. And next year we'll have more chances when the schedule's normal."

"You're young," Waller replies after a long silence; and Kent thinks *Concussions.*

"Are you--" he starts, but Waller makes a sharp gesture in the direction of the medics, and shakes his head.

"I'm fine," he says. "Tell the guys that, would you?"

"Sure," Kent promises, pulling off his skates. He gives Waller a small fist bump, careful not to jostle his bad shoulder. "Good game tonight. Sorry we didn't take enough advantage of the move."

Waller nods once, jaw still tight. The sinking feeling in Kent's stomach settles lower.

He half-smiles to cover it as he says goodbye and leaves.

Kent keeps his face straight as he heads to the dressing room, even though he's pissed at himself for forgetting the most important part of being a captain: tell guys what they need to hear as they need
to hear it.

Manage the truth, if it's different, later. When you have to.

He shouldn't have forgotten. He shouldn't have had to be reminded by Waller. He knew better.

The tension in the dressing room eases a little when Kent returns with the quasi-good news, until it's back to normal post-loss levels. Kent watches Waller's normal partner leave the room still pulling on his shirt and notes the lingering edginess in the rest of the defensemen.

He knew ever since Waller told him about the memory problems last year that the team was going to go through an upheaval when the man retired; but that wasn't the same as feeling the deadline bearing down. And after this of all seasons. Shit.

Predictably, the hit comes up in the interview session afterward. Kent listens to the updates about Toews' health and the league's decision to review before they let the media into the locker room, grateful that the club already got Waller out of the building.

During postgame he edges the line of lying as close as he can. Kent talks about how it was the kind of game that brings out guys' competitiveness, how the stakes were already high with the Hawks' points streak. "Of course we're glad Toews was cleared. He played as good a game as everyone out there. I'm glad he's okay."

"So you're saying that hit wasn't deliberate?" one of the reporters--that asshole Yerby--asks.

"I think Walczak brought his A-game tonight and the check ended up reflecting the energy and power he always brings to the ice," he replies. "Of course, no one wants to land a hit like that on purpose."

"What does the team think about the decision to review?" another reporter asks.

"The league of course has to look out for all players," Kent says. "The final decision rests with them."

"Given the short season, are the Aces letting Walczak revert more to his former tactics as an enforcer?" Yerby says over one of the bloggers's questions.

He's not a fucking leashed dog, Kent thinks. "I don't believe tonight should be taken as an indication of that. Walczak's a solid defensive anchor for our team, a great player."

"If this behavior isn't okayed by the Aces, does that mean it was Walczak's own decision?" Yerby continues, like Kent hasn't even said anything. "Do you think we'll see more reckless hits like this in the future?"

"You tried to get me to trash-talk a teammate and friend in 2009, and I wouldn't," Kent replies. "Why do you think I'm going to do it in 2013?"

He can hear some of the reporters talking to guys nearby go quieter. They've completely broken the acceptable pattern of the interview at this point, but it's not like he started it. Kent holds eye contact with Yerby, who narrows his eyes.

The interrupted blogger clears her throat loudly. "That was a great goal off the Blackhawks in the second," Collins says. "The face-off didn't look like a deliberate loss--how'd you do it?"
Kent tilts his head with a smile. "Teamwork," he answers, and thinks shit, this could trend into abandoning-the-Aces-for Switzerland-despite-being-captain territory fast. "We've got a great team, really good guys who've pulled together for this season."

The assistant GM steps over. "Kent, we need you for the radio interview. Scalfano's stitches are taking longer than they said," Cabot says, to him and the reporters.

"Absolutely, on it." Kent gives him a smile and nod and gets the hell out.

He runs into Vichy later that evening on his way to the players' lot. "Parser, man." Vichy falls into step. "You need to do something about that seething hatred of the media."

"It's not seething," Kent replies.

"Uh-huh," Vichy drawls. "God help anybody you really despise."

"He always starts it," Kent mutters.

"And he'll be around after we're retired," Vichy replies. "At least try and look like you don't want to punch him in the face, huh?"

Kent swears and stops in his tracks. "Did I?"

Vichy blinks, but then holds up a hand and shakes his head. "No. Well, yeah, but only if someone knows you. Your game face stayed on, don't worry."

"Good." Kent drags a hand over his face and then adjusts his hat, and starts walking again. "Don't do that to me."

Vichy shakes his head again. "You know, it's okay to be human, Parser. No one's going to flip out if you aren't a hockey robot."

"Not on camera it isn't," Kent says sharply. "I'm the captain, I can't damage the brand like that."

Vichy exhales slowly, sliding his hands into his pockets.

"Parser--" he starts, and Kent wrenches off his hat and yanks a hand through his hair.

"Would you fucking stop already!" he demands. "Enough of this bullshit, if you give them anything they'll crucify you for years. There's nothing fucking wrong with me for handling that!"

"Jesus--Kent." Vichy grabs his shoulder, forcing him to a stop. "Okay. Don't kill yourself over this."

Kent twists, trying to break loose, but Vichy just tightens his hold. " Fucking let--!

"Waller made his own decision on the ice, alright?" Vichy says. " It's not on you."

Kent clenches his hands into fists.

"He's been doing this for longer than us, all right? He saw the same thing as you, he made his own choice." Vichy squeezes his shoulder. "Let it go, alright?"

Kent makes himself exhale and relax his grip on his hat before he crushes the brim too noticeably. "I'm fine. I'm good."
Vichy narrows his eyes.

"Look, Parse, I know you don't like letting people close," he says. "But would you just listen to me?"

"Let go," Kent says.

Vichy exhales through his teeth but does. Kent pulls back; Vichy tightens his jaw.

"Look," the other man says. "I don't want to fuck things up between us, all right? But I'd like to think we're fucking friends, Parson. Just--listen to me. Nobody's mad that I went to Russia, and nobody's gonna keep track that you signed with the NLA. Everybody saw what Lewis was doing. It was a shit year last year, but things are different now, okay? It's gonna be better. Alright?"

"Sure," Kentmocks.

Vichy makes a smothered noise in the back of his throat and rubs a hand over his face. Kent thinks about how they're in the middle of an open lot.

He exhales slowly and leans hard against the trunk of a nearby car before he stops to think about alarms; but one doesn't go off. "Look. Okay. I got it."

"Parser," Vichy says flatly. "You don't fumble around the media. It is like the fucking apocalypse came. I--"

"He should've backed the fuck off Waller."

"Yeah," Vichy agrees. "But you still don't let those guys in your head. Not like that."

When Kent scowls and looks away, Vichy breathes out through his teeth and slides his hands in his pockets.

"Look," he says quieter. "I'm getting worried, alright? You've been really edgy for months. I know last year was shit. Okay? I mean, fuck, when he was talking like you weren't good enough, what the hell did that mean for the rest of us? You're the best fucking guy on the team." Vichy shoves his hands deeper into his pockets but keeps looking at him. "It was shit last year, I know. We all know.

"But he's gone," Vichy says emphatically. "It's a new coach. Some new guys. Things've changed. He's gone, it's over. This season's gonna be better."

He pauses, then adds, "Fucked-up contract and this damn schedule aside."

Kent snorts before he can help it.

"The division's gonna be weird next year," he agrees.

Vichy folds his arms. "Stars didn't belong in the 'Pacific' anyway."

Kent nods casually beyond his shoulder. "Maybe try that line when you don't have mountains land-locking us right behind you?"

"Fuck you yankee, we're still closer," Vichy replies.

"Yuh-huh."
Vichy shifts on his feet and loosens his arms slightly. "Look--"

"No. I got it," Kent says. He rubs the heel of his hand hard against the bridge of his nose for a couple breaths before dropping it again. "Seriously."

Kent pushes off the trunk and smacks the dust off his suit before holding out a fist. "Thanks. I mean it."

Vichy just looks at him for a long moment before tilting his head away slightly; but then he nods and bops Kent's fist with his own. "Alright."

*

Kent gets confirmation that this season is going to be utter bullshit ten days later. Their game starts and ends a half-hour after the Hawks' and Avs'; Kent's waiting with the rest of the guys to board the bus post wrap-up, checking the other teams' scores on his phone. He stifles a curse when he sees the Avs'.

"You okay back there, bro?" Chazzer asks, leaning past one of the d-men to raise an eyebrow at him.

"The motherfucking Avs," Kent grits out.

"What?" Chazzer frowns. "Wait, were they playing--"

"Chicago."

Chazzer shoves around Showy as the d-man smacks him on the head for it and strides back toward Kent. "You're fucking with me. You don't mean--"

"They beat them," Kent confirms. "Regulation loss."

Chazzer strangles air as he wedges up next to him to look at his phone. In front of them, Waller turns around, brows drawn.

"Six to two? Fuck me," Chazzer snarls. "How?!"

"Better deal with Satan," Kent mutters.

*

The season never stops being insane, but Kent makes himself shake everything else off and just focus on the games and playing.

He jostles with other guys for the lead in points and assists. Kent breaks his personal record in the points lead by six games before St. Louis finally beats him out again.

The media talks about it.

They talk about the streak, and him, and the Aces, a lot. When the team hits the top of the Pacific in April by one point, the media talks about them even more.

But they should be doing better. Kent finally invites one of the rookies out to a basketball game and uses it to tell Toby to start taking the season seriously. It doesn't matter if he and Robber got a raw deal with the lockout; he can't keep coming into practice with hangovers.
Kent repeats the move with Robber. They both promise him to get their acts together.

By the end of April, the Aces are holding their place at the top by seven points. Coach Moss moves Kent from second to first unit PK.

Kent's making dinner while Sports Central plays in the background when he hears the team come up again.

"It's impossible not to think about those rumors--and we know the club disavowed them but there were a lot of rumors--about Dan Lewis having problems with the team's young captain in his final year. Well, Parson's still there and Lewis is gone, and the Aces are leading the division, so...."

"Yeah. I guess whatever those problems were, they've been resolved under the new coach."

"Or left with the old one."

"That's another way to look at it."

"The rumors were disavowed," a third voice mediates.

"True. I guess we can only look at the stats for this season versus the last one."

"Hmm."

The third reporter switches over to a different story about the Lightning. Kent laughs quietly to himself and flips his omelet.

*

The Aces keep their place as top of the Pacific through the end of the regular season. They win the conference quarterfinals, and straight up crush their opponents in the semifinals.

They lose to Chicago again in the finals.

Kent thunks his forehead against the tile as he showers afterward, and wonders if the losses would cut this deep if he hadn't gotten a win so early in his career.

He gets that there's thirty-four teams and only one victory. It's not possible to win every time. It's a different team for everybody every single year, and that's before injuries and surgeries screw up rosters. Nothing's ever the same twice. Kent knows that.

But it fucking burns each time he comes so close again just to fail.

*

Waller retires.

Kent rents the mansion at the MGM Grand and they throw him the biggest party they can manage: players, front office staff, girlfriends, wives, kids and family, retired and active guys that Waller played with on his previous teams. The place is packed all day and evening; it was a hell of a career.

Waller's eyes get watery several times during the afternoon, and Patsy chokes up during his toast. No one gives them any shit.
In late June the Aces' primary owner, Bruckheimer, invites Kent and three more of the guys to Hollywood to attend his award ceremony.

Kent does great media while he's there, joking around with Sunny and Patsy and Burr on- and off-camera, and he generally enjoys the event. If anyone had told him at sixteen when he was trying not to freak out over showing up in old jeans at Jack's frigging lakeshore mansion that one day he'd be a guest of honor for a guy getting his star put in the Walk of Fame, Kent would've had a hard time to buying it. Even knowing how good he was. This is great.

But in the back of his mind, he can't forget how obvious a PR stunt it is.

Bruckheimer's clearly showing off how the Aces have stabilized post-lockout by having the team's captain and the remaining three guys who've been with the club the longest make a public appearance and be blatantly cheerful at one of his events. One that's conveniently happening less than a week before the draft.

Kent accepts being treated as a commodity during the season, because that's how the league works. It pisses him off a lot more when he's not being paid for it.

But Bruckheimer comps their rooms at the W Hollywood; and Kent's Twitter and Instagram now have a load of selfies with celebrities on them; and he learns that Burr's apparently some kind of licensed mixologist when he goes nuts with the guys' minibars that evening, goalies.

So Kent writes everything off as benefits instead of salary and lets it go.

He also notices that the Aces' GM is absent.

When Kent mentions it to Sunny, his alternate just shrugs. When Kent asks Patsy about it, the d-man scratches the back of his neck and says, "Guess so. He's got contract stuff to do, yeah?"

"Yeah, good point," Kent agrees.

He doesn't bother saying anything to Burr. The other man won't talk politics in the dressing room, and he won't talk about the front office anywhere. Kent makes a note to himself that he needs to start keeping better track again of what's going on in management.

*  

He rearranges his conditioning schedule to return to Vegas for a day to meet a pending free agent the Aces are courting. Kent and Vichy do an informal skate with Senderens and talk about differences between the Aces' culture and the Schooners'; and then Kent leaves Senderens in his liney's hands so he can catch the plane back to Ottawa.

He rearranges his schedule again for the draft's days. Kent watches Seth Jones go fourth, tweets the usual greetings to the Aces' picks each round, and wonders why he and Jack were killing themselves to be top prospect if the league's just going to expose the guts of the system and show how it's a meaningless designation.

Free agency opens, but the front office doesn't sign Senderens.
Kent tries to follow what the issue is as the days pass, because he thought this was a done deal. He was already trying to figure out how they were going to manage the fact that Senderens is right-handed but plays better on left wing when the club's already got an overripe LW in the feeder team.

But after the Schooners counter the Aces' offer sheet, news dries up in the media. Kent reads the Seattle Times and Post-Intelligencer, but their sports writers don't have anything more than Vegas's. He gets the impression the league's intervened to mediate.

Someone obviously has. The couple times Kent's in Vegas after July 1st, whenever he drops into the clubhouse to swipe coffee before heading out for personal practice, he notices guys he doesn't recognize in designer suits around administration's offices.

The first time Kent realizes the cut of the suits' jackets looks familiar because it's a more expensive version of the tailoring that some of his uncles with concealed carry licenses use, he doesn't stick around the clubhouse to check if anyone's actually armed. Kent just dumps the rest of his coffee in a travel cup and splits for the Ice Center.

He reschedules his flight to Ottawa to leave the next day instead of at the end of the week.

* Kent visits his parents for a shorter period than ever before and just flies into New York around his birthday. He spends most of the offseason conditioning, training up on playing more defensively, and working with a figure skating trainer.

By the time he heads back into Vegas, he's added enough options to his skate style to give himself flexibility.

Now he just has to wait until preseason starts. Once Kent knows whether all the changes this year are going alter the league's new disciplinary habits, or if Shanahan's going to keep on cracking down on guys who hit illegally, then he'll be able to determine how much the Aces' overall playing style will have to evolve.

* Senderens eventually re-signs with Seattle.

It's all talked about in terms of stability and maintaining the Schooners' core in every article and video Kent reviews; but he pays attention to the words being used and notes that several people in Seattle are really fucking unhappy with however the situation played out, including Senderens himself and the Schooners' assistant coach.

When Kent's former first alternate retired, he never told Kent who was supposed to become his liaison about any of the stuff with the club that Kent's not supposed to officially know. Kent thinks about contacting him; but he'd have to interrupt Waller's vacation with his family if he did.

Besides, after his retirement the front office hired Waller into a player development position with the feeder team. His family's still in Vegas, but Waller himself's mainly been in Kansas since June. If the front office has kept this under wraps as tight as it seems, he may not have any more of an idea about what's going on than Kent.

So instead Kent finally calls Vichy out for drinks at Sergei's restaurant one afternoon while the dust is still settling and asks if there's anything he needs to know.
"I have no fucking clue," his liney tells him, rubbing his face. "This is...way out of my stuff."

Kent slumps back into his chair, rapping the edge of his can against the tabletop. "Shit.

"We brought in enough money, didn't we?" he insists. "We topped the fucking division. We've made the playoffs four years running. We have a fucking Cup win, Jesus, what more do--"

"I think we're okay," Vichy interrupts. "No one can argue the stats, Parser. We've been the phoenix of the Pacific since '09. It's okay."

Kent snorts and takes another pull of beer, but doesn't reply.

Vichy rubs a thumb against his temple. "Maybe they decided to rebuild the team after all the league changes," he mutters. "Try and get some more sellable names. Even if it meant screwing over the old-boy network. I dunno."

"Awesome," Kent drawls a couple moments later, once he's finished processing that Vichy's apparently way more willing to talk openly about this stuff than Waller ever was. Or else....

Kent's never asked Vichy about any of it before. Waller said to just talk to him, so that's what Kent did.

But that was about management and club stuff, not the silent investors. And Waller said that Vichy's stuff was something different, so--

--so Kent needs to stop thinking about things he doesn't really want to know and just drop this already.

Revenue and returns on investment are apparently still a problem for the club. Fine. Kent can work with that. He doesn't need to know more.

He shakes his head. "So basically the season's gonna be even more goddamn weird than we thought."

Vichy makes an exasperated growling noise in the back of his throat.

"Awesome," Kent drawls out again. He takes another sip of beer, and adds thoughtfully, "Explains why the books on who was gonna get injured first were up so soon this time."

Vichy folds his arms on the table and rests his forehead on them. "Of course they were," he mumbles.

Kent snickers. "How can you be surprised, Las Vegan?"

"Fuck you, yankee."

"My favorite's the 'When will Parson's nose finally get broken?'" Kent grins. "Our fans are dicks."

Vichy points at him without lifting his head. "It's gonna happen this year. Guys aren't gonna forget what a chirping asshole you were last season," he says. "Hundred bucks. You can't escape forever."

"A thousand and you're on," Kent says.

Vichy makes a startled snort.

"You cocky fucker," he snickers, straightening up. "Okay."
Kent lifts his beer. "Here's to our impending medical bills."

Vichy taps their cans even as he shakes his head. "Christ."

*

The off-season shit between the Aces and the Schooners means Kent gets to go into training camp having to settle a team that's disconnected, with the core guys wary and the guys with contracts ending soon spooked and the new guys reserved with everybody. Awesome.

Kent wheedles the front office into reserving daily time at the Ice Center for almost a full week before camp, so he can do informal skates with the trades and feeder team players who came into town early. He ropes the teammates who live in Vegas into helping.

"You're late," Kent tells Showy when the d-man finally arrives on the ice twenty minutes into their rental time.

"Fuck off Parse, I got a teething kid," Showy retorts. "You're lucky I showed at all."

"Whatever." Kent nods at the guys further out on the ice. "We can do three-on-three now. You're on Vichy's team. When we're done, tell me what you think of the d on mine."

"Yeah, yeah, Jesus. Fuckin' workaholic," Showy mutters. He downs the last of his Gatorade and tosses it behind him into the bench before skating over to Vichy. Kent heads for his team.

Camp helps chill things out. Their head coach rolls straight into it like the off-season drama was nothing; like it's even somehow some kind of advantage now. Kent can't tell if that means Moss is borderline insane even for a coach, or if this is just normal for somebody that came from the NCAA instead of the NHL pool.

But he's not complaining. It was a short season last year, but it was enough to get to know the man's coaching style. Moss didn't fuck with the regular pairings at the first sign of a slump, he didn't line match much, and he used other coaches' habits of doing that against them. He publicly supports You Can Play and doesn't call anyone fags in the dressing room or non-public practices, and the majority of the changes he's developed on their team make sense: like putting five forwards on the power play, no matter how much commentators act like it's heresy.

Like keeping Kent on the penalty kill, because Moss thinks he's good at being where the puck will go and that he's thriving on shorter shifts where his explicit job is to humiliate the other teams' PP prima donnas.

Which Kent is.

He wants to keep his spot on the PK, so he keeps working hard on playing better defensively through camp and into the preseason. The Aces' penalty kill stats were okay last season; but Kent wants to be among the league's top this year. And it doesn't hurt that becoming a better two-way player will make him more marketable, even if offense is what he likes best.

Kent busts his ass for the PK to the point that one of the power play guys quarter-jokingly headlocks him in the dressing room one day and tells Kent if he doesn't rein in the chirps during practice he's going to break his nose.

"Sure you'll try," Kent manages, still trying to break out of Scrappy's headlock while the rest of the guys pointedly don't help like assholes. "I skate faster."
Scrappy makes a "graaaurgh" sound and noogies him until Kent jabs an elbow in his gut. Kirbs finally throws a glove at them.

"Knock it off already, Scrappy," the man's liney tells him, being the voice of fucking sense on the fucking energy line like he's fucking supposed to be, since Robber's just standing farther away laughing with Kent's traitor of a liney Mitts and it'll be a cold day in hell before Kent expects rational calmness from Robber anyway. "He's just gonna double down until you put him on IR, you know that."

Scrappy swears at one or both of them in Italian and finally lets Kent go, stomping over to his stall. Kent shakes his head slowly and doesn't rub his throat even though it's chafed.

He genuinely gets along better now with the checking and energy line guys more, too--minus some exceptions--since most of them play shifts at some point with the PK team.

Kent's not sure if the coach intended that, or if it was coincidental.

At the start of preseason Moss keeps Kent on the PK and adds him to the power play's second unit.

The media keeps on speculating whether a five-forward PP can survive a full-length season. Pretty much everyone acts like last year was a fluke that the Aces only pulled off because of the short schedule.

Kent follows the commentaries and thinks *Just watch.*

* 

Camp ends, preseason starts, and Kent gets the team's integration going. He arranges the group events, connects with the new guys, and makes sure the players on the AHL team don't feel shut out in the dressing room. He starts talking more to the coaches about guys that could have chemistry, based on what he's seeing on and off the ice. As the roster's shaved down toward opening night, Kent coaxes the guys on it into something like a cohesive team, because that's his job.

He starts feeling worn out earlier than usual.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if there was someone he could talk to. But with Waller gone, there's not. Not really.

There's guys that Kent can take apart bad plays and lost games with so the team won't repeat those mistakes, but that's not the same. There's a few guys he can swear about other teams and refs with, but that's different too.

There's no one he can talk to about what it's like to keep doing this every year: steering the team, keeping everybody on good terms and managing conflicts before they get in too deep, integrating new guys and call-ups, spearheading the charity work and the publicity and the local sponsorship events. Wondering who's going to be lost to trade or injury next, and trying to plan for it. And all of that on top of being expected to score a goal almost every game, earn enough points to keep his name in the top rankings, lead the team into the playoffs, earn the club another Cup, and not get sidelined with injuries while he's at it.

Most days it's fine. Most days he likes it.

Kent likes being on camera. He likes the dorky enthusiasm of events and of their new PR videos;
he likes solving integration problems and figuring out how to put which players together to get the best results. He likes making the new guys better. He likes making himself better. He likes people liking him.

But sometimes it's been too much for too many days in a row, and Kent just wants a break. Or a hand. He wants someone else to shoulder the load once in a while, or to at least help with dinner after a nineteen-hour day.

*

He texts Jack before the season launch, asking if he's gotten his basement fixed since the hurricane flooding. It seems like the most low-key opening.

He never gets a response.

Not after a couple hours; not after almost a day; not after several days. Not after any period of time Jack would've normally answered, even if he just made a note and then forgot to reply until he saw the reminder.

After a week, Kent has to accept that there was no note and Jack never plans to respond. He just deleted Kent's text the way he does all the stuff he doesn't want to deal with. Assuming it's the right number in the first place and he didn't change it again.

After a week and a day, Kent has three drinks more than he should following a loss and would've had four if his lineys hadn't strong-armed him into a cab. During the ride home, Kent deletes Zimmermann's contact information and all his remaining texts.

*

Their first game against Phoenix is an away one. The Coyotes' roster includes a call-up who used to be on the Aces' feeder team before he was traded during offseason.

Frankel played with the Aces for five games in the 2011-12 season when they lost Hens to a bad case of flu, and it was the worst twelve days Kent had to endure: Frankel was a fucking loudmouth who never noticed when he was starting to legitimately irritate guys, so Kent had to constantly monitor him on top of dealing with the former head coach being pissed off with him and with getting scratched from two of the games for "poor performance." Worse, by day three Chazzer couldn't go half a practice without snapping and ripping into Frankel, so their second line barely had any cohesion. The coaches kept shifting the lines around to try and find guys who could play a full game of decent shifts with him, because Frankel was the best currently-uninjured forward the Sovereigns had available for the Aces to use. They only won a single game out of those five.

The upside is that because Frankel always had something to say even if no one was interested, Kent has a wealth of info on him to use for chirps.

Once he knows the Coyotes' roster, Kent does a quick calculation of Phoenix's penalty kill stats versus the Aces' power play; and then he verbally goes after Frankel with no holds barred every second they're on the ice together.

By the end of second period, the Aces have drawn nine penalties and the refs are starting to ignore attacks against them because they can hear the shit Kent's saying and they know he's the root cause.
They're also starting to call the Aces on the tiniest infractions. One of the linesmen wanted to give Kent five for fighting when the Coyotes' captain finally laid into him to warn Kent to back off his teammate; but all the video footage and every guy on the ice and even the Phoenix fans who hate his guts right now had to acknowledge Kent just taunted Doan without engaging. Kent shoots too low at the goal in the middle of that PK since his arm and side are still aching from a hit earlier, but he assists Showy on the d-man's shorty less than a minute later. Vegas is winning 4-1.

"What the fuck, Parse!" Chazzer demands as they're heading to the guest dressing room. "The fucking fuck! The hell did Frankel say to you, the fuck is up?!"

"Hate that asshole," Kent replies distractedly, pressing his tongue against the tooth he's pretty sure Doan knocked loose. He'll have to tell the trainer he needs a dentist appointment.

"What?" Chazzer says. In front of Kent, one of the d-men looks over his shoulder.

"Since when?" Sunny asks.

"Always."

"Never said that when he played on Aces."

Kent gives him a weird look. "The fuck'd I do that?" he replies. "He was a call-up. 'S my job to integrate them."

Kent's alternate captain keeps looking at him for a long moment. And then Sunny reaches back and ruffles his hair hard, shoving Kent's head down with it. "Fucking Parse."

"What?" Kent demands, punching Sunny in the bicep so he'll stop. When the older man doesn't reply and just keeps walking, Kent shoves his sweaty hair off his face and presses his tongue against his tooth again.

He glances behind him when he hears Chazzer make a stifled noise; but the first unit PK center is just rubbing his face hard.

They win 6-2, with Mitts getting a breakaway for an empty net goal. Kent and Vichy almost knock their liney off his skates when they crash into Mitts for the celly, with Vichy shouting in glee and Kent laughing as much as he can while still winded from drawing away the Coyotes' defensemen.

*  

The next morning Kent's in PHX on the plane to Los Angeles, waiting for takeoff and playing poker across the aisle with the rookies who haven't learned better yet, when his phone buzzes. Kent checks it briefly and sees it's a text from another unknown number, this one just saying Yes.

Kent half-considers finally changing his number for the umpteenth time and replies Think you have the wrong number before deleting it.

Several minutes later, the person writes Sorry for the interruption.

Kent deletes that too and gets back to the game.

*  

Desharnais makes an offhand comment about him in an interview a day before their first game.
with the Habs: "He's someone to watch out for. I think he's been underestimated the last few years with some of the social media stuff. Parson's a very cerebral player. When we played together in the NLA, he set me up for a pick once off the opposition's defense, I didn't realize until eight seconds after."

"You bastard," Kent tells the screen after one of the guys shows him the video as he's coming out of the clubhouse showers.

"You are bad at compliments, bro," Chazzer remarks.

"He blew my game," Kent says in irritation, scrubbing his hair dry and scowling at the other man's phone.

Chazzer looks at him.

"What?" Kent finally replies.

"No, okay," Chazzer says. "It's just weird like, actually hearing you say it."

"I've said stuff like this before," Kent replies after a moment.

"Not really," Chazzer tells him. "Maybe to Vichy or Waller, but not the rest of us. You keep that front up twenty-four seven."

"That's my job," Kent says. "To be a good face."

"I think we've made it clear we're down with a manipulative son of a bitch for a captain, Parse," Chazzer says dryly. "Stay chill around the media and it's fine."

He makes a thoughtful face a breath later. "Well. Maybe don't terrify the rookies too fast. Poor Johnny acted like you were a rattler that first year."

Kent elbows him hard in the arm, snorting.

*  

Kent called it on Seattle having mixed feelings about re-signing the RFA the Aces sent an offer sheet to back in offseason. Whatever went down during July, now any time they play against the Schooners, Senderens acts like he's out to kill them. Today's afternoon home game is worse than usual.

It should be an easy win. The guy's line is a mess, the team's obviously splintered with internal problems, and the bags under the Schooners' captain's eyes are clear in his pregame soundbite.

But Seattle's head coach seems to be running Senderens as a loose cannon. The man won't cut his ice time; so the Aces' energy line keeps racking up penalties putting Senderens in his place whenever he's let back on the ice. Kent's pretty sure they've broken the Aces' record for single game four-on-four minutes by second period.

By third period, the Aces' head coach is sending out almost anybody on the PK because the regular units are exhausted. Kent knows he's telegraphing it with how heavily he's leaning on his stick at the bench, but the energy he's saving not sitting up matters more.

With twelve minutes to go, Scrappy finally spears Senderens so hard the guy can't straighten up again. The Schooners have to pull him from the game; the refs eject Scrappy.
Only one Schooner starts a fight over the spear, which is really fucking telling and also puts them in another four-on-four. Kent thumps Scrappy several times on the back as they pass each other on the ice, and Scrappy's center Robber yells happily from the bench, "Great fuckin' job, Scraps!"

They're still playing four-on-four when Kent rebounds a shot that Chazzer manages to tip in for a goal, finally breaking the tie. Chazzer low-fives him as they skate to the bench.

"How many guys've you put on your card now?" one of the d-men asks Scrappy in the dressing room afterward, over the noise of the Aces' victory song.

Scrappy half-grins at Patsy. "Eight more fights and I'll beat out Sestito."

"I dunno if that's the best record to shoot for," Kent deadpans from farther down the stalls.

Scrappy points threateningly at him. "Fuck you, points leader," he replies. "You ain't taking this from me."

"Alright man, follow your heart."

"That's goddamn right, Parse."

"Just try and get fewer stitches," Kent adds, smirking. Scrappy gives him a long look and an even longer rude gesture.

*

That night Kent sees one of the Schooners' guys, a call-up defenseman, alone in the casino club the team's at to celebrate.

Kent remembers his number but not his name, and looks it up: Lee. He had a good backhand pass and zero qualms about throwing himself on the ice to block the puck, and he hit hard but he hit clean. He helped the refs hold back Senderens during most of the fights when they were on the ice together. Could be a d to watch for soon, if the Schooners don't implode.

They run across each other a couple times at the bar over the evening. Kent nods at him once during a lull in the music. "Good game."

Lee makes a disgusted noise. "The fuck it was."

"Well," Kent concedes, "interesting game."

He snorts again. "Easy to say when you won."

"Yep," Kent agrees with a half-grin. Lee side-eyes him and then shakes his head.

Kent's at the bar again, waiting to buy water for himself and a final draft for Chazzer for the game-winning goal, when his phone vibrates.

A couple seconds later it goes off again. And then again. And then after maybe half a chorus of the song thumping overhead, again.

*Jesus, okay,* Kent thinks.
He pulls it out in exasperation and checks his messages. It's four from the Aces' rookie d-man, Nino. Three were sent straight to Kent:

\textit{can u come to 2 fl bath i need help}

\textit{2nd floor bathroom by th big windows}

\textit{now}

The last one went to the group text: \textit{help someone come 2 fl bath by big windows}

Kent shoves his way out of line and takes off for the stairs.

It takes him too many seconds to find the bathroom, off a corner and too close to the smaller bar. As he's entering, Kent sees a stranger heading for it in his peripheral vision and locks the door behind him. He hears Vichy demanding "--fuck did you text him \textbf{fuck}--" over the music before he cuts off as he sees Kent.

He's kneeling on the floor, holding Toby by the shoulders, with Sunny and Nino crowded around them. Toby's slumped against the edge of a stall, tense in Vichy's grip, eyes wide and blank. He's breathing shallow. He's trembling.

Kent goes cold.

"Fight?" he asks as he comes over, even though he knows the answer.

Moreno shakes his head. He's still got his phone in his hand. "No, he--I--"

Kent hauls him back by the shoulder so he's got room and crouches next to Tobin. Sunny steps away. Kent presses the back of a hand to Tobin's forehead. Hot. Not sweating. "What'd he take?"

Moreno shakes his head again. He fumbles his phone, manages to grab it before it hits the floor. "I dunno, I found him in the hall, I didn't see him--fuck is he okay? Is he gonna be okay?"

Tobin groans and tries to pull his head away from Kent's hand. Conscious. Responsive. Still shaking.

"Should we call ambulance?" Sunny asks.

"Give me a minute," Kent says, checking Tobin's pulse.

Feels arrhythmic. What's the usual in this place? X? Some designer shit Kent doesn't know? Fucking Vegas. "Anybody know how much he drank?"

Nino fidgets more with his phone. "Few shots? I wasn't.... I didn't think it was a lot." He drops the phone. Klimentov picks it up and gives it back.

It didn't seem like a lot, so it hadn't hit Kent's radar to start tracking. Tobin laid off the excessive partying when Kent talked to him about it last season, and he didn't publicly regress during the summer. He still came into practice with hangovers some weeks, but nothing that crippled his game. Nothing that put him on Kent's mental list of emerging problems.

But maybe there was a reason for that, if Klimentov hadn't wanted Nino texting him.

"Maybe someone slipped him something?" Klimentov says. Not convincing enough.

"Of what?"

"It's labelled." Kent tosses the keys to Sunny. "Go with him. You, don't come back," he tells Nino. Kent looks back at Sunny. "Bring me it and then get back to the guys and keep them all together and in public. You drive here yourself?" he asks Nino.

" Came with me and Showy," Sunny says. "Fils came alone, can take him home. Should I ask for phones?" he adds, as serious about this as everything. At least Kent can trust his alt, still. "Take message off?"

Kent grits his teeth when Tobin shudders harder. He shakes his head. "No point. Phone companies store text contents. Just keep all the guys together and visible."

Sunny nods and palms Kent's keys. He sets a hand on Nino's shoulder and guides the rookie out of the bathroom, takes his phone when Nino almost drops it again. Kent follows and re-locks the door behind them.

The guy who was standing in the hall tries to get in and then bangs hard on it, swearing. Kent goes back to where Klimentov is helping Tobin sit up straight.

"Why do you have that in your car?" Klimentov asks.

Habit. He had a nightmare once where Jack drank too much at a party and choked on his own vomit in a bathroom because Kent lost track of him for too long. Having the bottle in his backpack made him feel more prepared. Kent crouches to check Tobin's pulse again and says, "I want to talk to you after this."

Klimentov gives him a long look.

"I don't know if you've noticed this about yourself, Parser," he says, "but alcohol and drug abuse are pretty touchy subjects with you."

Kent doesn't reply.

"...I thought he was getting better," Klimentov mutters, eventually. "I thought he'd listened to me."

Kent holds down a sneer because this isn't the time or place. "If you think someone's getting better, they're not. They're just hiding it better."

He should've known himself. He should've kept watching closer.

"Ow," Tobin whimpers. Kent focuses on him as he flinches and shifts. "My leg--ow."

"Cramp?" Kent asks. When Tobin nods jerkily and bites his lip, Kent pulls off his shoe and helps him flex his leg. "Are you cold?"

"Nnnn," Tobin manages.

"Are you cold?"

"No." His head starts to drop forward. Kent catches it and holds it straight. He presses a hand to Tobin's forehead again.
"Hot?"
"Yeh."

"Okay. Vich, soak some paper towels."

Klimentov goes to the sinks. Kent kneels on the linoleum and holds Tobin's head up and tries to listen to his breathing over the music.

He should've expected this. They'd gotten by without problems for too long. He should've been more prepared.

"Don't...." Tobin trails off and squeezes his eyes shut. "Gonna throw up."

"Don't puke on my shoes," Kent tells him. Behind them, Klimentov says, "Aren't any."

Kent growls under his breath. He props Tobin up enough to move into the stall, breaks open the cover on the toilet paper with an elbow and some prying. He throws a roll to Klimentov.

Klimentov catches it and rips off a bunch of paper. Kent goes back to holding up Tobin. A sink starts running behind him.

Kent shoves his phone deep in his back pocket and shrugs off his over-shirt. He throws it along the wall of the stall, just in case Tobin does barf. He catches Tobin's head again when he starts to slump forward.

"Ow." Tobin flinches.

Responding to pain. They might be able to get out of here tonight without an ambulance or TMZ on their asses. They might be able to keep this under control.

"Here," Klimentov says. Kent takes the handful of cold wet paper and presses it against Tobin's throat.

"More," he orders. "We need his temperature down."

"Okay," Klimentov says. He goes back to the sink.

They've got the paper wads pressed along Tobin's forehead and throat and the crooks of his elbows when someone raps at the door. Rhythmic. Like a song Kent doesn't know. He thinks *Not Sunny.*

Klimentov makes a face and mutters, "Is that--Book of Mormon?"

"--Maybe Showy," Kent says, jerking his head at the door.

He pushes Tobin's arms back into position when he starts to uncurl them. Kent tucks the paper back into the crooks of Tobin's elbows as Klimentov opens the bathroom door. "Hold your arms like that."

"Why?" Tobin mumbles as Showy tosses over the pills.

"Because I said so," Kent replies. "Quit arguing."

"Dumb reason."

"Do it."
Klimentov re-locks the door as Showy leaves and brings the bottle over.

Kent manages to get two of the pills down Tobin's throat without him puking. "See if they'll sell you cranberry juice," he tells Klimentov.

"He might be able to stand," Klimentov replies, gesturing at the sink.

"Water's not enough. He needs electrolytes. They make cosmos, they'll have cranberry juice."

"Okay," Klimentov says; and Kent gets even more pissed at how easily he's agreeing with everything he says.

"It wasn't fucking Jack," he bites off.

Klimentov is silent for a couple breaths before saying, "Okay, Parser."

Showy's still outside when Klimentov opens the door, slumped against the opposite wall and on his phone. Klimentov talks to him quietly while Kent soaks more toilet paper.

Tobin flinches when he starts replacing the warm tattered paper on his forehead. "Cold!"

"Are you cold?"

"No." Tobin rubs sloppily at the water dripping down his face. "I wanna puke."

"Don't throw up on my shoes," Kent repeats. Klimentov closes the door and goes to the sink. "I'll make you pay the cleaning bill."

Tobin groans. "Thought were cool," he mutters. "Yer an asshole."

"This is your own fault," Kent replies, keeping his voice calm. If it's X he doesn't want to push Tobin into the freaked out empty void side of it. He's got enough to manage. "You took too much. You should be outside dancing and worrying about the Cup falling out of a helicopter, not sitting on a gross bathroom floor. These were good jeans."

Klimentov hands him more soaked wads. "What?"

"Whoever took the Cup on a copter ride," Kent replies. "I remembered that, started freaking out some idiot'd destroy it before I got to lift it. Ecstasy is shit," he tells Tobin. "Don't do this again."

"Only one," he mumbles. "Didn' think it'd...."

"Don't buy from people you don't know," Kent replies, keeping his voice patient. "You're twenty-two. You should know better."

"I take it back," Klimentov says. "I wanna talk to you after this too, Parson."

"Fuck you, I was sixteen," he replies. Kent pulls up Tobin's shirt and presses a palm against his armpit. Still not sweating. Still hot. "I had an excuse. And I only did it once. Soak more paper."

"Christ." Klimentov does that while Kent re-checks Tobin's pulse. Still arrhythmic. When he brings the wads over, he says, "I figured you were straight-edge in school."

Kent snorts before he thinks about it. "No."

He should shut up. He doesn't remember the statute of limitations.
But he was a minor. He's pretty sure it's past. "Not in Juniors. Not at first." And he gets sick of the assumptions. "If people claimed it was something Jack did, it was probably me."

"I am learning so much shit tonight," Klimentov mutters.

"Fuck you." Kent keeps replacing the paper wads. "We have to get him out of here. It shouldn't be this bad."

There's another knock on the door, the same pattern as before. Klimentov answers.

Kent makes Tobin drink the juice Showy bought, holding his jaw and slowly dribbling it down his throat until the first small bottle's empty. Klimentov holds the paper against Tobin's forehead and keeps him upright.

When Kent starts to open the second bottle, Tobin shakes his head weakly. "No," he groans. "I feel sick."

"I bet you do," Kent replies. He screws the bottle shut. It's no good making him throw everything back up. "Alright. In a couple minutes, we're leaving."

Kent starts to straighten. Tobin jolts and then reaches forward, scrabbling ahold of his thigh.

"I wanna play," he says desperately. "Don't get rid of me. Thought it was okay. Just one. I wanna play, Parse. Don't do like that other guy."

"What?" Kent replies, pulling out of reach.

Behind him, Klimentov says, "Like you did with Crosley."

Kent looks over his shoulder. Klimentov is watching him carefully, holding out a fresh handful of paper wads. He doesn't say anything else about the rookie forward the front office pulled from the roster and sent back down to the Sovereigns in early 2012 so they could call up the guy on the feeder team that actually belonged in the Aces.

Kent hadn't realized anybody had figured out he was the one who'd gotten the coaches to think it was their idea.

"I wanna play here," Tobin repeats. He pulls back when Kent turns to him again, tucking his hands in close and drawing his legs near his chest. "Ow."

"Do you really?" Kent asks. "You thought this would help your game?"

"Jus' wanted try," Tobin mumbles into his knees. "Gonna be gone by. Thirty. Thirty-five. Then what? Didn't think it'd be so.... I wanna play."

"Enough," Kent says, taking the paper from Klimentov. He crouches down to swap it out on Tobin's throat. "Calm down."

"I wanna play. Parse please, don't get rid me, 'm sorry. Don't."

Kent breathes out and wipes his hand on his jeans.

"Stop the drinking," he says. "And don't fucking do this again. Or maybe they'll trade your ass to the Kings and you can go hang with Richards."

"Parser," Klimentov says.
"Hold him steady," Kent replies. He moves to the quietest spot he can find in the room and pulls out his phone. He hesitates in the contacts list.

"I can get him home," Klimentov says, crouching next to Tobin to hold his shoulder and keep the paper towels on his forehead. "Make sure he's okay. It'll be fine. I'll get a cab, get him out."

"He's not sweating and his heart's wrong," Kent says. "It's an OD or too close. He needs real medical care. Just. Fucking give me a second and stop acting like I'm gonna end his career over this, you're an asshole."

"Really fuckin' touchy subjects with you, Parson," Klimentov says flatly. Kent tells him again to shut up.

He calls the assistant coach, because he's always remembered Kurlansky's face when the man learned the extent of the research Kent did on the teams putting hits on them back in the 2011-12 season, and the way the man never said anything about it.

It takes Kurlansky a while to pick up. Kent's started thinking about what he'll have to do if it goes to voicemail when the man answers. "Parse?"

"Hey," he says. "I called you instead of Moss because it got a lotta d-men involved. I can call him instead. Or afterward."

There's a couple heartbeats of silence. Klimentov is murmuring something to Tobin.

Kurlansky exhales for a long time.

"I was really hoping to be done with this shit with Reboul gone," he mutters, and that's interesting. Kent files away the comment about the retired former captain for later. "Who and where?"

Kent names Tobin and the casino. "Can we take him to the clinic? We've got prehospital care down, but I don't want to wait much longer."

Another pause, briefer. "No," Kurlansky says.

Shit.

Then it has to be a hospital. So there's no way to keep it from going public. Shit.

The whole team came out tonight. Even the guys that left early will be suspect. Nobody's going to believe it was just one of them. The media's been salivating for something like this from the club--they're Sin City. Fuck.

Kurlansky adds, tired, "Not for something like--how bad is it?"

Kent focuses. "He keeps saying he wants to throw up, he's burning up and not sweating. Heart's beating out of rhythm. Had muscle cramps earlier. He's talking and pretty coherent, but we don't know how much he took and how much he drank."

"One," Tobin mumbles behind him. "And couple drinks."


"Asshole," Tobin groans, thumping his forehead against his knees. Vich tells him, "Stop it, alright?"
"Keep his head up," Kent says. "He has to breathe."

Vich cups Tobin's head and tilts it back up properly. Tobin mutters under his breath.

"Who else's there?" Kurlansky asks.

"Vichy," Kent says. The coach swears on the other end. "Nino found him and texted me and then the guys. Vichy and Sunny got here before me. Sunny sent Nino home with Fils and went to keep the rest of the guys together in public. Except Showy," he adds. "I think he's watching the door on the other side."


"Mitts left before this started," Kent offers, since the man took off early for his girlfriend's. "That's one of us."

A couple moments later, the coach says, "I wasn't thinking about that." Guiltily.

"Why not?" Kent replies. "This could screw up our special teams and some of the regular pairings. It's what they pay you for."


"It's fine, I can take him."

"Absolutely not, Parson," Kurlansky says. "PR'll kill me if I even let you on the periphery of an OD. Send Vichy. He's there? Give him the phone."

Kent does, silently.

He soaks more paper at the sink and swaps it out on Tobin. Vichy nods silently on the phone a lot and sometimes goes "Yeah" or "Understood."

When he looks like he's about to hang up, Kent gestures for the phone. Vichy says, "One sec, Parser has something," and hands it over.

Kent doesn't give the assistant coach a chance to speak. "If I go home it's going to look suspicious," he says. "How 'bout Showy and I go back and help manage the rest of the guys? Then Sunny'll be covered to leave. That'll take care of everyone that was in here."

"... All right," Kurlansky says reluctantly. "Try to get the boys out soon. Not too soon, but--shit."

"I can push everyone out around eleven," Kent says. "Talk about traffic and practice tomorrow morning."

"--Yeah. Okay. Do that."

"Will do," Kent says. "Anything else?"

"That's all. ...Thanks, Parse."

Kent says goodbye and hangs up.

He helps Vichy get Tobin up on his feet. Tobin wobbles as Kent braces his arm around Vichy's
neck, and whimper. "I wanna puke."

"You throw up on me and I'll slug you," Vichy tells him, wrapping an arm around his waist.

"Don't," Kent replies. "Keep your voice calm. If it's X, he's gonna be swinging between a high and a massive low. Stay calm until you get him there."

Vichy gives him another sidelong look but nods. "Okay. I will."

"You gonna be all right?" Kent asks, quieter.

"Yeah, it'll be fine."

"Vich. Quit fuckin' lying to me, you gonna be okay?"

Vichy looks over again.

"Yeah," he says, a couple breaths later. He shifts Tobin's arm over his shoulders. "Probably. It'll be alright. My name should stay out of it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Vichy looks at the door and lowers his voice. "...Some of the valets owe me favors. I can get out the employee entrance, borrow one of their cars."

He shifts Tobin's weight again and fumbles his keys from his pocket. Vichy holds them out as Tobin drops his head onto his shoulder. "Tell Jeff drive it to his place, I'll pick it up tomorrow."

Kent takes the keys but shakes his head. "Don't do that. Go out the front, say you think he drank too much and grab the first cab."

"If I do that the cameras--"

"I said no," Kent orders. "There's cameras at the employee entrance. You're not fucking up your career being an accomplice to his shit. Go out the front, get a cab, take him to ER, tell them you think he over-drank, and keep describing the symptoms until they figure out what happened."

"Asshole," Tobin mumbles into Vichy's shoulder.

Kent grabs a handful of his hair and yanks his head straight.

"Go to hell," he says flatly as Tobin yelps. "There's twenty more guys out there this is going to follow for years."

Vichy grabs his wrist. "Parser. Stay calm. Right?"

Kent lets go. He keeps glaring at Tobin as Vichy moves the two of them back. "I'm not letting you fuck up their lives too. You chose this, you pay for it."

He looks back at Vichy. "Go out the front and do everything like you think it's too much alcohol. Don't you fucking dare put yourself or the team at risk looking like an accomplice to drug use. You understand me?"

"Okay," he answers.

"Good," Kent says. He unlocks the door. "Make sure they figure out what happened and treat him
right. Don't leave and keep talking until you're sure they've got it."

"I will," Vichy says.

"Good," Kent repeats. He opens the door and holds it for them. Showy looks up from his phone and then shoves it into his pocket. He pushes away from the wall to help Vichy.

"You're staying," Kent tells Showy, stopping him before he can take Tobin's other arm. "Thanks for the help. Hold on."

Kent looks at Vichy as he's making his way slowly out the door and down the hall. Tobin's shaking and his fingers are gripped tight in the back of Vichy's shirt as he stumbles to keep up. "Call if you need to."

"I was emphatically told to keep you outta this, captain," Vichy replies.

Kent says, "I don't give a shit. I dumped charcoal and juice in him, they'll know he had pre-care. They can't say anything about me they haven't already. Call if you need help."

Showy looks between him and Vichy, and doesn't say anything.

"Okay," Vichy says, slower. "It'll be alright, Parser. I'll see you at practice."

"See you then," Kent says. Vichy and Tobin head out.

"Hang back a minute," Kent tells Showy, before heading into the bathroom.

When Showy starts to follow him, Kent asks, "Did you use this earlier tonight?"

"Uh," Showy says. "Not this one, why--?"

"Then stay out," Kent tells him. "I don't want your fingerprints in here. Watch the door."

"Got it," Showy says after a pause.

Kent locks the door behind him again just in case. He cleans up all the scattered paper wads, tugs his over-shirt off the stall and pulls it on.

Kent rinses his face at the sink, dries it off, and then fixes it in the mirror until it's pretty close to the expression he saw on a guy once in Juniors at a party, who was helping a friend that'd been drinking hard and whining about a breakup out of a bathroom he'd puked in.

Mildly concerned resignation. Assumption that this was a one-time thing. Not a habit. Not a problem. Not a big deal.

Looks right. Okay. Time to go. He's got to get back to the rest of the guys. He can't blow Showy's alibi.

Kent picks the two juice bottles up off the floor, unlocks the door, and leaves.

"Thanks again," he tells Showy with a tired smile. He tosses him the full bottle. "Why are the guys who can't hold their liquor the ones who think they can go hard?"

Showy glances at the cranberry juice and then looks back up, brow furrowed. "Parse--"

"He just drank too much. That's all you need to know," Kent says. "Give me a hand here, I thought
"Fuck off, what the hell, God." Showy scrubs a hand over his face for several seconds, and then exhales hard into his palm.

He drops his hand and rolls his shoulders before shaking them out.

Showy shakes his head slowly and starts walking into the main area. "Kids."

"Yep," Kent agrees, joining him. "Vichy's taking him home. We need to put him through the wringer at practice tomorrow, maybe that'll make it stick."

Showy pushes his hands into his pockets but makes himself snort. "You're a dick."

"Part of the job description," Kent says. He throws the empty juice bottle into a trashcan as they pass it. "Doin' shit that's gotta be done. Sorry you got stuck in the hall for so long," he adds. "Must've been boring."

Showy shrugs a beat later. "Eh. Finished my underground chamber in Minecraft."

"Nerd."

"Fuck off."

They get back to the team's tables and do crisis management: Toby drank too much, got sick and freaked out Nino, Vichy's taking him home, fuckin' kids amirite. Nobody else better be that stupid or Kent'll kick their asses next practice. Etc. Sunny gets or fakes a call and heads out. Fils and Nino are gone.

Most of the guys don't buy it, but they don't say anything.

That's all Kent needs from them. Nobody has to believe him as long as they don't ask questions.

Several guys spend a lot more time on their phones than before. Kent gives Vichy's keys to Scrappy with the instructions and keeps an eye on his watch.

Twelve minutes and some seconds after eleven o'clock, Kent bangs his glass on his table and whistles. The rest of the team looks over.

"All right, last call guys," Kent says, standing up. "Head home soon, we've got practice tomorrow."

Showy raises a hand. "Problem, Parse: this is Vegas, there's no such thing as 'last call.'"

A couple of the tourists in the tables around them laugh; one raises his mug and cheers. Kent rolls his eyes and smiles.

"For the Vegas Aces, there is," he replies. "Head home before the shift change, guys. If you don't, I don't care if you've been stuck in traffic until five minutes before practice starts, I better see your asses on the rink, in gear, on time. Capisce?"

"Your accent is shit, don't ever do that again," Scrappy replies without looking up from his phone.

Kent punches him on his good shoulder as he leaves.
After Kent returns to his apartment, his phone is silent for hours.

He stretches out on the couch and drifts in and out of a doze, his tablet playing the first car show he found on his Netflix list in the background. The phone finally buzzes after two a.m., with a group text from Tobin's number but in Vichy's writing style: *I'm fine. Sorry about tonight.*

Kent wonders why he didn't go through Tobin's messages to at least pretend to write like him.

He sends back *Good* and *Start taking better care of yourself* before stretching. Most of the guys write similar glad-to-hear-it statements before the chat goes quiet again. Kent eventually drops the phone back to the floor.

He thinks about getting up and going to bed, and then thinks screw it. He sets his watch by the phone and curls up more on the couch.

He's pulled from the nap when the phone buzzes again. Kent rubs his face, fumbles it up off the floor, and checks the message. It's Vichy from his own phone now, to him: *Meant it about talking to you.*

Kent exhales through his teeth. *Fine*

The tablet's battery is low. Kent yawns hard and reaches out to quit the episode, and there's a rap on his door.

"Are you serious," he says flatly.

He rolls off the couch, rubbing his face more, and goes to turn off the alarm and check the security camera.

Vich. Kent considers not answering, and then thinks about the neighbors and opens the door anyway. "Are you serious."

"Why'd you think I was lying?"

"It's fucking--" Kent leans back and checks the oven clock "--three a.m. why the fuck'd you think I meant now."

"Then you shouldn't've answered," Vich replies. "Lemme in, I'm exhausted."

"*Go home,/* Kent says emphatically. He pulls the door wider, pissed Ivanovich is forcing his hand. "Are we really doing this."

"The ER guy said he could've been a lot worse if he hadn't had good pre-care," he replies. He wedges past Kent through the door, rubbing his face wearily. "So. Thanks, Parser. I would've fucked it up."

"...Alright," Kent says at last. He shuts and locks the door. "He's okay?"

"Yeah." Vichy drops down on the couch and stares blankly at the tablet. "Yeah, he's okay. They wouldn't tell me much. Patient confidentiality."

Kent snorts humorlessly. "See how long that lasts 'fore tabloids bribe around it."

Vichy doesn't reply.
Kent breathes out slowly and then resets the alarm code. "Alright," he repeats. "You got through okay?"

"Yeah," Vichy answers. "I told 'em I brought him in 'cause I was worried how much he drunk to be acting so weird. Said a girl told me her guy found him in the bathroom, but I didn't think about getting their names before they left."

"Vichy," Kent starts.

"I know, cameras," Vichy snaps. "Some chick was flirting with me on the floor before Nino texted, that's why I said 'she.' I know it's not fuckin' perfect but I had to explain the pre-care!"

"Okay," Kent replies. "That's pretty good." He pushes a hand over his hair. "Guess the best with the circumstances. Nothing's gonna hold up if they investigate, so--close is fine."

Vichy rubs his hands over his face again. "God."

"It was fast thinking," Kent adds, pressing the heel of a hand against his eye and wishing he didn't feel so groggy. "That crap got dumped on you when you were already half-drunk and tired. You did good. Long as he'll be all right, we'll deal with the rest how we have to."

Vichy looks over at him again for a long moment, and then presses his face harder into his folded hands.

"Don't think about it any more, Vichy," Kent tells him. "It's done. We'll just move forward."

"Alright," Vichy mumbles into his palms.

"You're staying here," Kent says. "You look like you're gonna collapse. I'll wake you for practice."

Vichy nods dully a couple times and then slumps over onto the couch.

Kent stops the episode and turns off the tablet. Vichy shifts onto his back and stares up at the ceiling.

Kent picks up his phone and watch as well, and Vichy says slowly, "Okay. But--everything else aside, Parser. You did drugs?"

"I was sixteen," Kent says. He drops the tablet on the kitchen island and starts to leave. "Go to sleep."

"I'm not judging, okay." Vichy rubs his face again. "I'm so goddamn tired I feel like I'm hallucinating. Like. I thought I knew you, and you really were replaced with a Swiss double."

"Christ," Kent mutters, even as he stifles a snort.

"Don't you 'Christ' me, Parser."

"Go to sleep, Vichy," Kent flips off the light.

It doesn't change much. He never shut the curtains earlier; the neon of the Strip farther down the road keeps the room dimly lit. Vichy folds his arms under his head.

"Look," he says, as Kent's heading for the bedroom. "If you don't wanna talk, okay. But you get why I'm like 'what the fuck,' right? It's weird."
"It's not that weird," Kent says tersely.

Then he wonders if Vichy's trying to distract himself from thinking about the last several hours. Kent exhales through his teeth, and makes himself slouch against the bedroom doorway. "I wasn't addicted or anything," he continues. "I tried some shit when I was a kid and then I didn't do it again. That's normal."

"Not for you," Vichy replies. He tilts over to face him. "You're like the polar fucking opposite of an addict. They do PR shit on it."

"Of course they fucking do," Kent says flatly. "I was sixteen. Lay off."

"Why would y'do that?" Vichy asks, and he sounds sincere. "You're not the kind of guy who'd screw up his career for a short high. Not even at sixteen."

"I was a kid."

Vichy doesn't reply. Kent finally starts to drag a hand through his hair, stops himself, and exhales heavily.

"I didn't figure I had a lotta time," he mutters. "And there were people that had the stuff. And I didn't have like half my family in the area for once. It wasn't that weird."

"What?" Vichy says. He props himself up on an elbow. "Not have a lot of time?"

Kent clenches his jaw. "In Juniors."

"What the hell?" Vichy asks in confusion. He sits back up. "Parser, they were talking about you your first three months. The fuck'd you think you didn't have time?"

"Money." His dad. "Stuff. It costs to play, we had bills."

"Oh," Vichy says quieter.

Kent breathes out through his teeth again and slumps down into a crouch. "Whatever," he replies. "I was wrong. Obviously. I wouldn't've done it if I'd known. Most of it was lousy, anyway."

"Most--what'd you do?"


Vichy rubs the bridge of his nose. "...But if it was a money thing--"

"I'm good at talking up people," Kent replies. "And cards."

And pool, but he got his ass kicked once sharking at fifteen and didn't do it again. Kent doesn't mention it. He's never told anyone that one except Jack. He told his parents he was mugged.

"Oh my God." Vichy rubs his face again, harder. "What in the flying fuck."

"Lay off already."

"I'm not judging, man, I just." He drops back down on the couch, folding his arms under his head. "You're like the goddamn poster child for clean living, and you actually did dumb shit like us as a kid. My world is askew."
"Is that a quote?" Kent asks, because Vichy used that particular tone.

"Yes," Vichy says, but he doesn't say what from. "Okay." And then lower, "Wow."

"It's not that weird."

"Poster child."

Kent rolls his eyes and rises back to his feet. "Go to sleep."

"I'm not gonna tell anyone, Parser," Vichy says, quieter. "And I don't think Toby remembers much. Just...."

When Vichy trails off, Kent shrugs a shoulder. "Doesn't matter," he says. "I was a minor, it's past."

Kent shifts, and then braces a foot hard on the opposite side of the doorway. "...Every rumor everyone fuckin' assumes it was Zimmermann. Like he ever would've done anything that'd damage the family name." He practically had to wheedle Jack into trying pot, and the first time had been a waste since Jack spent it paranoid about getting caught and kept checking that the door really was locked. "It's irritating."

It wouldn't have been half so hard for Kent to track when Jack was hiding empties if it weren't for him trying not to make his dad look bad.

His name almost killed Jack in a lot of ways, if Kent thinks about it.

"Okay," Vichy says. "...Glad you quit."

He pauses for a couple breaths before adding, "Pretty sure you're the first person I've heard call drugs 'lousy' that wasn't getting paid for it."

Kent shrugs again. "Didn't like 'em. X made me freak out about the Cup. And I think I broke a guy's windshield practicing snap shots on an upper. Nothing seemed worth it."

"Practicing shots?"

"What," Kent says, and Vichy presses his hands over his face, shoulders shaking. "The party was boring, and the alley was empty."

Vichy rolls over onto his stomach and buries his face in the couch, smothering laughter. "Oh my God."

"It's not that funny," Kent mutters, letting his leg drop. "I forgot my coat. Probably would've gotten hypothermia if Cartier hadn't found me."

Vichy wheezes, trying to get a hold of himself. He tilts onto his side to look at Kent again. "Cartier?"

"Senior in the Océanic when I came in," Kent says. "Went...148 in the draft? I think. I think he's still in the ECHL, I didn't keep in touch." He was embarrassed.

Cartier was the guy who, after that night, took Kent to an apartment party maybe a week later. He gave him regular sodas to drink, and told him to watch a group of about five people over in one part of the room.

It didn't take Kent long to figure out that one of the women was holding. The rest of the group was
competing with each other to be the one she shared with.

"And that's after Trish managed to track it down," Cartier told him, when he saw Kent got it. "It takes work to score. Doesn't matter if you're buying or trying to get a split. You could do it," Cartier added. "You're good at people. But it's a lotta work. And you're gonna be NHL material, Kent."

Cartier took another sip of his beer and pointed a thumb at the group. "You'd be better off using the time you'd be stuck spending on that crap on practice instead. You're good. But keep working, and you'll be drafted the first round for sure."

Kent hadn't explicitly realized he was being handled that night, but he'd still known Cartier was trying to get him to think seriously about stopping. Not telling him to. Not pushing. Just pointing out that he could either be one of the people begging someone else, or he could be one of the people clear of all that bullshit.

Kent hadn't done anything else after that. Except for weed, once more on his own and then those couple times with Zimms.

After the two of them became actual friends, he even started pouring his own drinks short. At first, Kent didn't want to get trashed and look stupid in front of him; and later, he didn't want to risk not being clear-headed in case Jack went overboard. They had to balance out.

It'd helped that he doesn't like being drunk any more than he liked being high. The buzz from two beers feels great, but even in Juniors Kent hated the loss of control that came with more than that. He hated the way his vision would go out of focus unless he concentrated and the way he'd say things without thinking enough about them sometimes, since Jack would never just fucking let it go afterward.

He'd got that Jack had liked it. Had needed it to get out of his head for a while, when the pills and Kent weren't enough. But it wasn't a feeling he could share.

Maybe if he could've, he wouldn't have expected Jack to get over his own using as easily.

"Huh," Vichy says; and Kent shakes his head and focuses. "Glad he did."

Kent shrugs again. "Yeah." He should find out who Cartier's playing with these days. Tell him thanks for real. "Anyway. I don't do any of that shit now, I haven't for years, chill out."

"I'm chill. I'm fuckin' ice."

"You're fuckin' drained," Kent drawls. "Go to sleep already. Practice is in a few hours, you know we have to be there."

"Alright, alright," Vichy mutters, settling on his back again.

Kent gets a pillow from the bedroom and tosses it to him. Vichy pushes it under his head, and then shifts his jaw. "Toby was pretty shaken up with the last stuff you said."

"Good," Kent says. "Maybe it'll sink in this time."

Vichy doesn't reply.

Kent slides his hands into his pockets. He remembers to hook his thumbs out a breath later, and turns for the door again. "See you tomorrow."
"Kent."

"What," he replies, looking over his shoulder.

Vichy has a hand pressed over his eyes, rubbing his thumb hard against his temple.

"You didn't have to scare him that much," he finally says. "Nobody's gonna go after the rest of the guys over this."

"Of course they are," Kent says wearily. Vichy really needs sleep if he can't see something this obvious. "That's what the media does. Get some rest already."

"Why do you always--" Vichy starts; and then he squeezes his eyes shut and pinches the bridge of his nose. He lets out a slow, long breath.


"Night."

Kent texts Vichy's girlfriend that the man's crashing at his place tonight because Kent didn't want him to get back in a car when he looked this exhausted. Nadiya sends back k thx

And then he finally gets to bed.

* *

Kent wakes up at 6:17 a.m. when he hears a ringtone that isn't his.

His head's killing him and his mouth tastes like toothpaste and beer. Kent rubs his eyes and wonders why he was dumb enough to drink to hangover level last night, and twists around to check on Zimms.

The bed's empty. That's weird--Zimms's usually more about having sex if they were drinking. Did they have to room differently, is someone sick? God, did they fight again. Wait, this is the only bed. Why's he so tired, this place is too weird for a hotel, where's Zimms, what the hell is going on--


The other phone stops ringing. **Fuck**, last night. Kent forces himself out of bed.

When he comes into the main room, Vichy's pushed himself up on an elbow on the couch and talking groggily on his phone. "Uh-huh. .... Summerlin, yeah. No, they recognized him, from--Robber?" He rubs at his face and starts to sit up. "Yeah, his stuff with th' kids. .... Uh. Maybe not, I think--"

Kent takes the phone from him. "Hello?"

"--Kent?" the person asks, a little aback.

It takes him a second to place the voice: Masters. From the PR team. One less concern. God, Kent's so tired his head aches.

Which means Vichy's worse, because he's always an uncommunicative zombie in the mornings until the coffee kicks in. He shouldn't be on the phone, so Kent has to wake up.
"Hey, Yves," he says, heading into the kitchen. Kent puts the phone on speaker and starts making coffee. "Is he okay?"

"Yes," Masters says. "Is Anatoly with you?"

"He crashed here last night to dodge traffic," Kent replies. "Said he worried Tobin drank more than we thought and took him to ER instead of home. Everything alright?"

"...It could be worse," Masters says, and Kent belatedly realizes he shouldn't have asked about Tobin being okay at the start. No, fuck, he already talked to Kurlansky last night, so--son of a bitch, he's too off right now.

"That doesn't sound great," Kent replies. He moves to the sink and starts rinsing his face.

"There were some complications," Masters answers. Kent slaps his face a couple times and then shuts off the water. "I'm glad he's with you; we were hoping to talk to you both before practice."

"Sure thing," Kent replies, pulling off his shirt and drying his face with it. "When'd you want us?"

"Sooner would be better," Masters answers in that dry-Canadian-understatement voice.

"Okay," Kent agrees. "Traffic should be dying down by the time the coffee's done. We can probably be there around seven."

"We'll see you then," Masters replies. "I need to make some more calls."


When the coffee's ready, Kent pours a thermos full and hands it over to Vichy along with his phone. "Don't answer that until you're awake."

"Do you think the shit you do is normal, Parson?" Vichy grumbles, taking it away and shoving it into his pocket.

"What the fuck is 'normal' supposed to be?" Kent demands. "Stupid?"

Vichy frowns at him but doesn't answer, so Kent goes back to the kitchen.

Vichy squeezes his eyes shut and rubs them hard while Kent pours himself a cup; and then he shakes his head tiredly and just drinks his coffee.

*

When Kent and Vichy arrive at the clubhouse, the front office is already talking with the three d-men who were involved last night. Kent reads articles on Tobin silently while they wait; Vichy makes more coffee in the kitchen and refills his thermos.

Eventually Nino and Showy come out of the admin offices' door.

Showy points a thumb over his shoulder when he sees them. "They said go in if you're here. They, uh, wanna reconfirm stuff with you and Sunny."

"Okay," Kent replies. Vichy nods and drains the last of his coffee.

Nino looks like he barely slept considering the bags under his eyes, and he hasn't spoken. When Kent catches his shoulder as he and Showy start to pass by, Nino jolts to a stop before looking at
"Hey," Kent says. "Thanks for everything last night. He's gonna be okay because you reacted so fast and got help. Good job."

The rookie swallows hard and then rubs his face. "Thanks, Parse. I--thanks."

Showy slings an arm over Nino's shoulders and starts leading him down the hall. "C'mon, pal, I need some friggin' coffee."

Kent leaves Nino to him and heads into the offices.

The entire front office is in admin. The assistant GM must've taken a redeye from the feeder team's city in Kansas; the trashcan by PR's door is full of empty energy drink cans. Kent and Vichy take seats by Sunny.

The GM leads the questions, with PR breaking in occasionally. At first Impey just runs through the basics with the three of them, apparently helping them all get their stories matching. Then he sends Sunny out and asks Vichy and Kent what happened after the rest of the guys left.

Vichy answers first and leads with the raw truth, like a goddamn crazy person, so there's not much Kent can do but follow his lead. Mostly he just nods and makes agreeing noises, and speaks up whenever Vichy's fumbling for details.

"After we hung up with Paul, we figured out what to do," Vichy finishes, nodding briefly at Coach Kurlansky. "And then I took him to Summerlin. When I got in, they--"

"'Figured out what to do'?" Adams from PR breaks in. "I just want to make sure we've got it all down."

"I was--gonna go out the back, borrow a car, but Kent said it'd be better to be honest and go out the front like we thought he just drank a lot."

"Anatoly had the good idea that the back would be quieter, maybe help keep Tobin calmer," Kent says. "I pushed him to go through the front because I figured the less staff we disrupted, the less trouble we'd be."

"Okay," the GM says. He looks over at Adams and the rest of the PR team; when none of them ask further questions, he looks back at Vichy. "So, when you got in to the hospital?"

Vichy runs through his report of the rest of the night. Kent slouches back in his chair and listens.

Eventually they're released for practice. The associate coach runs the majority of it, and repeatedly yells at any guys who try to get more info out of Kent or Vichy or Sunny during pauses.

Practice is really short. They're all ordered to return to the clubhouse afterward; and then the rest of the morning and the start of the afternoon is taken up with crisis management.

The head coach updates them on what they've heard from the hospital and Tobin's family. PR tells them what's okay to say to the media, which is basically nothing. The team president talks about
their expected behavior as professionals and role models.

Kent listens and nods when he's supposed to and tries not to feel relief.

Damage control's been kicked up to management. They're the ones that have to spearhead the official communications, the team redesign, the brand recovery, and all the rest of that work. It's on them.

All Kent has to do is keep the guys' morale up, and keep their minds on practice and games. He just has to get any call-ups integrated, and make the media soundbite about it being the front office and the league's place to decide about Tobin. All he has to do is his job.

Tobin's alive and he's off the roster. They were teammates but not friends; Kent doesn't owe him anything.

He can be done afterward, for once.

* 

Except he can't, because there's never a hard "done" after something like this.

Nino goes on a bad skid over the next couple weeks. Kent stays longer after practices and pulls in different d-men to help him work through it, but his slump doesn't break.

The coaches reduce his ice time; but instead of starting to scratch him, they pair him up more with the veteran defensemen for further mentoring. They send him out in the offensive zone to bolster his confidence. They give him enough chances that by the second week Kent gets the feeling it's becoming an issue in the front office. The media starts questioning the club's decision-making even more.

When Patsy sprains his ankle and can't skate as fifth d for the next couple weeks, the coaches finally call up another d-man and send Nino back down to the Sovereigns. Kent drives him to the airport for his flight to Kansas and tells him keep working hard. "You're good, Moreno. We'll see you again."

"Thanks, Parse," Nino says, tired and worn-down and angry and humiliated.

Kent bops him on the shoulder and tells him it's an opportunity to build up his skills without the crushing pressure. "I know it sounds like bullshit, but look at it like that anyway. Sometimes a break's all it takes to get steady again. Play a couple games, get more ice time and work out your game. We'll see you."

Nino nods and rubs at his eyes, and then grips his luggage tighter and heads into the airport.

* 

Three weeks before Thanksgiving, Kent fucks up his ankle bad on a check during the end of the third period, at just over four minutes left while the Aces are still tied.

He keeps it to himself. Kent downs the painkillers the trainer gives him, skates his last shift, misses a shot, and sends a pass too wide. He hisses desperately when they go into overtime.

He skates eleven seconds of his OT shift, but when Holler sends him the puck, the Avalanches' center throws himself onto the ice to block it. He skids and crashes into Kent's skates; Kent goes down and smashes his head on the ice.
He regains consciousness while they're still hauling him out, but he's too groggy to register much: floor, door, ow, hurts more than cracking his ribs did. Cot. Shot in his elbow. Still hurts.

The painkiller gogginess replaces the pain gogginess pretty soon, but not before he embarrasses the hell out of himself by screaming when they start to pull off his right skate. Kent still feels out of it, but he can tell how many people are in the room. The assistant coach and a guy in a suit are arguing. The trainer's cutting off his skate.

"It was a fucking reckless hit!" Coach Kurlansky insists.

"It shouldn't've been," the suit guy replies. "Toronto reviewed, Paul. It shouldn't have done this much damage."

"Well it did."

"I dunno what to tell you," the suit guy says. "It shouldn't've done this."

"Earlier," Kent manages. "Final period."

They look over. Elliot pauses in cutting the skate but then resumes. Suit guy asks, "Earlier?"

Kent waves vaguely at his ankle and then gets distracted at the sight when Elliot finally peels the boot off. "Aw, fuck. No."

"Parson," the suit guy says carefully, coming over. Is he a time keeper? Is the game over? How long's he been out, did they win? "Concentrate. Did you say you were injured before the slide?"

"Yeh," Kent answers. "Tell me 's not broken. Please."

"We'll take you to the clinic to confirm," Elliot tells him. He looks down at Kent's ankle again, and revises it to, "Hospital."

Kent drops his head to the cot with a groan. The suit guy and Kurlansky speak more, lower, and then the guy leaves. Kurlansky talks into his phone while they brace Kent's leg for transport.

"I should've known when you took the painkillers," Elliot mutters. "What the hell, Parse. Why'd you say it hurt, not you broke it?"

"Dunno 's broken yet." Kent makes another gesture and tries not to look at his ankle. "Four minutes left. Tied."

Elliot breathes out through his teeth and gives Kent a flat look. "You used to be such a sensible kid. What's going on lately?"

It's one more season until Jack graduates and signs into the league, which is the first time Kent's let himself put it into a coherent thought.

"M sensible," he replies, and Elliot and Kurlansky both say "No."

After postgame the guys keep texting him while Kent's at the hospital and going through the concussion protocol, until when he finally unlocks his phone he just skims the messages. The last third are mainly orders for him to fucking reply already.

Kent checks the game's score, exhales in relief when he sees the Aces won, and then sends Broken
to the group text.

Vichy immediately replies *Your fucking BRAIN? We know. What the fuck, Parser.*

*shit how long*

*Dunno* Kent answers. *Think 6 wks, therapy*

*Why the fuck didn't you say anything?!* Vichy demands.

*Just 4 mins*

*Oh my god*

Huh, he got Vichy to skip punctuation. That's rare.

His phone rings a second later; it's Vichy. Kent tells it slowly "Nooooo" like it really thought he'd be dumb enough to pick up. The nurse in the room looks over.

Kent's just congratulated the team on pulling out the win when Vichy writes *Answer your fucking phone you coward.*

*No*

*I answered when you bitched at me about my concussion. Answer your phone.*

*I learn from others mistakes* Kent points out.

*Two straight fucking months you harassed me until I got a visor answer your fucking phone.*

*You got while to go then*

*Answer it or I'm calling your mom, asshole.*

Kent calls his bluff. *Bs*

There's nothing from anyone for a little while, until Chazzer says *Yeah he did it*

What the fuck? *Wif stop him*

*Nah*

*STOP HIM*

Kent's other liney sends *This is the best shit I've seen you're grownass men*

*FUCK YOU MITTS* Kent replies and then his phone rings. It's his mom.

*Your a dead man Ivanovich* Kent promises, accidentally ignoring the call to type before calling back. "Hi, Mom--no it wasn't the slide, it. Yeah, I--yeh. Yeah, obviously y' raised a stupid son."

The nurse chuckles, which helps a little as his mom goes "Kent Vincent Parson *so help me God*--"

"I played wi' cracked ribs and nobody freaked like this!"

"Lord, give me strength," she mutters. "That was the *Cup finals*, and it was still stupid. Why would you do it now Kenny, who gives a damn about the Avs?"
"Nn," Kent answers. "'s already broken, what'd I have to lose?"

"More strength than this, Lord," his mom grumbles, and Kent snickers.

She lets him go when it gets obvious he's growing pretty stoned from the Vicodin, and says she'll call tomorrow. Kent's still dealing with paperwork when Chazzer shows up.

"Get out, traitor."

"I can call Vichy instead," Chazzer half-smirks. "He really wanted to be the one to drive you home."

"You're all assholes. 'M gonna write a book when I retire 'bout the Aces and call it 'Everybody On This Team Was An Asshole.'"

"Yourself included?"

"'Myself Fuckin' Included,'" Kent continues, and Chazzer cracks up.

"What did they put you on, bro? It must be good."

"My brain feels fucked up, I hate this," Kent grits out. Chazzer blinks and looks at him. "I hate it, I hate this shit!"

"...The pain's probably not gonna feel great either when it comes back," Chazzer points out.

Kent lets his head thump down on top of the paperwork.


Chazzer squeezes his shoulder. "Next year, Parse. Maybe even this one when they clear you. You been playing like you're possessed lately."

"Gonna start all over again," Kent mutters. "'Nother season 'til he's in. Never fuckin' stops."

"What?" Chazzer asks; and Kent clenches his jaw shut.

He drags his hands through his hair and digs his fingers into his scalp. "Fuck everything."

"Wanna go back to being the loopy stoned and not the angry stoned?" Chazzer asks, after a long pause. "That's gonna be more fun on the car ride."

"Fuck you."

"Counter-suggestion noted." Chazzer thumps his shoulder. "Fill out your paperwork so I can take your crippled ass home, Parse. Is it legal to have you filling out paperwork high?"

"Fuck everythiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing."

Chazzer wakes him up a couple times over the night on "doctor's orders" to check for concussion-like symptoms, which Kent is pretty sure is both bullshit and an excuse to mock him in Polish when Kent tells him it's bullshit.

The man crashes on Kent's couch, makes sausage and ridiculously good eggs for breakfast the next
morning, and loses a game of pool to him.

"How the fuck!" Chazzer demands, as Kent sends the 8-ball into the side pocket. "You have a broke leg."

"Ankle."

"Fuck you, Jesus Christ." Chazzer leans on his cue. "I shoulda known, who gets a table this fancy if they aren't a fuckin' shark. Move to San Jose."

Kent flips him off. Chazzer snickers, but doesn't keep giving him shit like he did last night, when Kent was struggling to calculate how many points Crosby would probably have by the time Kent was finally able to get back on the ice and snarling about it until Chazzer started calling him a Flyer.

"I can't believe you didn't want to play stakes," Chazzer says, shaking his head. "I would've scammed me."

"I don't bet on pool," Kent replies, before looking over at the oven clock. "You're gonna be late for practice."

Chazzer rolls his eyes before fishing up two balls from a corner pocket. "Aye aye, captain."

After he leaves, Kent puts away the book on industrial psychology that Chazzer left on the countertop and tries not to think about how weirdly quiet his apartment is. He's not used to being in it for so long.

He spends hours on his phone, talking to and texting family and managing his story on social media. He turns on the TV and leaves it on in the background all day.

* 

His insurance jacks up his rates afterward, which is a blatant scam given this is his first major injury since 2011. Kent gives half-hearted consideration to finding a new company.

His parents arrange a long weekend off at the same time and fly over to visit. Kent happily abuses the fact that they're willing to do the cooking, but has to keep explaining that he hires someone to clean.

"If you say so," his mom tchs, looking up at the exposed air conditioning ducts. "That's dusty."

"I'll tell 'em for next time."

"Why didn't they just put them in the ceiling properly to begin with?"

"Loft living," Kent answers, sarcastic air quotes and all. She snorts. "It was the only one-bedroom available when I wanted to move. 'Cept another place, but Vichy said the windows'd kill my electric bill in the summer." Kent shrugs. "I'm just glad it had a real bedroom."

"Hmph," she answers, folding her arms. "Still, it seems like a waste of money. This place isn't so big, you could clean it in half a day. They do give you days off, right?"

"There's times where they aren't paying me," Kent replies. "Doesn't mean I'm 'off.'"
His dad looks over across the countertop. "Are you doing okay, Kenny?"

"Broken foot aside," he smiles.

"That one's your own fault," his mom tells him. "Don't you ever stay on the ice again that injured."

Kent raises his palms. "I'll try," he pacifies. "No promises when we're in the finals."

She hrumphs but accepts that, because she doesn't fight lost causes. "Fine."

"It wouldn't be a risk if you weren't playing so viciously lately," his dad says, not looking up from the saucepan.

"Isaac," his mom warns, low.

Kent waits, but his dad doesn't say anything else.

"Play styles change over time," he says at last. "I have to keep adjusting my game when other guys change theirs."

"All right, Kent," his dad says. His mom changes the subject and asks about his rehab.

* 

Google searches on the Aces start bringing up kent parson broken ankle play time instead of greg tobin overdose.

Kent tells himself it was worth it.

If it was already broken anyway, at least he made use of it.

* 

He goes through the long, long process of recovery.

Kent does everything the trainers tell him to. He keeps up what weight training and cardio he can while his ankle heals. He goes to the PK and PP meetings. He watches tape until the video coach just exhales whenever he sees Kent limping down the hall on his crutches.

Kent reviews plays with the rest of the guys, goes to the home games, and talks with his alternate about the latest fluctuations Sunny's noticed in the team's dynamics and about the different guys called up from the Sovereigns. He works to integrate the call-ups as best he can without being able to play with them, because it's gotta get done. For some reason the club didn't make the simple move and void Tobin's contract for being in violation of the league's drug rules; they just put his name permanently on the injured roster. The team keeps cycling through Sovereigns players trying to settle on his replacement while filling Kent's gap, so Kent has to get them fitted in.

He tries harder to make Chazzer tone down his habit of snapping and ripping into the other guys when he feels they're screwing up too much. Kent points out over and over that the man has to keep a lid on it until Kent's cleared to play again: it's something the team can only sustainably survive when Kent's there to be the good cop.

He does what he can to still be a good captain off the ice. He tries not to count the days slipping away, the potential points and assists and goals lost forever now.

*
He adopts a cat three weeks into his recovery. Kent saw it dart underneath a car in the tamale shop's lot as he was making his way back from the overpriced but conveniently-located grocery store in the lofts' ground floor. He spends five minutes trying to coax the stupid thing out before it finally comes--and then only when he caves and breaks open his sriracha beef snacks as a bribe.

Kent goes into the building after that. When he looks down as he's waiting for the elevator, he finds the cat got in behind him and is grooming itself at his feet.

"How'd you get past the doorman?" Kent says. The cat swishes its tail once.

He snorts. "I'm not feeding you more."

He tries to keep it from getting into the elevator, then almost tries to keep it from getting out of the elevator before deciding that's cruel, then tries to keep it from getting into his apartment. It's fast, or else he's even slower than he feels. "Are you mocking me?" Kent finally asks it. "Did the guys send you?"

The cat headbutts his grocery sacks and meows loudly.

"I'm tossing you out once these are up," he warns.

The second time he comes back from the building's exercise room to find the cat's shoved his toaster onto the floor and is now sitting triumphant in its spot on the kitchen counter, Kent takes a photo. He accidentally hits the Twitter app instead of his messages, so he just DMs it to Vichy with Is this normal or did I let in a serial toast killer?

"I could toss you out," Kent threatens, as he crouches awkwardly and starts picking up the toaster. "Right back out. Don't think I can't catch you. This thing's comin' off eventually."

The cat thumps her tail like she's mad he isn't proud of her for trying to murder his appliances.

"Is this payback for the vet or what?" Kent asks, before his phone buzzes. He tries to scuff the cat, but she jumps to the floor before he can get a hold of her. "Stay off the counter. Bad cat."

Vichy's retweeted his DM with Normal for a cat that'd pick you. Because he's a secret troll. Kent presses his thumbs against his eyelids before telling him as much, and then spends almost two hours on Twitter fielding retweets and questions.

After the eighteenth person asks the cat's name, Kent figures he needs to think of one.

He tries to look up cat names, but he mostly finds poems or that musical his mom and aunt dragged him to when he was a kid and they visited Manhattan. "Why can't I just call you Cat?"

She jumps back on the counter.

"Off." Kent manages to save the toaster before she headbutts it to the floor again. "Don't wreck my shit because you don't like what I said." He prods her off the counter; the cat hisses at him before finally jumping down again. She whacks her tail against his cast.

"You dick," Kent tells her with grudging admiration. "--That's it.

"If you're gonna be a bastard, you're getting a bastard name," he informs the cat. "You brought this on yourself."
She ignores him and starts grooming.

"All right then," Kent says, unlocking his phone again. "I've gotta stop talking to you, I sound crazy."

He's pretty sure he gets chirped by a solid third of the hockey world after the name gets spread around, which confirms his belief that it's perfect. Kent rearranges his cabinets and starts storing the toaster in one when he's not using it.

With her nemesis gone, Kitt Purrson doesn't go after anything else on the countertops. The coffee pot, the knife rack, and the banana holder all stay unmolested for a week. After two, Kent figures the cat got it out of her system and skips the hassle of putting the toaster back up after breakfast.

He comes home that afternoon from a physical therapy session and finds it on the floor again. "Fucking come on."

*K*  

Kent goes through the therapy until they clear him to start practicing in moderation again. He gets back on the ice with a specialty trainer and feels like his lungs are about to collapse ten minutes in.

"Jesus Christ," Kent wheezes, braced against the boards. "Put it on my gravestone. 'Died on the fuckin' ice. Showed you up, Malarchuk.'"

"Bad record to aim for, Parson," the trainer tells him. "The first week back's always the worst. It'll improve."

"It better," he replies. Kent pushes himself straight again. "'Lright. All right. I'm good. Let's go."

"'I'm good' means he's lying," Mitts calls from where he and the backup goalie are practicing on the other side of the rink.

"Nobody asked for--" and then Kent has to brace a hand on the glass again. "Ok, no."

The trainer nods. "You'll want to save your breath."

"Holy shit. Boxy, get the boys," Mitts says gleefully. "This is gonna be epic."

Kent gives his liney an "I'm watching you" gesture while he's still bent forward and working on evening out his breathing.

He's finally cleared to return after Christmas break. Kent tries to think *Four more months left*, tries not to think *So much time lost."

*K*  

Vichy throws his usual New Years' Eve party for family and friends, and invites Kent and the guys still in the city to it.

"Everyone is already warned not to play cards with you, Parson," Vichy's girlfriend says when she answers the door. "Do not try."

Kent snorts and shakes his head. "I wasn't gonna play for money here, c'mon Nadiya."
"No," she answers. "Sorry, not sorry."

Kent laughs and shrugs off his windbreaker and makes a mental note that Nadiya still doesn't like him.

A quarter to midnight, Vichy swings by with a dripping champagne bottle while Kent's leaning against the wall and checking the news on his phone. "You need another?"

"Nah, I'm good," Kent says, sloshing his beer slightly.

"All right." Vichy exhales and sets the champagne on the floor before slouching against the wall beside him, folding his arms. "I cannot wait for this goddamn bad luck year to be over."

Kent snarks.

"Nooooo shit," he agrees. He takes another swallow of beer. "I'm not superstitious and I still wanna be done with 2013."

"I'm hella superstitious," Vichy says flatly. "Good riddance to it."

Kent checks his watch and raises his bottle toward Vichy with a half-grin. "Twelve more minutes 'til we gotta start really going hard for the rest of the season."


Winter Classic comes and goes; Hockey USA's Olympics list is published. Kent's not on it.

None of the guys really say anything, except for Chazzer's abrupt " Fucking seriously, bro?" when he sees Kent in the clubhouse at breakfast their first day back.

"I figured," Kent replies evenly.

Vichy looks up from his plate.

"What the hell?" Chazzer demands. "You tweeted from the fucking orientation camp last summer!"

"And then I spent two months of scouting reports injured," Kent says. "It wrecked my stats on top of sideling my candidacy. Why would they risk a spot on me when they could take a healthy winger instead?"

Vichy's still looking at him across the table. Kent takes a longer drink of his coffee.

Chazzer mutters something under his breath in Polish and thumps Kent on the back as he heads for the fridge.

Vichy goes back to his eggs. Kent drains the rest of his coffee.

* There's never a hard done when a former teammate decides to fuck himself up with drugs, even months later.

After morning skate Coach Moss has Kent come to his office between lunch and the special teams'
meetings. Kent figures it's about his bad game lately: his physical liney's been on IR with a groin injury, right in the middle of a string of games against tough teams, and without Mitts Kent's been getting choked on the ice. He hasn't gotten more than one assist in the last four games, and he's only had one goal.

But when he shows up at the office, the coach doesn't mention the slump. He has Kent go over some game data.

It doesn't take Kent long to figure out what the point is. For the last few months--ever since Tobin's fuckup, minus the time Kent wasted sitting out with his ankle--whenever Kent's time on the ice overlaps with the player who shared his rookie year with Tobin last season, that player's numbers noseive.

Kent noticed it back in October. But he figured Robber was shaky over Tobin; and he didn't want to fucking talk about that guy; and he and Robber didn't share much ice time. So Kent ignored it. And then he broke his ankle. And then life just kept on going.

But since he was cleared to play, it's started up again. It's affecting their penalty kills. It's affecting the number of goals they've given up in the last few games, with Burr out with a concussion and the backup goalie unable to trust the PK team not to leave him on an island. There's less than three months before playoffs; it's a problem Kent has to fix already.

So Kent puts down the pen without finishing the rest of the Corsi Rel and asks, "Is this about Robinson?"

"Yes," the head coach answers.

Kent sits back in his chair and rests his forearms on his thighs. Moss turns the legal pad around to face himself. "We saw it beginning late October, but he and Moreno were both having a rough time then."

Kent starts to shift his feet and then makes himself sit still.

"Miguel made sense, with what he had to deal with finding Greg," the coach says after a moment. "I know Pete and Greg are friends, so that made sense too. But now it's started again, and I haven't seen a reason why."

Kent crosses his legs and starts to adjust the tongue of his sneaker absently, but he has to drop his foot back to the floor when the pressure quickly starts bugging his knee again. "Ah."

"I tell the media that I don't pay much attention to the guys' off-ice stuff, so that's what I have to do," Moss says, after a longer pause. "But I know last season Pete stepped up after you and Anatoly talked to him. He clearly made some changes off the ice."

Kent keeps from reacting to that.

It's not a surprise that the coaches have a mole in the dressing room. That's how things are. Kent's pretty sure it's one of the older guys: the alternate captain or the fines master, assuming it's not Sunny and Patsy both. Or Vichy.

Kent usually doesn't think about it. Sure, he wants to know who he should trust less; but once he knows, he won't be able to act the same around them. So he leaves it alone.

Moss continues: "And I know part of this job means understanding players will avoid talking to me sometimes."
Kent straightens up slightly from his deep slump in his chair, and watches Moss shrug his shoulders.

"I understand the reason," the coach says. "Guys don't want to risk being scratched. Younger guys like Pete are especially competitive about their ice time. But I still have to understand what's happening, so I can plan for our upcoming games. If he's not comfortable talking to me, I have to rely on the rest of the guys for the information."

It's really obvious the coach is trying to manipulate him into talking, even if he's not pointing out that it's clear Robber only has a visible problem with Kent.

But he can't argue with Moss's reason for doing it. Kent was pissed at Vichy for keeping Tobin's shit from him for the same reasons.

Kent picks up the pen he was using to do the stats and starts playing with it as he sorts out his response.

"...Last season he and--Robber, he and Tobin were partying more than I liked," Kent says carefully. "Just dumb shit, being kids. It wasn't anything big, just a couple too many drinks at night, stuff that was messing up their sleep and how they played at practice."

Kent shrugs a shoulder. "They just needed to get their act together and take the season more seriously. When I talked to them about it last April, they said they would. And that was the end of it."

Kent accidentally snaps the pen's cheap plastic casing. He swears quietly and drops the pieces on the game data printout before wiping his inky fingers on the paper. "Sorry."

"I've got more," Moss replies. "We noticed Pete definitely improved around then."

"He listened," Kent says. "Sometimes he doesn't cut off early enough if we go out after a win, but he's taking the team seriously. Give him time to grow up a little more and it won't be a problem."

"All right," Moss says. He looks back at the legal pad.

"...I'll talk to him," Kent says. "We haven't really talked about this stuff since last season. I'll see what the issue is."

"All right," Moss repeats. "We've got a little time, but I'd like to get a handle on this before the Olympic break's over."

"Got it," Kent replies, starting to push out of his seat before pausing. "Was there anything else?"

Moss glances at the clock before dropping the pen pieces into the trash. "No. Head over to the PP meeting. I'll see you at practice tomorrow."

"Okay."

Kent goes through the special teams' meetings and his workout in the weight room and a shower before finally making himself stop putting it off. He catches up with Robber while they're changing into regular clothes and asks what's going on.

Robber flat-out lies to Kent's face that everything's fine with him, and Kent barely keeps from rolling his eyes.
Robber sticks to the claim even when Kent pushes, so he finally decides he's not going to get anywhere today. He'll try again tomorrow.

"Alright," Kent says, as they're heading down the hallway out of the clubhouse dressing room. Robber's hands are shoved in his pockets and his shoulders are slumped; he just makes a vague noise in the back of his throat. Kent exhales through his teeth. "But if something's a problem, say something already. I don't wanna be trying to fix shit after guys are back from Sochi. Playoffs are coming."

The second-year doesn't reply. Kent bites down another exhale and keeps striding down the hall, fishing in his pocket for his keys.

Robber falls behind him as they walk; and then he says, "It's shit what you did to Greg."

Kent turns around.

Robber's jaw is tight, and he doesn't say anything else. Kent says, "What are you talking about?"

"All that shit in October, with--you kept helping out Nino on his skid, so just--how could you be cool like that with him and act like Toby didn't fuckin' exist?!"

"Because Nino's on the roster and Tobin isn't," Kent replies. "My job's with the Aces."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Robinson demands, fists clenched at his sides. "How do you just fuckin'--what do you mean, your job?"

"What's your problem?"

"You, asshole! How can you just stop--" Robinson shakes his head hard. "Fuck, how can you be such a good guy to Nino and such a fucking dick to Toby at the same fuckin' time?! I get Nino, but Greg went through shit too and nobody's fuckin' been there for him!"

"My job's with the Aces," Kent repeats. "If you think there's a problem with how Tobin's been handled, you need to take it up with the front office or the Sovereigns' captain."

"Fuck you, Parson!" Robinson says angrily. "Not everybody's fucking Zimmermann, you asshole!"

Kent almost hits him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he replies. Kent forces his hands deep in his pockets as he moves closer. Robinson backs up. "If Tobin wanted anything he shouldn't've fucked up in the first place."

"Why're you so--!"

"Fuck you," Kent says flatly. "He's alive. He's fuckin' lucky he's still got a contract. If you got a problem how he's been handled, tell it to somebody in charge of him, 'cause it's not me."

"Goddammit--" Kent hears to the left.

And then Scrappy's shouldering his way between them, forcing Kent aside and pulling Robinson away from the wall he was backed against. Someone wraps their arms across Kent's chest and drags him farther away.

Kent wrenches hard against the grip to shake it off. Vichy lets go, but moves in front of Kent. Up
the hallway Scrappy's between them and Robinson, speaking lowly to his liney.

"He fucking--!" Robinson starts, and Scrappy tugs his head closer and keeps talking.

A couple moments later Scrappy lets go and points at the end of the hall. Robinson snarls out "Fuck!" but he turns and storms away.

He kicks the door open at the end of the hall. Someone in the connecting corridor makes a startled noise.

"Jesus Christ," Scrappy exhales, dragging his hands over his wet hair. When he turns to Vichy and Kent, Vichy shakes his head once and makes a sharp gesture before pointing at the door.

Scrappy doesn't argue. He picks up his t-shirt off the floor and heads out after Robinson, yanking the shirt on over his head as he hip-checks the door back open. Kent can hear him making some kind of apology to whoever Robinson nearly hit before it swings closed again.

"Fuck," Vichy breathes out, combing his fingers through his hair. "What the shit, Parser?"

"Fuck off," Kent snaps, and Vichy looks at him.

The other man finally breathes out slowly before rubbing a hand over his face. "God.

"Gimme your keys," he adds.

"What the fuck?" Kent replies.

"You done for the day?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So you're too pissed to drive," Vichy says. "I'll take you home."

"Fuck off, Ivanovich," Kent says sharply, wrenching his keys out of his pocket. "I can fuckin' take care of myself."

The keys fall to the floor, because he's still so angry he's shaking with it.

Kent snarls out another curse and kicks the keys against the opposite wall. Vich jolts when they bounce near his feet.

Kent thumps back against the wall and rips off his hat, dragging his hands over his hair as he tries to regain his goddamn cool already.

He squeezes his eyes shut tighter and clenches his jaw when the locker room door opens down the hall. A second later someone says, "What the--"


The backup goalie doesn't argue. He passes between them without saying anything else. Kent forces his hands down and braces them on his thighs, and tries to even out his breathing.

After Boxy's left the hall, Vichy leans down and picks up Kent's keys.

"You wouldn't let me drive like this if you were in my place," he says. "You try and tell me otherwise, you're a liar."
"Fine," Kent bites out, shoving away from the wall and grabbing his hat off the floor.

Vichy tries to talk him into going to a casino to chill out for a while, but the last fucking thing Kent wants is to have to be on point in public for a minute longer.

"I've got shit to do," he replies. "If you're hijacking my car, just take me home."

"It's great being friends with you sometimes, you know that?" Vichy says flatly, and Kent tells him to piss off. They don't talk after that.

After Vichy leaves him and the car at his apartment, Kent sets Netflix to stream some car show and gets to work on the hockey sticks he started making after the fourth game of his slump, when the only things he managed to do was steal passes to keep the Aces out of their zone and get one second assist.

After he breaks two sticks sanding them and cracks a third while bending the blade under hot water, Kent gives up.

He vacuums the living room and kitchen so Kitt won't get splinters in her paws, and then texts Vichy asking if he's still interested in going out. Kent stuffs the broken sticks down the trash chute in the hall so he won't have to see them again.

Sure. Vichy replies a little later, before adding I'll pick you up.

"Fuck off," Kent mutters; but he just sends K

They go to the local casino one neighborhood over, the place that doesn't have a sports book so the majority of people in it rarely recognize them. Kent plays blackjack for over an hour until he feels calmer and also finally remembers his rule about not counting cards in the locals.

He doesn't care about games that rely on luck instead of skill, so Kent cashes out and gets a double whiskey and goes to find Vichy.

He finds him playing roulette, which means Kent has to stand way back from the table to wait for him. He doesn't go near roulette tables ever since his second year with the Aces; during his rookie year a casino threatened to blacklist both him and a d-man for wheel clocking, even though Kent was just screwing around on a napkin because he was getting bored watching Showy lose. Kent started trying to learn how to do the calculations in his head for that casino's wheels after the scene-but then he was made captain, and he couldn't fuck around with stuff that would damage his and the Aces' brand like that anymore.

So Kent just stays at a table far enough away that no one can accuse him of being Vichy's observer and waits.

After Vichy cashes out, Kent spends the drive home mentally sorting out how much work he can do on the hockey sticks tonight and how early he can enter the Ice Center before practice tomorrow while still getting enough sleep; so he doesn't know what leads Vichy to pick one red light to say, "Have you thought about therapy?"

Kent looks over at him, eyes narrowed.

"Before you say anything, lemme remind you you're the one that's all over the military
partnership," Vichy says before he can speak. "And if you say one thing about therapy being bullshit I will never let you forget it. I'll tell Showy you dissed his acting outreach with the VA. Your life will be over."

"Asshole," Kent says, grudgingly impressed. "How long were you planning that one?"

"Since this afternoon."

When Kent doesn't reply, Vichy exhales slowly.

"I'm serious," he says, starting to drive again as the light turns green. "You--"

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit," Vichy says flatly. "You don't fucking ignore problems on the team, Parson. You haven't been yourself since October."

"The hell?" Kent replies, because aside from the shit with Robinson and the time he was on IR and this fucking slump he's been playing like he's supposed to and building points like he's expected and doing his goddamn job. "What do you know?"

A second later, Vichy wrenches the car two lanes over into the right, before taking a sharp turn into a parking lot. Kent swears and grabs the handlebar.

Vich breaks hard over the lines in a parking spot and wrenches up the break, somehow having managed not to screw up his goddamn Agera R or kill them both. Kent starts, "Jesus fuck--!"

Vich twists around to glare at him. "Say that to my face."

"The fuck?!!"

"Tell me to my fucking face we're not friends, Parson," Vich bites off. "Fucking do it."

"Fuck's sake--" Kent tries to drag a hand over his hair and winds up knocking his hat back instead. "That's not what I meant, Christ."

"Then the hell did you mean!?"

"Jesus," Kent snarls, before telling himself to get a grip.

They can't both be angry. People drive like New Yorkers on coke in this city, but the cops'll still pull them over if they nearly cause a wreck.

Kent breathes out slowly and readjusts his hat. "What's the problem, Vichy?"

"Oh, fuck you," Vich growls, before turning away. He braces his elbows on the steering wheel and starts rubbing his face.

"I can't fucking do this, Parson," he mutters, a stretch of silence later. "I don't know how. You gotta talk to someone that does."

"I'm good," Kent says evenly. "What's the problem you've been seeing?"

Vichy combs his fingers through his hair and then folds his hands behind his head. He slumps back in his seat, staring out the windshield.
"You don't let problems fester in this team," Vichy replies tiredly. "You don't ignore things that affect guys' performance. Not a single year I've known you has been your style. So do you really think this thing with Robber is normal for you?" he pushes. "If somebody asked around the club 'What's Parson's captain style,' do you seriously think anyone that's played more'n a couple games with you would say 'Ignore a newer, younger player who's struggling and leave him to figure shit out on his own'? Ignore *any* teammate who's struggling, no matter what you think about them?"

Kent tightens his jaw and looks out the window, and doesn't answer.

Vichy finally says, "You haven't been yourself, Kent. Not since October."

Kent tugs off his hat, catches himself in the middle of the tell of messing with his hair, and readjusts it brim-forward. He slouches back in the seat, folding his arms.

"I'll get it worked out with Robber," Kent says, because fine. Yes. He fucked up, he should've dealt with this at the start. He should've done his job. "I'll get it fixed."

"Kent--"

"Look, thanks for telling me this, okay?" Kent says. "I appreciate it. And I'll work on it."

Vichy tightens his fingers behind his head. "I'm not saying 'work on it' on your own."

"Do you think I'm going to talk to anybody about the stuff I told you so they can turn around and sell it to the tabloids?" Kent finally says, flatly. "I'm not going to talk to anyone, Vich. I don't have anything to say."

Vichy closes his eyes and clenches his jaw.

Kent curls his fingers in, then makes himself quit. He unfolds his arms and drops them onto his thighs, waiting for the next argument.

But Vichy finally just breathes out slowly.

He does it again a couple moments later, before swallowing hard. And then he opens his eyes and drops his arms and unlocks the parking break.

"All right, Parser," Vichy says. "I got it."

"Okay," Kent replies.

After Vichy drops him off, Kent eats dinner and streams more background noise TV and works on his sticks and tries to stop Kitt from sprawling across the finished ones. But anytime he puts her on one of her beds or up in the cat tree, she just jumps back off and grooms and then saunters over to the pile to flop across it again, looking right at him.

"You are so weird," Kent finally surrenders. "Whatever."

Kitt stretches out more before rolling over and kicking one of the sticks off the pile. Kent shakes his head and focuses on sanding down the blade of the last one.

He goes to bed at the time he needs to for a good night's rest. He sleeps poorly.
Kent shows up at the Ice Center several hours before practice with a bucket of pucks and his wooden hockey sticks in a spare duffel. The Ice Center’s online schedule said the south rink wasn’t booked until 7 a.m., so Kent sets up a net there and runs himself through drills and shots, methodically working his way through the sticks as they break.

When the second-to-last one snaps on a slap shot, Kent tosses the pieces down the ice toward the rest of the pile. He does one hard skate across the rink, and finally notices how quiet it is. The people in the north rink are gone. The place is probably opening soon. He’ll look at a clock in a minute.

Kent runs through a couple spins and twists, dodging the broken sticks littering the ice, and tightens his jaw when his ankle tingles slightly. He hears the short three-part whistle summoning his line back to the bench and turns automatically for it.

Coach Moss is watching him from the empty bench, and Kent finally recognizes the sound should’ve been weird. He breaks to a hard stop.

He gets himself together a second later. "Hey," Kent manages, bracing his hands on his thighs. "'Sup?"

"Morning," Moss says, taking a drink from his thermos before holding out the last wooden stick Kent had propped in the bench. Kent starts across the ice. "How long've you been here?"

"Uh, little while," he answers, taking the stick. "Wanted to do some work before practice."

Talking’s making him realize how winded he is. It’s definitely later than he thought.

It's definitely weird that Moss used their line whistle instead of just calling to him. Unless Kent didn't hear it. "--Were you here long?"

Moss looks at his watch. "About four minutes."

Kent braces the stick on the ice and licks his chapped lips. "Sorry," he replies. "I was concentrating."

"Ah," Moss says, taking another drink of coffee. "How'd you get in?"

Kent shrugs and nods at the north rink. "Came in when they opened for private lessons."

Technically he came in with the code he got from a former employee, back when some of the guys tried to set him up with her during the season her sister was an ice girl. Kent took her out for dinner and a show after work one night to make them lay off, but she left something behind and told him her entry code while she was punching in to retrieve it.

Kent tried it once one summer morning when he was waiting on the Ice Center's late opening staff. He didn't expect it to work, since she'd married and moved out of Vegas; turned out it was still active.

But it’s not like he hides it whenever he's here. If the Ice Center's management doesn't keep better track of their internal records, and the employees assume it's fine for him to be there, Kent might as well use the advantage. At least until the Aces finally get their own practice rink and they can stop having to use public facilities.

"Ah," Moss says again. He nods at the stick Kent's leaning on. "Is that wood?"
"Yeah."

"Did you make it?"

Kent laughs slightly. "That obvious?"

"Haven't seen wood sticks in years," Moss replies. "And I don't think I've ever seen professionally-made ones bound with duct tape."

Kent pulls off one of his gloves and scratches the back of his neck. "Cheaper," he says. "And the grip's good."

"How'd you learn to make them?"

Kent's not sure why they're doing this interrogation, but it's not like he really wants to get to what Moss probably wants to talk to him about. "My aunt dated a lacrosse guy when I was a kid, and he was friends with a guy in the Dragons," he answers. "Back when they were in Richelieu and Iberville?"

"Ligue Nord-Américaine de Hockey?" Moss confirms; and that's the accent of a guy that can speak French well. Kent makes a note.

"Yeah," he agrees. "He showed me how to make them." Kent shrugs over at the broken sticks. "They don't last long, but lumber's cheaper. Helped cut costs 'til I hit peewee majors."

"Hm," Moss says with a nod. "Yeah, that'd be handy. Who was it?"

Kent shifts on the ice as his ankle tingles again. "Dunno," he admits. "I only really hung out with him once, and I was concentrating on the lathing. We left his game early, and I didn't remember his number."

Kent exhales and tries not to tense his jaw. He doesn't like forgetting people he owes. "Aunt Jenna didn't remember the guy she was dating that knew him, so I kinda hit a dead end."

Coach Moss blinks at that; but all he asks is, "Left the game early?"

Goddammit. Of all the--why'd Kent mention that? He knows better.

He breathes out and shifts on his skates again. "Yeah, uh. My mom was covering someone on third shift at Franklin, so my dad ended up taking me. He was raised in the Friends, so--" Moss furrows his brow at that, and Kent clarifies. "Quakers."

"Ah," Moss says.

"Yeah. So." Kent shrugs. "You know that league's rep. Wasn't his thing."

Moss nods. "Were you planning to stay on the ice much longer?"

"Not really," Kent replies, glad for the subject change. "I was gonna take a couple more shots and head to the clubhouse for breakfast."

"Good," Moss says. "Make sure you give yourself a rest before practice. What's wrong with your ankle?"

Goddammit. Kent pulls his glove back on and shifts the stick to his other hand. "Nothing. Not really. It kinda...I feel it a little more than usual sometimes, but it doesn't hurt or anything."
"Have Elliot take a look at it," Moss replies. "Don't make the mistake of being one of those guys who exacerbates an injury because they think they need to be better and play through it, Parse. You've got a long career ahead of you."

He's already twenty-three, and everybody knows players' peak year is twenty-four; but Kent manages to stop himself before he says anything about that.

"Okay," he replies instead.

"Alright," Moss says. "Try and get back here early after breakfast. I want to talk to you before practice."

There it is. Kent figured the shit between him and Robber yesterday reached the front office, one way or another.

"Okay," he repeats.

"I'll see you then," Moss tells him, before making his way out of the bench. Kent skates back toward the net.

He leaves soon after that. Kent eats breakfast mechanically at the clubhouse, shrugs it off when his alternate captain asks if he's sick, and heads back to the Ice Center. Coach Moss tells him to come in when Kent knocks on the office door; when he does, both the head and the assistant coach are in the room.

The office the Ice Center rents to them isn't that big. Kent settles into the remaining free chair across Moss's desk and says, "Hey."

Moss nods at him once. Coach Kurlansky raised a hand when he came in, but he doesn't look up from between the sheets on his desk and the laptop he's typing on. Moss says, "I'm guessing you know what this is about."

Kent slouches deeper into his chair. "Robinson, yeah?"

When Moss nods, Kent exhales. "I know I fucked up yesterday. I'm sorry. I'll take care of--"

"No," Moss says. "I'm sorry I asked that of you."

Kent tightens his fingers on the arms of his chair. "Robinson, yeah?"

When Moss nods, Kent exhales. "I know I fucked up yesterday. I'm sorry. I'll take care of--"

"No," Moss says. "I'm sorry I asked that of you."

Kent blinks and looks at him.

The room is quiet except for Kurlansky's typing. Moss says, "I shouldn't have expected that from you."

Kent tightens his fingers on the arms of his chair. "I know it's my job to--"

"Kent," Moss interrupts, "if I had a friend who almost fatally overdosed and then I had to deal with a repeat of the situation with another teammate, I'd be angry and upset about it too."

Kent tenses up so much that his chair scrapes on the linoleum as it slides back.

"My job is to do whatever it takes to win games," the coach says. "Part of which includes not making unreasonable requests of players. I should have handled that situation differently, instead of putting it on you. I'm sorry I asked that of you."
At the other desk, Coach Kurlansky is staring at one of the data sheets silently; but then he starts typing again.

A few heartbeats later, Kent forces himself to exhale and relax. He unclenches his fingers from the chair's arms.

"It's okay," he finally says. Kent rubs one of his palms where the plastic of the chair arm cut into it. "I shouldn't've gotten pissed at him. It wouldn't've ended up that big a problem if I'd just kept my cool."

"You normally do," the coach replies. "You have a strong sense of responsibility as a captain, Kent. Sometimes it's hard to remember you're only twenty-three. That's why this stood out."

Kent switches hands and rubs his other palm. Coach Kurlansky is still typing at the other desk.

Moss continues, "The other reason I asked you to come here is, I want to confirm: can you keep working with Pete in the interim while this is worked out?"

Kent blinks and looks up at him.

"Yeah," he replies. Jesus, how fucking unprofessional does the front office think he is now? Why didn't he just fucking walk away from Robinson yesterday? How much is this going to wreck his reputation within the league?

Coach Moss considers him for a long moment before folding his hands on the desk.

"Stop me if I'm being an asshole," he says, "but you and Jeff don't get along, correct?"

Kent shifts in the chair. "Scrappy's a good guy," he replies. "He's good to have on the ice, and the fans love him. He's a valuable part of the Aces."

"I'm not a reporter, Kent," Moss says dryly. Kent looks over at the bulletin board covered in thumb-tacked papers hanging on the back wall.

"I don't expect teammates to always get along with each other," the coach says. "Everybody's always going to get along better with some guys than they do with others, because they're all different people. Nobody with sense expects perfect harmony in a locker room. I just expect guys not to let their differences carry out into the game."

Kent shifts in the chair again and drops his hands to his thighs. "I don't have any problems with Jeff."

"Mm," Moss agrees. "There's none visible on the ice. It takes a lot of time in the locker room to notice. Doesn't matter if you're not the kind of guys who wouldn't hang out outside of the club. You're both professionals, and I trust you both because you both behave like it. So," the coach says, "even though the circumstances are different, can you continue to work with Pete as well?"

"Yes," Kent says, because that's his job. He has to do it, so he will.

"Okay," the coach says. He looks at his watch. "Go ahead and get changed for practice. I told Pete I wanted to speak to him too; tell him to come in if you see him."

"Will do," Kent says, pushing out of his chair.
Coach Moss just nods at him, so Kent says goodbye and leaves.

The outside hall is empty. Kent heads for the Ice Center's locker area to get changed.

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After Parse shuts the door behind him, the assistant coach stops typing and pinches the bridge of his nose with a long exhale.

The head coach leans back heavily in his chair. "That went as well as I could've hoped. Thanks, Paul," he adds.

Paul drops his hand. "I didn't believe you about the typing."

"He's aware he has issues with emotional responses," the head coach replies. "Give him cues a situation is just a business discussion and he'll follow them." Aaron tilts his chair back farther and stares at the ceiling. "Though that was a hunch."

Paul snorts under his breath and then starts deleting the gibberish that he'd begun typing when he couldn't concentrate enough to write up the actual report. "Good hunch."

"He's been passing for a long time," the head coach says.

Paul looks over with a raised eyebrow.

Aaron folds his hands behind his head, still staring half-focused at the ceiling; but when he continues he doesn't reference the thing about Parse's sexuality that everyone in the club avoids talking about because they're all hoping they're wrong and they won't have to deal with the PR. "It bothered me that he works like a call-up trying to stay on the roster, but imposter syndrome would explain it."

Paul tilts around in his seat. "That bothers you?" he says, since Aaron already updated him on Parse's apparent breaking and entering for personal practice that morning and his ensuing conversation with the kid.

"A lot of things about him bother me," the head coach replies; and before Paul has time to think Son of a bitch, not again the man continues: "Like why didn't he take the combine?"

Paul turns his chair around fully, frowning. "What?"

"He and Zimmermann both skipped it," Aaron answers. "Why? Everything I've heard about Zimmermann, that was way more arrogant than anyone who knew him expected."

"There's no way he could've taken it," Paul points out. "If he was that drugged up by then, it would've been caught immediately."

"So why didn't Parson take it either?" Aaron replies. "Was he that much more of a brat as a rookie than he is now?"

"... No," Paul answers after a few moments. He leans back in his chair as he tries to remember Parse's rookie year. "He was a pretty normal kid. I guess more laid-back before he became captain, but we never had bad interviews or off-ice shit to deal with."

"He's too savvy to pull stunts like that," Aaron agrees. "And if he was already building a brand in Juniors, he's more than smart enough to know refusing to take the combine would damage it. So
why'd he do that?"

Paul exhales hard and sinks deeper into his chair.

"Because he was an over-confident teenager who already knew he was going to be first or second pick," he shrugs, since that's what the GMs eventually decided. It didn't really mesh up with the kid when they met him in person, but.... "Or some secret competition with Zimmermann, since he wasn't taking it. Who knows?"

"Or he was smart enough to know one prospect acting out of character will attract attention, but two closely-ranked prospects refusing the combine would get written off as personal nonsense nobody managed to talk them out of," the head coach says quietly.

Paul frowns again. "Why would--"

If he already knew about the drug abuse, he realizes.

If he did it to cover for Zimmermann.

The assistant coach slumps forward, bracing his elbows on his thighs and covering his face with his hands. "Shiiiiiiiiiiit."

They'd expected problems with Parse. Once the Aces looked likely to get 2009's first pick, the GMs and the owners had gone back and forth for weeks, reviewing the stats and the gossip and the scouting reports on Zimmermann and Parson and Tavares, trying to make a decision. And after Zimmermann flamed out and it came down to Parson and Tavares, the club debated even more.

They finally went with Parson, based on goal-scoring and indications of playmaking ability and a media presence that could withstand Vegas's pace and turnover. His up-front attitude about coming from a military family was a bonus, something PR and the minority owner figured could be used to improve connections with Nellis base and the air force community in general.

But they'd all heard the rumors and seen the pictures. They expected problems. They prepared. The PR office looked like a war zone by the end of June, with whiteboards full of potential disasters--from DUIs to drug use to coded language that Paul was half-certain stood in for possible sex crimes--and the potential spins and pre-emptive solutions for them. Paul was pretty sure the head of PR slept under her desk at least once the week before the draft.

And then they got the actual kid.

Parse had been cagey through the prospect camp and training camp and preseason: a freshly-nineteen-year-old who was polite and personable and had even better media and fan presence than they'd hoped; a rookie who smiled and shrugged off his teammates' chirping and never seemed to get annoyed at anything except losses and bad passing, but who always gave off an undercurrent of wariness if you talked with him for long or about anything personal. He wasn't open with anyone.

But Paul eventually wrote that off as the shit Parse had clearly gone through over the summer, having to watch Zimmermann's implosion and then deal with the resulting media scrutiny. Everyone had heard the rumors about them in Juniors. Everyone saw the pictures.

Parse wasn't open with the office or the staff or his teammates, but he listened. He took notes when the trainers talked about diet and alcohol moderation. He showed up at practices rested and sober and focused. He went to parties but didn't throw them, clubbed but kept his priorities straight. He didn't cause problems off-ice. Most important, he produced.
When the GM decided in 2010 that Reboul was going to continue to regress and it'd be better to let his contract expire and assign the captaincy to Parse, the kid just doubled down and became even more laser-focused on the team and reaching the next level he could play at. Occasionally, especially at the end of the season and during playoffs, to the exclusion of having anything resembling a personal life outside of hockey.

Maybe it was Parse finally getting away from Zimmermann's bad influence; or maybe that overdose scared him straight so the kid was already committed to staying clean when he arrived in Vegas. Whatever it was, sometimes Paul couldn't remember why the hell they'd ever thought Parse would create problems for the club, or how they could've possibly considered picking Zimmermann over him.

But then they learn that some of the guys had to separate Parse from a teammate he was physically intimidating during a yelling match that had clearly been months coming, and Paul remembers that there's still baggage that comes with having Parse on the Aces.

Like the fact that anything even tangentially related to the kid's Juniors career, or to goddamn Jack Zimmermann, can and usually does turn into a landmine.

The head coach says, "We need to talk to George and Chris."

Paul rubs his face and then lifts his head at the mention of the GMs.

Aaron's still tilted back in his chair, staring across his desk at the door now. "I don't think Tobin's salvageable here. It's the same as the Zimmermann situation. We won't get enough to offset the damage." He hisses out a breath. "Dammit."

Aaron was the one pushing the GM to give Tobin a chance to redeem himself in the feeder team and to revisit him in a couple seasons, so Paul just says, "All right. We've got the meeting this afternoon."

If Parse is completely incapable of working with drug users after his experience with Zimmermann, that's going to become a problem with Sunny sooner or later; but Paul doesn't add that out loud. He just turns to his laptop again.

Aaron breathes out through his teeth again behind him.

"Could've gone worse," Paul reminds, and then there's a knock on the door.

Aaron drops his chair to the ground and straightens up. "Pete?"

Robber pushes the door open. "Yeah."

Aaron nods at the chair across from his desk. "Come in."

***

Kent catches up to Robber after practice and tells him sorry for being a dick the other day. Robber says the same.

Things stay tense between them at first. But Kent makes himself do his job and keep his personal feelings out of the dressing room; and then a four-game win streak boosts the team enough that the other crap gets shrugged off.

Eventually things go back to pre-October normal, or at least to close enough.
Kent keeps the Aces' trainer updated on his ankle whenever it bugs him again. It's never enough to feel like a real problem; but a couple months after he's been back, his knee starts to bother him too. Kent talks to both his physical therapist and the Aces' trainer.

Both of them direct him to the closest ART chiropractor in the area, though it's the trainer who's more urgent about it. Elliot all but calls to make the appointment for him.

"So it's okay?" Kent asks. "Going outside the club?"

Elliot pauses from flipping through his Rolodex and gives him a flat look. "I don't give a shit about that, Parse. I can't specialize in everything. If you're actually saying it hurts, I want you there the earliest they can get you in."

Kent slumps back into his chair. "I tell you if something's wrong," he argues. "I don't want surgeries."

"You tell me when you bother to notice something's wrong," Elliot replies. "You've either got one of the highest pain thresholds I've seen or you're a goddamn masochist."

Kent snorts quietly. "Okay, okay."

"Was this the problem?" Elliot pushes. "You thought we'd get pissed if you went outside the club to get looked at?"

Kent lifts a shoulder. "You don't want injury specifics known."

"That's why you go to a guy that keeps his mouth shut," Elliot replies. "Was that why you weren't talking about it?"

Kent finally just shrugs slowly and scratches the back of his neck. "It wasn't bothering me that much."

"Don't do that any more," the trainer tells him. "Being in good physical condition needs to be one of your top priorities. We're going to look at what's best for your long-term career, not the next coming weeks."

Kent tightens his jaw briefly, but just makes himself nod.

Elliot keeps looking at him for a couple moments.

"Don't buy into that crap that twenty-four's the peak year," he says, and Kent blinks.

"Data says it's twenty-seven," the trainer tells him. "And that doesn't account for the guys who keep on improving, because they make experience and brains and skill work for them even if they start slowing down or getting winded sooner."

Elliot shakes his head. "Swear to God, I can't count how many twenty-three-year-olds I've seen freak out over that bullshit stat. You aren't peaking, Parse. You aren't even close yet."

Kent slowly, very very slowly, finally starts to let himself relax.

"...Okay," he says at last.

Elliot returns to the Rolodex and pulls out a card. "Make sure to get copies of your records for me."
Kent gets out his phone to take down the information. "Okay."

* 

After the Aces win their away game against the Kings, all of them but Patsy go to a sports bar by the hotel to celebrate. Kent catches up as soon as the doctor finishes retouching the stitches he got during the second intermission, after Brown finally slashed him in the face when Kent made yet another taunt about him failing the U.S. in Sochi.

Mitts keeps enabling Robber and Scrappy as they complain to the staff because the place doesn't have the NHL network. Kent eventually hauls them away from the bar and tells them to stop harassing servers over something that's management's fault. "Would you bitch to the goalies if the front office replaced half of us with Kings?"

"Fuckin' treason, Parson!" Scrappy retorts, and Robber says, "I dunno what the hell you're saying."

"That's because you're drunk," Kent replies. He shoves them toward the team's booths. "Quit giving us a bad name."

"I fuckin' ain't," Robber snaps. "I could drink your lightweight ass under the table."

Kent raises an eyebrow. "You wanna go?"

"No," Scrappy interjects. He wraps an arm around Robinson's neck and starts half-hauling him away, telling the second-year: "He cheats. He cuts drinks."

"Pussy," Robinson mutters; but he leaves. Kent watches them head back to the booth, eyes narrowed, until Mitts thumps him on the shoulder with the back of a hand.

"Don't," his liney says. "He really doesn't drink that much. He doesn't come into practice with hangovers anymore."

"He doesn't come in with hangovers much," Kent says shortly. "He'd earn more ice time if he'd fuckin' cut back already. Quit encouraging them."

"He's not the one who fucked up, Parse," Mitts says, quieter than normal. Kent looks over; but Mitts heads back to the booths.

Kent breathes out and turns back to the bar. "Sorry 'bout that," he tells the nearest bartender.

"No, sorry we don't have that channel," she answers.

Kent orders a couple plates of fajitas for their tables too, and leaves the change while the staff switches the channel on the TV nearest them. Kent's still waiting for the food to arrive and watching Mitts from the corner of his eye and arguing with Vichy over who has to buy the next round when he hears the program shift to college sports.

"Who cares!" Robber yells at it. "Fuck colleges, talk about how we beat the Kings' asses!"
Showy elbows him hard in the ribs. "I played for Michigan, asshat."

"You're an exception," Robber tells the d-man. "Who says 'asshat' anymore?" and on the screen Kent hears Zimmermann's name.

He looks over and tries to tune out the arguing and hears "--haven't seen moves from him like this since he was the #1 NHL draft prospect."

Kent stills.

The Sports Central newscasters go into an interview, talking about a "big picture." But it's really just the same garbage they've been spouting since 2009. Kent listens, tightening his jaw when the second reporter claims again that Jack was set up to the first overall draft pick. He gets abruptly twice as pissed that the man's insulting Bob's integrity.

It was an endless fucking contest between them for a reason. Jack didn't need his dad to get projected for first pick. Kent wasn't a sure fucking bet for second. They both worked their asses off because Tavares was right there breathing down their necks if they slipped up.

"Teams aren't gonna be scrambling for this kid. Because if I'm a GM, I don't want Bob Zimmermann Lite," the asshole adds, and Kent thinks If you could make it as a GM you wouldn't be a reporter you pathetic fuck.

The thing every single one of these douchebags never gets is Zimms played the way he did in Juniors stoned on meds half the time and crippling terrified the rest of it--so why the fuck do they think he's going to do worse now that he's clean?

All a club has to do is pair him with a winger who's good at assists and add a linemate who knows how to create chaos. Send him out with defensemen that have his back against rats and can clear a line for his shot. More importantly, get him integrated with a team that's able to keep functioning regardless of how lousy he is at normal human interaction and how dickish he gets in the preseason. Don't burden him with the captaincy until he's settled. Make sure he's got someone who's good with people for all the off-ice work and to pick up the slack when he gets overwhelmed. Don't make him do excessive publicity solo. Monitor the clickbait reporters in his interviews. It's fucking simple.

Any GM with the brains for managing and fostering talent is going do whatever it takes to rig their salary caps and snag him. And then it'll be thirty-three teams that're fucked and one that finally makes the goddamn media shut up about Jack Zimmermann's supposed failures.

Someone kicks his foot hard under the table. "Parser."

Kent pulls his legs in. "What."

"You wanna let go of that?" Vichy asks.

Kent looks down at his beer and then at his fist, white-knuckled around the handle.

He breathes out slowly and forces his fingers to uncurl. They still feel numb.

Most of the guys are watching him. Robber's frowning, narrow-eyed. Vichy starts to say, "Parser--"

And then the food finally arrives.
Kent doesn't have it in him to salvage the evening. He leaves his mostly-full beer on the table, tells the guys again not to give the Aces a bad name while they're in their rivals' hometown, and walks back to the hotel.

He laps the blocks around it several times until it's clear the time alone in his head is just letting him think more and making him angrier. Kent gives up and heads back after that.

He checks the leading scores again once he's in his room, and recalculates what he needs to make it to the top of the goal and points lists. He grits his teeth and swears to himself and pops his ankle and thinks about all that time he wasted, sitting out November and December. Locked out in Switzerland. Losing playoffs.

He turns off his phone, and pretends to be asleep when someone knocks on his door half an hour later.

* 

It takes a few days, but eventually Kent reviews the footage he can find of Samwell's game.

It's not like a hat trick is that damn unbelievable, not for Jack. If he hasn't been making plays like that in the last couple years with Samwell, then they weren't using him right. So what's changed?

The kid who gives Jack the most passes and assists doesn't always focus in face-offs--he'll take his attention away from the puck and put it on d-men before the puck drops. Weird no one's taken more advantage of that.

Or not; it's ECAC. Apparently a forward can get away with that kind of overt weakness there.

He's fast, though.

Good puck control. Focused on sending the assists. Passes up goal shot openings, mainly sticks to assists. Doesn't seem to watch the ice enough to be a playmaker. Doesn't use his speed to full advantage. Hell of a spinarama but doesn't deke out opponents the way he should. That's the best Samwell can put on their first line?

Wasted talent, Kent thinks, about the same time another part of him goes Are you seriously getting jealous of a college kid?

Kent snorts humorlessly and closes out of the video.

Use Jack right and he's gonna kill it on the ice. It's so fucking simple. It's like people want to be blind.

* 

At the end of the regular season Kent comes in second for points, which feels even worse than his tie for third in assists. He tries not to think about why.

The Aces scrape into the conference playoffs as the wildcard. They take seven games to push out the Kings in round one and then lose to the Aeros in round two.

After they return to the dressing room, Chazzer chucks his helmet into his stall hard enough that Kent hears the visor creak. He makes an unconscious note to tell the equipment manager.
Kent braces his hands hard on the edges of his own stall, trying to even out his breathing and stop shaking. Behind him, the dressing room's the ugly quiet of a playoff loss. Chazzer's still ripping off his padding and throwing it into the stall, but at least he's not yelling at anyone. Kent got that much through to him.

He thinks about how much work it's been getting the team cohesive this season, about how much they had to pull through, how they made it here despite the offseason upheaval and the weird schedule and Tobin's bullshit and Kent's six-week absence and the target the Schooners had on them. They did really, really good for the circumstances. They put in their challenge for the Cup. Get a grip, fix this now.

He thinks *One more season. One more season and then he's--*

Kent shakes his head hard and shoves the thought away. *Get a goddamn grip.*

"**Aeros,**" he snarls, straightening up and pushing his hair out of his face.

"Shoulda cut Farkas off at the knees when I had the chance," Scrappy mutters.

"Clean hockey," Kent answers in reflex, and Scrappy snorts mirthlessly.

"Be believable from anyone but you," he retorts.

"There's no penalty for mind-fucking opponents," Kent replies. "There is for fighting."

"Fuck you, Parse," Scrappy mutters; but then he just exhales and slumps against the back of his stall.

Kent lets it go too. He watches the team's oldest defensemen in the corner of his eye as Patsy's hands stay clenched tight in the towel he's rubbing his face with.

Kent does what he can to level out the energy before he has to shower and do the interviews and take on the rest of the postgame franchise face duties. He stays on point and does his job.

When he finally gets home, he doesn't bother turning on any lights. Kent nearly trips over the cat on his way in, makes his way to the bedroom, and collapses on top of the bed. He kicks off his shoes and pulls the blanket over himself and goes to sleep.

He wakes up the next morning with his mouth sour, still feeling tired. Kitt's curled up beside him, which is new.

Kent thinks how this is what his life's come to: another playoff loss, another wasted short season, pitied by a fucking stray. He can't figure out if he's angry or sad.

One season left.

*  

At the final everybody-still-in-town dinner before the start of offseason, Kent gets into an argument with one of the defensemen about the value of popcorn blockbusters versus pretentious college-student-favored art house films that Showy almost turns into a fistfight before his partner and Kent's lineys and the backup goalie intercede.

"Lucky this is private room," Sunny says flatly, his arms hooked under Showy's armpits as he
drags his partner back two more steps. "Dumbasses."

"That motherfucker started it!" Showy snarls, and Sunny asks if he's fourteen.

"Hitchcock wrote blockbusters," Kent replies, irritated. He tries to shrug off Mitts' arms around his shoulders, but Mitts just leans more weight on him and cackles harder into his back. "It doesn't matter how smart you are if you aren't likable. Nobody needs a 'criterion collection' for Die Hard."

"Did you seriously just--!?"

Mitts is laughing so hard Kent can break out of his hold now, but Chazzer and Scrappy have come over and also gotten between them. Vichy keeps a hand pressed hard to Kent's chest, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Parser, you seriously gotta do something about this hatred of media."

"This is movies."

"Holy fuck," Mitts gasps between snickers. "Showy, don't kill him, he's not winding you up on purpose."

"The fuck he's not, you think I don't know this motherfucker?!! Fuck your college issues Parson, don't you pull this shit on--"

"Short for real, I swear! I swear," Mitts says, palms up, still wheezing for breath as he sits on a table. "His perfect captain persona implodes after playoffs. You shoulda heard him last year at the retirement party before Waller arrived. Or fuck, how he talked after the office finally fuckin' fired Lewis."

Showy scowls at Kent in disbelief. Vichy stares at Mitts. "What."

"For real!"

Vichy demands, "How fucking long've you known this?"

"Still standing here," Kent points out, and Vichy tells him to shut it.

"Like I was gonna tell you, this is awesome," Mitts retorts. "You'd be all responsible and shit about it."

"Seriously, still here."

"God." Vichy rubs his face with a palm. "Showy, just. Go get another beer and shake it off. Parser, I'm fucking begging you, get ther--do something before you snap in an interview and murder Yerby."

"Murder's stupid," Kent replies. "I just have to get him to say something racist or worse live."

"Jesus Christ Almighty," Chazzer mumbles. Scrappy stares at him.

"Probably not," the backup goalie says. "McGuire's still working after that 'right off the reservation' comment."

"That was a decade ago," Kent replies. "Social media'd slaughter him now."

"Yeah, but if you're tricking him into saying it? Not gonna fly."

"How bad at this do you think I am, Boxy?" Kent asks. "He'd only say something like that if he
actually thinks it, that's not my problem."

On the table Mitts is doubled over, dying laughing. Vichy presses both his hands to his face.

"Oh my God," he moans. "Someone go fuckin' make sure the doors are shut and keep the staff away from him. Smith, I'm gonna kill you."

Boxy leaves for the doors. Sunny forcibly turns Showy around and points at the other end of the room. "Beer."

Showy jerks his other shoulder loose and grunts something in heavily-accented Icelandic. Sunny snorts and shoves him in the back toward the bar.

Later, after they've made him and Showy publicly make up for the rookies' sake, Kent elbows Vichy in the ribs on his good side. Vichy side-eyes him dubiously.

"What," he replies. "You finally done, Parser?"

"No," Kent replies, before tapping his unbroken nose. "Pay up."

"--Are you in league with the devil," Vichy mutters. "You better take a check."

"No personal checks accepted," Kent smirks. "Cash only. Hit up an ATM."

"Dick."

"Serves you right for betting against me."

"Dick."
During the offseason, Kent's agent tells him he got that opening in a Minnesota conditioning camp.

It's the same organization Kent's chiropractor mentioned a few weeks ago, when he was telling Kent about auxiliary neurofeedback therapy during the Aces' brutal playoff run, since he knows Kent won't take prescription painkillers. It's also a camp that's starting to pull a better rep than Kent's usual one in Ottawa.

Kent double-checks with the club's trainer about it. Elliot tells him, "For Christ's sake, Parse, you aren't bucking the chain of command going to a goddamn training camp."

Kent snorts away from his phone and then relaxes back against his sofa. Kitt smacks him in the thigh with her tail when the movement jostles her position curled up in the center of it. "Okay."

"Injuries don't stay secret in the league as long as anybody wants," Elliot adds. "The season's over, stop worrying. Besides, I've heard good things about Jay. If you need to talk to him about your knee or ankle to customize the training, just do it."

Kent starts scritching Kitt behind her ears, only to have the cat thump him with her tail again but then start purring. Kent mouths *Mixed messages* at her and tells Elliot, "Okay."

* 

During the offseason, the Aces' oldest defenseman gets traded for a draft pick.

Kent figured it was coming. They all did: Patsy was getting exhausted longer after games, wrung out from constantly swapping partners in the fifth position and balancing the new d-men's weaknesses while they got experience. His stay-at-home defense style doesn't really fit into the current coach's system, and there's a younger defensemen almost ready to take that role. He was the oldest guy on the team.

"Really wanted to do another stadium game with you fuckers," Patsy says, when Kent drops by his house to see if he wants help packing the afternoon that the news is announced. Patsy's a good friend of Waller, the retired veteran d-man Kent boarded with during his first year; and since Waller's currently in Europe doing player development with some of the Aces' prospects and can't check in on Patsy himself, Kent figures it's the least he should offer. "Or a Winter Classic."

"Maybe if the lockout hadn't fucked things up," Kent commiserates.

"Maybe." Patsy exhales slowly and then drains his beer.

When he sets the can down on the kitchen counter, he looks around the half-boxed-up kitchen silently for a few moments before smiling faintly.

"Raised the Cup, though," Patsy says quietly, nodding. "Never losing that."

It occurs Kent that for all he keeps thinking about the next win and all the losses he's running up against chasing it, the fact that there's a Stanley Cup banner hanging in the Aces' arena is huge.

The year on it isn't that far back. It's *there*. There's more space to be filled beside it--but it's *there*.

"Yeah," he agrees. Kent pulls his mostly-full can out of the cabinet he's emptying and tilts it toward
Patsy with a smile. "We killed it together. Thanks for everything, Pats."

Patsy rubs his wrist over his forehead and eyes for a moment, and then obnoxiously ruffles Kent's hair before abruptly pulling him into a sideways hug. Kent startles and spills beer over his hand and reflexively grabs a shelf to keep from stumbling off his footstool. "You too, Parse."

Kent wonders how many beers Patsy had before he arrived. After another second, he says, "Makin' it weird, old man."

Patsy chokes on a snort and shoves him away. "You goddamn little shit," Patsy laughs, as Kent pushes his can back into the cabinet before he ends up getting it dumped over his shirt. "Now you call me that?"

"Now you can't kill me in practice for it," Kent grins. Patsy laughs and elbows him.

* *

Between trades and free agency, by the end of July the Las Vegas Aces have bled even more veteran players.

Kent makes a mental note that there's probably going to be even more growing pains in the coming season.

The Aces have a few solid combos: Kent and his lineys; Sunny and Showy's veteran defense pairing; Scrappy, Robber, and Kirbs on the energy line; the first power play unit. But Coach Moss was line blending everyone more toward the end of last season, trying to match up guys with chemistry out of the roster and call-ups the GM gave him.

And now, fewer vets means there's fewer level-headed older guys on the team to do mentoring.

Which means Kent keeps having to lead a bunch of post-adolescents and mid-to-late twenty-year-olds with increasingly minimal backup.

On a team known primarily for a physical style of play—one that's only started to be less illegal in the last couple years, once the league decided to get serious about suspending players. In a club where Kent's low penalty minutes stand out because Vegas still mostly drafts and signs players who fit that play style, even as the current head coach is pushing speed and offense.

Which is all about as easy as it sounds.

During the offseason, the Aces' AHL affiliate pick up a defenseman from the Schooners' feeder team. The guy they trade for him is Tobin.

Which isn't so much an alarm bell as a defcon siren.

Seattle and Vegas's GMs never should have been willing to trade again, after the way they were both burned in an attempted signing last year. And no organization should be willing to take on a player who publicly fucked up with an illegal drug overdose.

Not unless the trade's letting them offload another player just as bad or worse.

Except if that's the case, Kent ability to read people is shot. The defenseman the Aces've acquired is the one Kent made a mental note to keep an eye on last season: Lee, one of the few Schooners' players who consistently hit clean during the game he played against the Aces.
Kent reviews the couple NHL games the Schooners called Lee up for, and watches some of his AHL games. When he can't see any significant issues with Lee's play, Kent concludes it must be off-ice shit instead.

Because that's really what the club needs again.

Kent calls his center and the player development guy who used to be the Aces' first alternate captain out for drinks at Sergei's restaurant to ask just who in the front office is out of their goddamn mind.

He doesn't mention to either of them that the other one is coming, because he's not sure if they'll cancel if they know. Kent doesn't know how their whole we-know-things-about-the-front-office-and/or-silent-investors-Parson's-not-allowed-to-know thing works, whether Vichy and Waller even know about the same things, or if they cover separate areas, or what.

But Kent hasn't forgotten how Vichy was a lot more willing to talk to him about things the former alternate would shut down discussion of completely.

When Waller arrives in Sergei's to find Kent and Vichy already at one of the tables against the back wall, the man just stops beside it, folds his arms, and looks at Kent.

Vichy half-smiles automatically at the sight of him. "Hey, Waller--...."

He looks over at Kent with a frown.

Kent wonders if if the Rangers or Bruins have to deal with this kind of probably-getting-money-from-the-mob-or-similar crap too, and tilts his head at Vichy.

"He didn't know either," Kent tells Waller. "You can keep standing there while we talk if you want, man. I'm used to looking up."

Waller snorts and then shakes his head as he pulls out a chair. "I'm gone one fuckin' year, Parse, and you turn into a little shit."

"'Turn into'?" Kent replies. "I'm just hitting my next level. Team's got a bet going on who's gonna finally snap and sock me one."

Vichy chokes on his beer.

"Yeah, I know about it," Kent says cheerfully. "Lemme know if I can ante in now, or if I have to use a proxy."

His liney braces his elbows on the table and buries his face in his hands. Waller chuckles and slaps him on the back. "I missed you, kid."

"Same," Kent replies. "Look, if there's shit you guys aren't supposed to tell me, I don't want to know it. I don't wanna know what was with those guys at the club last season or why that deal with the Schooners panned, I don't care," and Vichy lifts his head from his hands and stares at him. "But what the hell are they thinking with this trade?"

"What do you mean, 'those guys'?" Vichy demands.

"The ones in suits around admin when the trade talks disappeared from the media."

"How the hell did--?!"
"I was going into the club in the mornings for free coffee before heading to my skate, I saw them then," Kent interrupts. "I said I don't care, Vichy. I don't want to know."

Vichy rubs his eyelids with a thumb and finger. Kent turns back to Waller. "What's with the trade? How'd we manage to offload Tobin? And what the fuck are we getting dumped on us?"

Vichy pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales lowly.

Waller considers him for a few moments, and then props his elbow on the back of his chair. "You still trust me, Parse?"

Kent gives him a long look.

Finally, he readjusts the brim of his UNLV Rebels, pulling it lower on his face before slumping back in his seat. Kent folds his arms behind his head.

"Yeah," he says, because it's true.

Waller was there with advice when Kent was billeting with him during his rookie year and trying to adjust to the insane difference of going straight from Juniors to the NHL. In his second year, Waller kept the dressing room steady while Kent was figuring out how to transition from rookie to team captain and not fuck anything up along the way. The final half of the last season under their previous head coach would've been way, way worse if Kent hadn't felt sure he could vent to Waller if he was about to finally crack and the man would keep it to himself, because he knew Waller had done the same for other guys.

Kent still tries to fit in dinner at least once a month with Waller's wife and daughter to make sure they're doing okay while Waller's away working for the feeder team in Kansas. He owes that man that much, at minimum.

And he trusts his former first alternate as much as he's been willing to trust anyone since he was nineteen. "Alright," Kent says. "What is it?"

"I don't think Toby's a bad kid," Waller tells him.

Kent exhales through his teeth, but makes himself just lace his hands behind his head and hear him out.

"He made bad choices, and he fucked up," Waller says. "No arguing that. But he's been working his ass off to make up for it and stay in the Sovereigns."

"Okay," Kent says.

"I got a lot more sympathy for guys who abuse painkillers 'cause of how wrecked they've got playin' before the league decided to pretend it gives a fuck about us than I do some young asshole who gets shit-faced in public or cokes himself up, Parse," Waller says evenly. "But this is one of the times I think giving a guy a second chance is gonna be a good thing. He's put in the work to change."

Kent breathes out slower, and rubs his thumb against the bridge of his nose. Then he finally drops his arms to the table.

"All right," he agrees. "All right. Okay."

Waller look at him for a moment, and then nods.
"Told the Schooners' scout the same thing when they came 'round," the man adds, signaling to the bar. "He wants to change, he ain't likely to regress, a new club could be the chance he needs. Put my rep on the line."

Kent readjusts the brim of his hat again. "Okay. I got it."

"Just making sure," Waller says. "It's fucking hard to give second chances. So many guys fuck them up, you're thinking 'Shit, I really wanna risk this? I really wanna put my club, my money, my rep on the line 'stead of taking the safe choice and looking for someone else?' It can give you that gut-sick feeling just thinking about it."

Kent pulls off his hat and drags his hand over his hair, trying to smash down his cowlick. "...You really think he's going to change?"

"I think he's gonna keep tryin' like hell," Waller replies. "And I think he's got enough raw talent it'd be a waste to make him rot in the minors the rest of his career 'stead of giving him another shot. He seemed honest about staying clean. That's what I told 'em."

"Same," Vichy says.

Kent looks over.

He pulls his hat back on while the bartender finally makes his way over get Waller's order. After the guy's brought the beer and taken Waller's cash and left, Kent says, "You talked to the Schooners?"

"No," Vichy replies. "The GMs asked me if I thought he was sincere about going clean. And what he said last time when he promised to and didn't. I told them I thought he had to mean it now."

Vichy takes a long swallow of his beer before setting the can down hard on the table. "That whole goddamn cab ride and ER, he was.... It sucked. He was terrified he was dying, he was terrified he was gonna live and never play again except in some beer league. I told George and Chris if he goes back to using then fuck that liar, better he's not our problem."

Waller makes a vague noise in the back of his throat.

Vichy drains the rest of his beer, and then exhales tiredly. He sets the can back down on the table. "Either that scared him enough he won't pull that shit again, or nothing's going to," he mutters.

Waller reaches over and squeezes his shoulder. "Pretty sure he learned his lesson, Vich," he says. "I know he appreciates what you did."

"Wasn't me," Vichy mumbles. "I was gonna take him home, God, I could've killed him." He rubs hard at his face. "If Parser hadn't--"

"It happened, it's over," Kent interrupts. "He came out okay. It's over."

Vichy drags his hands hard down his face and drops his arms to the table, folding them. "Alright."

Waller waves to the bar again and buys Vichy a second beer.

Once the bartender's left and Vichy's cracked the can open, Waller changes the subject, partly. "Schooners know they're taking a mid-risk guy at worst. From what I heard, the guy we're getting don't fit their culture. They want it dealt with before it gets outta the dressing room."
"Yeah, that sounds promising," Kent drawls. "Doesn't fit how?"

Waller makes the hand gesture that Kent learned in his rookie year meant someone on the opposing team was going to get targeted with faggot chirps as long as no mics were around—the one that'd transitioned to a warning not to be a douche by his fourth year, when the front office had hired a new head coach and thrown in hard behind the You Can Play PR.

Vichy makes a stifled noise.

Kent snorts. Figures; if a club has to go with a PR risk, might as well pick a drug user over a gay guy. At least there's a template in the league for dealing with the first one.

Except--

"So they figured here'd be good because, what?" Kent asks, trying to remember the last time he publicly dated a woman. Too damn long ago, obviously. "The You Can Play stuff?"

"Guess so," Waller answers. "Can't really top a coach, players, and personnel endorsing it. Unless Bruckheimer becomes the second owner on board."

Kent shrugs. "Makes sense."

"Yep," Waller agrees. "Sides, my experience, the only guys who get up in arms about a queer in their dressing room are the ones who're shit to their women and afraid they're gonna get treated the same way now. I told Donny far as I know we don't have those kinda fuckfaces on the Aces anymore, 'cause you woulda already gotten them punted for being a PR risk."

Kent raises an eyebrow.

"Didn't say the last part," Waller tells him. "But am I wrong?"

"Of course not," Kent replies.

The only thing that can hit a club's brand harder than having a guy like that on the team is looking like a club that protects them. The stats the guy would have to consistently produce to be worth the risk would make him too expensive for the Aces to keep for long.

Kent's contract is already murder on their cap. His only saving grace is that a good fifth of his salary goes directly back to the club with the luxury box he maintains every season for his charity, and back into Vegas with the other season tickets he buys for local minor and college teams. Not to mention the other three-fifths that get returned indirectly to the Aces, since Kent sinks that into conditioning and chiropractor visits and other physical maintenance in order to stay a top producer for the team.

Kent's worked too goddamn hard to transition the Aces from a shitty joke of an expansion club to a real conference and playoff contender to tolerate seeing the team get bombed with that kind of PR firestorm. The entire fucking club's worked too hard for that.

Vichy makes another strangled noise and drains his beer.

"You okay?" Waller asks him.

Vichy bangs his can on the table. "No. Did anybody tell you about the shit this fucker pulls after postseason? Did you know about it too?"
Kent exhales dramatically and looks up at the ceiling.

Waller lifts an eyebrow and says, "Don't think I've heard."

"Well lemme fucking tell you."

"Or we could not," Kent interrupts dryly.

"Or we **could,**" Vichy challenges, scowling at him.

"Or we could do it at my place," Waller adds, half-smiling. "Sounds like dinner entertainment."

Kent tells him, "You aren't helping."

"Guess that's what happens when you don't tell a guy why you really wanna see him, Parse," Waller shrugs. Kent makes a face.

Vichy scrapes his chair back and cuffs Kent's t-shirt before hauling him out of his own. "Dinner sounds great. Let's go. Parser, pay our tabs."

"Why do I have--" Vichy starts marching him toward the bar, fist still twisted in his collar. "Seriously? You're fucking up my shirt."

"You're right, a dollar-store t-shirt could never handle this," his liney replies, not letting go. "What was I thinking."

"We can't all be fashionistas, Vichy."

"Is Mitts still an asshole?" Waller asks behind them; and when Kent glances over their shoulders Waller snaps a photo on his phone.

"No," he lies.

"Of course," Vichy says. "Death, taxes, Smith is a bastard. Which segues *right the fuck in* with this story."

"Good," Waller smiles, fiddling with his phone. Kent tries again to yank his shirt free.

"This is completely missing the point of coming here," he says flatly, except that the few other customers and the bartender are all still pointedly ignoring them. "I take it back, Walczak. I didn't miss you at all."

"Sure thing, kid," Waller replies, still smiling. He follows behind as Vichy strong-arms Kent up to the bar.

Vichy gets hauled into helping Waller's wife and daughter clean up after dinner, which Kent only realizes was a trap to get him and Waller alone on the deck after the man pours a finger of whiskey into their glasses and then holds one out to Kent with "Glad the shit at Sergei's wasn't about the silent investors, Parse."

Kent blows his cowlick back from his forehead as he takes the glass, and leans on the deck rail. "I know--"

"No," Waller interrupts. "Glad it wasn't, because I couldn't've helped you. I don't do that anymore."

He taps the phone resting on the side burner of the grill. "I have to keep too many notes."
Concussions, Kent thinks involuntarily.

He looks over. ". . . Everything okay, Walls?"

"Much as it ever is," Waller says. "I dunno who's in charge anymore. Maybe nobody on team-side. They were pullin' back when I left."

"That's not what I'm asking," Kent replies.

Waller takes a sip of whiskey and finally shrugs.

"Much as it ever is," he repeats. "I'm doin' better than a lotta guys could say."

He trails off after that, looking down at his glass. Kent shifts against the railing to face at him directly.

Waller finally shrugs again and takes another sip of whiskey. "Still involved in the game. I'm doing good."

Kent fiddles with his glass, twisting it distractedly as it sits on the rail. "Lemme know if there's anything I can do."

"Kid," Waller says with a tired half-smile, "you gotta stop tryin' to take on so much. It ain't healthy."

Kent shrugs that off. "Let me know."

"You do a lot for me already, Parse. Lookin' out for Marlene and Julie, that--" his voice cracks.

Kent feels a chill go through him as the man turns away, digging a thumb and finger against his eyes. "Waller?"

The man sets his glass down and rubs his face hard once before letting his arms drop.

"I appreciate it, Parse," he says, sliding his hands in his pockets and turning back to him. "I'm working--we're working some stuff out. Alright?"

"Okay," Kent agrees, since it's clear from his tone they're leaving this there.

Waller nods.

"Most things, I can't complain," he says, trying to convince one of them. "I still got work in the game. The Aces're looking after me and my family more'n I expected. We can afford any college Julie wants. Life's not bad."

"Okay."

Waller breathes out slowly and then leans back against the railing, folding his arms across his chest.

"I ain't worried about me, Parse," he says, quieter. "I know how to take care of myself if it comes down to it. But if you wanna do me a favor, look out for Sunny, okay?"

Kent straightens up. "What's wrong?"

Waller shakes his head. "Nothing, maybe," he says. "Nothin' I know of. It's more...."
He pushes his thinning hair back from his forehead. "Y’get older, you know what other guys around as long as you have probably gone through.

"He's the only guy been here since year one now," Waller says. "You know what our kinda hockey is, Parse."

"Shit," Kent says quietly. He touches the side of his head. "You think it's...?"

Waller shakes his head again with another shrug. "I dunno," he replies. "You know he likes to keep his private shit private. And him and me, we always knew we were up against each other for ice time. You don't wanna be the guy complaining 'bout something hurting if the other guy ain't."

Kent exhales through his teeth.

Waller lifts his shoulders. "Maybe I'm worried for nothing," he says. "I want it to be that. But just in case...."

He slumps back more against the railing and looks at Kent. "I know you keep track of a fuckton of stuff about the club. You care about this team, Parse. Nobody that knows you doubts that. So just-- keep it in back of mind, or whatever you do with all that stuff."

"I will," Kent promises. He owes the man that much.

And it's some important shit to know going into the season.

Waller lets out a long breath, and then pushes away from the rail and comes over to clap Kent on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Parse," he says, picking up his whiskey again. "I mean it."

"Any time," Kent replies, thumping him once on the back.

*

During offseason, the Aces select a twenty-nine-year-old defenseman to be their second alternative captain, finally filling the spot that’s been empty since Waller's retirement after the 2012-13 season.

Kent texts Showy a congratulations while he’s still in Minnesota, and makes a note that the coming season should be easier leadership-wise at least.

Showy's a lot more personable and talkative than the other alternate captain, Sunny. Finally, Kent won't be the only one who's keeping engaged with guys in and out of the dressing room. Somebody else'll be helping shoulder the load.

*

And then Showy goes and picks a non-profit focused on preventing veteran suicides for his charity this season.

Almost immediately the Aces' team president starts having a lot longer and more difficult renewal conversations with the casino and restaurant sponsors, because Vegas has no room for people that distract from its goal of giving tourists a good time.

Kent thinks Fucking come on.
The team heads into preseason. As the roster's shaved down, Kent and Showy plan off-ice activities. Kent reads the guys during them, and nudges the new ones who'll probably be making the roster this season toward the best players to work with them.

He gets the team integration in swing. He does the club and personal promotional work, attends the charities' and kids' events, and participates in the PR videos and the photoshoots. He starts practicing more with the backup goalie when Boxy takes over in the net after Burr gets another concussion in preseason. He does his job.

He reminds himself that things could be worse.

The Bruins' and Stars's seven-player trade last year, and the way Seguin bombed at handling it, is proof of that.

It could be worse. At least Kent's not part of a club that wastes young talent because it can't figure out how to manage it.

If the Aces' GM is shedding the club's older players as a first step to rebuilding the team as a young group around the Aces' maturing core, fine. Kent'll step up and take them in that direction.

If more of the core guys start getting their leadership acknowledged with more ice time and the eventually-open other alternate captaincy, even better. That'll make the Aces look like a team that's rewarding its trusted, long-term players, instead of like a team that made a nineteen-year-old its captain and then immediately freaked out over that choice and assigned older veterans to be alternates to balance against Kent's inexperience.

Plus, there's no ignoring that a younger team means more salary cap flexibility.

Which means more room to trade for players. Especially if the team can produce better this season, and make up for last year's pathetic eighth playoff seed performance. And the flexibility'll be handy in April, when other undrafted players start becoming available to sign. The college guys.

Jack'll be graduating.

Kent tells himself not to get ahead of the season. The Aces have to produce October through March first--and pick up a damn lot more points than last year--before he can start thinking about April.

"Why is 'Losing to Kent Parson at cards' a $300 fine?" one of the AHL players still competing for a roster spot asks in preseason, reading through the sheet tacked to the wall in the clubhouse dressing room.

Kent looks up. "Wha--goddammit, Robber."

"Someone has to save these poor bastards from you," says Robber, who's gotten way too obnoxious about penciling in new fines since O'Patrick tapped him to take over as fines master after he was traded out. "How long'd it take the new guys last year to learn?"

"Too long," one of them mutters, tying his shoes.

"What kind of fines master discourages fines?" Kent derides. "Patsy'd be ashamed of you."
Robber smirks at him. "That's why 'Beating Kent Parson at cards' is a $10 one. Incentive."

Kent spreads his hands in disbelief. Catalano raises an eyebrow and looks over the rules' sheet again.

"Any cards?" he asks. "Or just certain games? Texas Hold 'Em?"


"Don't do it, Cat," Korsy warns, looking up from his shoes. "I'm saving your butt here. Don't."

"Hm," is all Catalano says. Kent half-grins enough to show teeth when the kid looks over at him again.

* 

The Aces' first game of the regular season is an away one in Houston. Kent gives an assist on the goal that ties them up with the Aeros to force an overtime.

In the Aces' second game and home opener in Vegas, Kent gets a goal and an assist.

During the Aces' third game of the season, Kent has an assist on the opening goal.

In the Aces' fourth game and first overtime loss of the season, Kent has the lone assist on the Aces' only goal.

During the Aces' fifth game of the 2014-15 season, Kent gets a goal in the first period.

Media starts using the term "point streak."

* 

"The hell's up, Parser?" Vichy asks in the dressing room while they're stripping for showers before the media comes in.

"With what?" Kent replies.

"You, bro," Chazzer says, dropping his arm protectors on his stall's seat. "You're playing like someone's gunning for your ass. Even more than last season. Leave some room in the record book for maybe anybody else, huh?"

"It's open to anyone who wants in," Kent grins. Chazzer shoves him hard in the shoulder and calls him a dick.

"Fuck you Parse, I'm topping the PIM list this year," Scrappy yells on his way to the showers. He points threateningly. "Once I get in, you'll never beat it."

"Lookin' forward to the company, Scraps," Kent says with a thumbs up, and Scrappy also calls him a dick. Kent snickers.

*
The regular season rolls on and Kent keeps his streak going.

By the end of October, he's picked up at least one point in every one of the Aces' games. He beats his own past points streak, then beats other guys' streak records, then beats more.

He feels the momentum build with each game. Every win and overtime loss ticks the Aces higher and higher in the division. Every goal, every assist he earns sends him further up in the point rankings. Other guys are fighting him for lead position now.

Their barn starts selling out games again.

Kent starts seeing more and more black jerseys in the stands when they're on roadies. Pacific, Central, Metropolitan, Atlantic--it doesn't matter where the team goes, Aces fans turn out for them.

The media talks about the team more and more, the hockey world loves them or jealously hates their guts, and they just keep tearing forward.

*  

By the start of November, Kent's begun getting checked aggressively enough in games that he buys a therapeutic accelerated recovery performance machine to go with the training ARP he got after working with one during his offseason conditioning. He gives the manual to the Aces' trainer for any future recovery workouts Elliot has to design for him.

He also caves and starts bringing the ARPs on roadies and into the clubhouse for warmups, instead of just sleeping with the electrodes on like he was originally doing.

He takes exactly as much shit from the guys as he expected the first time he's caught using one.

"It breaks down scar tissue faster," Kent tells both his second alt and his linemate, when they come after him during breakfast in the clubhouse one morning. He had the machine hidden on a chair under the table; but he was still in shorts. "Why wouldn't I use it?"

"You are literally shooting electricity into your body to revive it," the alternate captain deadpans, looking up from the display screen on Kent's ARP and over to Kent's leg, now propped on a chair to show off two of the electrodes. "This is some Frankenstein-esque shit here, Parse."

Seeing his muscles move on their own when he's wearing the ARP is still kind of weird to Kent; but he knows better than to give any of the guys an inch when it comes to material to chirp him with. "Sure, Showy."

"It's more Jekyll and Hyde," Kent's linemate says, pouring himself coffee.

"Electricity!"

"But he's transforming from one state to another," Vichy replies. "And you're conflating Frankenstein with his creature."

"Fuck off, you asshole," Showy says, sounding genuinely insulted. "Are you accusing me of a grade school level comprehension of the text?"

Vichy snickers into his mug.

Kent rolls his eyes and takes the ARP back from Showy. "Nerds."

"The walking sci-fi creation can shut his mouth, Parse."
"I'm sitting," Kent points out, and Showy calls him a pedantic cyborg. Kent looks the first word up later.

* 

The mumps outbreak sweeping the league doesn't hit Vegas.

The Aces' front office gives the team's doctors and the trainer over half a practice to drill the new sanitary dressing room behavior into them; and the team's fines master is ruthless about hounding guys who forget and break the new rules.

Kent confirms that Lean, the rookie defenseman who somehow keeps finding time to sleep around, is using protection in all his hookups, because there's no way in hell Kent intends to let Vegas get mocked as the team that had an STD outbreak in their dressing room. The internet would never let that one go.

* 

As his streak continues through November, Kent reminds himself not to fall out of touch with the team.

He keeps tabs on the rookies and new guys and call-ups to make sure they feel integrated. The new alternate captain keeps him a lot more up-to-date on the d-men's grumbling about the defensive coach than the old one did— even though Kent knows not to fully trust Showy's viewpoint, since he's one of those d-men fed up with Coach Heit. He works the dressing room and team events and morning skates almost unconsciously.

Meanwhile, he sticks meticulously to the cardio and weights program the strength coach developed so he won't overstrain himself. He grabs as much extra ice time as he can fit in his schedule before the coaches kick him off. He spends so much time reviewing tape that he starts bringing the video coach lunch to keep Graves in the room.

The front office starts delegating more of the team's promotional work to additional guys, because the club's getting contacted with more and more partnership requests. Despite their shaky start renewing sponsors during offseason, the Aces are Las Vegas's only major league sports team—and they're killing it this season.

Kent does so many interviews, talking about the Aces, about his assists and the streak, that he doesn't even try to keep track anymore. He remembers interviewers' and organizations' names when PR prep's him fifteen minutes beforehand and then forgets as soon as they're over. Watching video of the pressers later starts to feel surreal.

His agent starts texting him advance reminders for his personal charity and fundraising events. Allan also gets him a cover photoshoot for Dude's Health.

He buys new dishes that hold bigger stores of kibble and water so the cat will be okay even if he's away on roadies or pulling eighteen-hour days.

* 

Midway into November, Kent shatters the record for the longest point streak by an American-born player and starts feeling like he'll never run out of energy.

It feels like the year the Aces won the Stanley Cup.
It feels like the games leading up to the Memorial Cup.

It feels like his second year of Juniors, when he and Jack slaughtered the stats and made their story the Océanic's new legacy.

*  

He starts being able to nap on planes and buses regardless of noise level.

Which is handy, except for the time he gets chirped for having a nightmare on the flight to San Jose and then chirped three times as hard because it was about losing his phone and not having his calendar or notes backed up. Kent starts sitting by the goalie more often after that, because at least when Boxy drags him, half the time it's in French and Kent can refuse to try mentally translating it and just ignore him.

Vichy starts getting assigned to connecting rooms with him on roadies, which Kent grudgingly appreciates even though it always means he's next to the card and dice room now. He knows he needs someone around to ground him, or at least to bang on the door and tell him to turn off the tape he's watching and go to goddamn sleep.

He never made a tally of how many times Jack told him his internal clock was broken their second year of Juniors.

It was enough that Kent took home the lesson. It's just executing it that's harder sometimes.

During November Kent passes out on his couch in his clothes three times more often than he ever makes it to his bed.

And the Aces lose and lose and win and lose and win and win and lose and win and win and win and lose and win and lose and win and win and win.

*  

The media talks more, about Kent's streak and Coach Moss's system and how the Aces are doing even better out of the gate this season than the year they won the Cup.

Instead of sounding like a jinx the way some of the guys say, it just feels like incentive.

In Kent's pre- and postgame interviews, he makes sure he credits everyone he plays with their due. He praises the special teams' hard work and the other lines' offensive drives, and he downplays questions about the Aces' leaky defense. He talks up the team the way they deserve with a start like this.

He studies how other clubs come in and face off against them: confident, determined, arrogant. Worried.

The Schooners come at the Aces desperate to get out of the bottom of the rankings this season, but stress is visibly impacting their bottom-six players and the new alternate captain. The free agent Vegas tried to sign away from them last season and who was hell to play against after that fell through is gone.

The Aeros come at them dead-set on not being humiliated with a loss after beating the Aces in last season's playoffs, but that's not the same thing as coming to win. Boxy shuts their asses out in Houston and Kent crashes into him for a hug after the game so hard that they knock the net off the
poles and the guys chirp him for two days straight.

Kent doesn't conceal what he reads in their opponents whenever he's in the dressing room between periods. He doesn't sugarcoat the best ways they can exploit those cracks the other teams failed to hide, even though the new guys stare at him the first couple times.

The team listens. The coaches refine what Kent sees and suggests to turn it into solid attacks. The media starts talking about how dangerous the Aces are in third periods.

*

Vegas becomes one of the toughest barns to step into this season.

*

Kent watches how their opponents deal with a loss, while they're skating off the ice and in their postgames afterward and when they go into their next games.

He watches how hard the losses hit the oldest teams, the ones that never have to worry about revenues or getting transferred to a new city. The ones where the club's name and past overwhelms any current players' histories.

He thinks how, no matter what else he'd change about 2009, he's glad first pick went to the Las Vegas Aces.

The only mantle Kent had to take on here was a few years' weak seasons and the recession fallout that he was expected to make up for. There's no shadow overwhelming Kent when he hits the ice. There's no record he's letting down after a loss but his own; there's no history he has to live up to except his own past seasons.

He's the one writing the Aces' legacy, right now.

He's so damn glad he went to Vegas.

Kent tears through practices and games and promos and everything else with an almost permanent grin, momentum vibrating under his skin.

*

In the Aces' final game of November, Kent makes two assists and surpasses Crosby's longest point streak record.

He starts feeling like as long as he's around people he doesn't even need to sleep.

*

Kent's second alternate eventually holds him back one day in an airport until they're trailing behind everyone else.

"Parse," Showy says seriously. "I'm as amped this season as everyone. But you need to chill the fuck down already. Somebody's gonna accuse you of a meth habit soon."

Kent bristles and then catches himself and forces it away. "They'd go with something more designer," he replies. "We're Vegas."

"Uh-huh." Showy keeps a hand on his shoulder. "I mean it, Kent. I'm gettin' worried.
"I haven't seen you like this since Cup finals," he adds. "And you've been at it way longer now. I keep expecting you to keel over in the middle of an interview, and then the fuck're we gonna do?"

Kent exhales through his nose and rubs the heel of his hand against his eyes.

He can't deny it's a more effective tactic than when Jack used to bet him twenty bucks he couldn't just stay seated in a chair for fifteen minutes.

Kent always won those bets because he wasn't going to admit back then that twenty bucks was a lot of money to a guy who seemed to think that was the lowest normal amount anyone would wager. But he hated them.

But he can do not screwing up his image. That's a stake worth playing for.

"Alright, alright," he says. "--Thanks."

"Sure," Showy replies.

*

The first week of December they wrap up their Central roadie with a loss to the Wild. They're still top of the division; but the Kings are too getting close. Kent checks the news on the ride to the airport, and sees that Jack's been spotted with the Falconers' assistant GM a third time.

Kent looks her up, finds that she used to be a scout, and thinks that at least that's proof he was right and that dumbass reporter last season was wrong.

Not that he needed the validation. The only clubs that wouldn't be scrambling to get Jack are the ones with blind management.

He wonders why he never heard about it when Jack talked with the Aces' front office; and then he thinks You fucking know why.

After they land in Vegas and he's driven back to his apartment, Kent re-checks the date of their game against the Bruins.

December 14: ten more days. Three more home games before their five game road trip through the east.

He wonders how late into December college semesters run. Less than high school, right? When did they get out for Christmas in high school?

Kent buries his phone in his half-unpacked suitcase and makes himself go to bed.

*

He checks Samwell's semester calendar the next morning. Classes end the 16th.

*

It's a stupid idea.

If Jack even bothered talking to the Aces' front office, he obviously decided against the offer. He's been focused on the Eastern conference. It's getting pretty clear where he's considering signing. It's a waste of Kent's time.
It was a stupid idea three years ago. It's a stupid idea now.

Could they even manage to be on the same team anymore? On the same line? In the same dressing room?

Do they have anything in common anymore, except that six years ago they played hockey together and a third of the time they probably regret becoming friends?

--All right, that one hurt.

It's a stupid idea.

Kent's skimming through Facebook on the plane ride into Boston, trying to get a feel for how the Bruins' fans will be coming into the game Sunday, when he notices more and more of the college accounts are talking about the same party.

Kent wraps up the fan research and looks up what the hell an epikegster is.

It sounds like the worst possible combination of house and frat party. Kent's immediate thought is that the Bruins' college fans will be too hungover to show up at the game tomorrow; and then he sees who's hosting it.

All right, then. There's no way Jack would risk getting caught up in that. Kent can finally put this stupid idea out of his head like he should've done a week ago.

Except there's no way Jack wouldn't be there.

He had a C on his jersey in the still during last season's news story. He might skip the party, but he'd be somewhere nearby to make sure nothing burned down and his team survived to morning.

It's still a stupid idea.

It's a stupid idea. But so was playing on a broken ankle, and getting more physical in his play style, and playing the last two periods of game six of the 2011 Cup finals with cracked ribs, and becoming friends with Jack Zimmermann instead of staying rivals, and continuing to pick up a hockey stick when he was fourteen and had barely cleared 5 feet and could never manage to weigh more than 133 pounds soaking wet while the fifteen-year-olds kept handing him his ass in the corners when he couldn't out-skate them fast enough. And all of those worked out.

Most of those worked out.

Plenty more stupid ideas haven't, but how was Kent supposed to know until he tried? Nothing can ever work if he doesn't try first. Especially if the timing feels right. And an opening's there.

You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take, and all that.
After the Aces' flight arrives in Boston late in the evening, Kent rents a car at the airport and then finds his second alternate has already grabbed his luggage and is holding it hostage in exchange for a ride to the hotel.

"I don't remember saying I was taking passengers," Kent tells him.

"We can make this real pathetic and I can hold this over my head, Parse," Showy grins. "What're they fudging your stats to again? 5'11"? In skates?"

Kent folds his arms and looks at him.

"All right," Showy says cheerfully, hefting the bag above his head and holding it there. "I know how to double down too, pal."

"Seriously?" Kent replies.

"What are you idiots doing?" one of the veteran d-men, Fils, pauses to ask when he and Kent's first alt come up behind them with their luggage.

"Immovable object is meet unstoppable force," Sunny says dryly, continuing past Kent and Showy. Fils snorts and catches back up with him, heading for the team's bus.

Kent sighs dramatically. "Fine," he says. "Thanks for carrying my stuff to the car, Showy."

Showy lets his arms drop, swinging Kent's bag carelessly in a long arc. "Yeah, sure. You wanna trust me with your stuff, no problem."

Kent grabs the bag when it swings back to his direction again. Showy makes a "that's what I thought" noise.

"You have to stop siding with the kids on Coach Heit," Kent replies in aggravation. Showy starts argue further about the Aces' defense coach, but Kent cuts him off: "You're already on thin ice with the veteran shit, you can't afford a second black mark."

"Fuck off, fuck you Aaron Burr," Showy retorts, and Kent says, "What?"

"I don't want to hear jack shit from the guy fundraising for concussion research," Showy tells him.

"You mean the organization consulting with local high schools? The one that's a key component of our plan to grow the sport here?" Kent corrects. "You're being too obvious."

Showy pinches the bridge of his nose.

"I'm not saying--" Kent starts, and Showy exhales through his teeth.

"No," he interrupts. "Anytime I wanna punch you in the face for shit you say, I remind myself this is how a GM thinks and I need to know it."

Kent slows down when some jackass cuts him off and gives Showy a sidelong glance.

"Please tell me you already thought of that transition," Showy says, dropping his hand and giving him a look right back. "I can't handle the karmic backlash of being the one that planted that idea in your head."
Kent snorts.

"I'm not saying it's not a problem," he continues. "But we've got good offense."

"And when they're injured?" Showy retorts. "How 'bout if we make playoffs and end up against the Blues? Their system's been shutting us down every fucking game, Parse. It doesn't matter how fast we are if we get trapped anytime we hit center ice."

Kent exhales harshly, because Showy isn't wrong.

The Aces' defense isn't what it should be this year, not with the talent and skill they have. It's already starting to burden their offense, and it's only December. By April, guys are going to be burned out.

"Look," Kent says, "the coaches and the GM know this is a problem, alright? It's gonna be dealt with."

Showy snorts doubtfully.

Kent shakes his head. "You can't walk back the 22Kill thing now," he points out. "So you have to lay off about Heit. Or it's gonna mess up your contract extension. Everybody only gets one negative."

Showy says, "I'm not signing one."

Kent shifts the car into the far right lane as he nears the exit. Once he's off the highway he pulls up against the first open space along the curb; there's a no parking sign, but it's not like he's getting out. Kent brakes to a stop and then twists around in his seat to face Showy.

Before he can speak, Showy asks, "What do you know about the silent investors?"

"...Nothing," Kent says eventually.

When Showy raises an eyebrow, Kent shrugs tensely. "Waller said not to ask."

Showy makes an exasperated noise under his breath at the name of the former fellow defenseman and slumps back in his seat. "Figures," he mutters. "You got that 'don't ask about how the front office works' lecture too?"

Kent just shrugs again.

"I've got a family, Parse," Showy says seriously. "I'm not raising my daughter in this world. I'm not gonna get in as deep as Waller or Vichy are, I'm getting us out."

Kent starts to run a hand over his cowlick and then catches himself. He drops his hands to the steering wheel instead, tapping his fingers on it.

"All right," he says at last, because there's no winning argument there.

Kent reflexively shifts into first gear even though the rental guy told him the Porsche's default was automatic and watches the traffic, checking for an opening. "You still need to back off Heit," he adds. "GMs talk to each other. It's gonna affect your options."

"I'm doing it anyway," Showy replies. "I'm not letting that motherfucker ruin us one more time."

Kent glances over his shoulder at him again.
"Just because I'm ready to go doesn't mean I won't miss here," Showy tells him. "I want the Cup again too, Parse. We should be in championship form this year. But you can pull an 82-game streak and it still won't matter if the d can't step up in the first round."

Kent half-grins but says, "Don't jinx me."

Showy pulls his phone out of his suit jacket. "I want our guys to win another one, too," he repeats, texting as Kent pulls out into traffic. "If I get a bad rep again for a while, I'll just fix it again. If it makes Impey fire that idiot, it'll be worth it."

Kent shakes his head. "We can do this, man. Nino and Lean have been improving a lot with you working with them. It's not--"

"They do not pay me enough to be a player-coach, Parse," Showy interrupts flatly. "I've spent years watching this club overwork you with responsibilities they should've had staff handle and letting you think that's normal. I'm not fucking allowing them to do it to me, too."

Kent's starting to regret beginning this argument while driving. "What the hell?"

"You do more for this club than it has a right to ask of you," Showy says, dropping his phone in his lap and looking over, which is really irritating because Kent has to keep his eyes on the road and can't gauge his expression. "Just because you're doing it by choice doesn't mean they should let you burn yourself out like that. It's not normal."

"I'm the captain," he says tersely.

"Which means you're supposed to argue with refs without pissing them off and do a bunch of PR," Showy replies, voice calmer now. "Not give up your personal life to teach systems to other players because the coaches won't take the time to get to know guys and do it themselves in a way they'll understand. That's on the goddamn coaches."

"So what the fuck should I be doing, letting us lose?" he snaps.

"I'm not saying there's a simple answer, Kent," Showy tells him. "I'm saying this club's been exploiting your intensity for years and it is shit to watch."

"Of course they do," he answers. "That's what they do to everyone. We're professional athletes."

Kent's alternate captain makes several faces and an aborted strangling gesture, and finally braces his elbow on the door, fingers pressed against his temple.

"There is so much shit to unpack there, I don't even--" and then Showy's phone buzzes.

He thumbs it open, snorts at the text, and tells it, "Thanks.

"Vichy's super curious to hear your explanation of how you aren't superstitious but somehow believe you can be jinxed," he adds to Kent. "Super curious."

Kent glances over again. "That's what--? You son of a bitch."

"Tellin' my mom you said that about her," Showy replies, half-smirking as he texts Vichy back. "You just made the Christmas party real awkward for yourself, pal."

Kent makes a growling noise and focuses on the road.
"Hey," Showy says as they come in sight of the hotel. "I haven't talked to any of the other guys about leaving after this season."

Kent looks over at him, and then focuses back on finding the hotel lot's turn-in. "Okay."

Showy rests his arm on the door, tapping his fingers idly on the leather. "As long as the office thinks I'll stay if he goes, we might get a new assistant coach before the season's over."

"Savvy," Kent says noncommittally.

"Yeah, it's almost like I've spent half a decade learning from a guy whose dudebro Instagram is a front for a mind like a fuckin' backup Central Registry," Showy deadpans. Kent makes a face.

"The guys are gonna think I'm ditching them because this fight was too much and I wussed out, but," Showy says, shrugging a shoulder. "It's hard to figure out who knows about the silent investors, who's got an idea and doesn't want to know more, who's straight-up clueless and thinks we're the same as any other team."

Kent nods once without saying anything.

"Since I can't explain it, there's no point in worrying," Showy continues. "But since I can't explain it, at least not to most of the guys, I don't want them to think I'm abandoning them yet."

"I get it," Kent replies, giving him a brief smile. "I'm not saying anything."

Showy looks at him for a long moment, and then says wryly, "Already mentally written me out, huh?"

He brakes into the parking spot a little harder than he meant to. "I'm not--"

"Kent," Showy says, "how long've we known each other? Seriously. Why do you think you still have to lie to me about who you are?"

Kent tightens his jaw.

"I get it, you know," Showy says, unbuckling his seat belt. "First game I play against the Aces, the coaches are gonna be hounding me for information on your style to work into their system. Same way you do to any guy comin' in from anywhere else."

Kent blows his hair away from his face and unbuckles his belt. "Yeah, I know. That's how it is."

"You know intellectually," Showy replies, "but I don't think you get it for real."

Kent gives him an annoyed look and pops open his door.

"Parse," Showy says. "For fuck's sake. You're a prodigy. I know you can't see yourself like other guys see you, but you gotta fuckin' know how rare you are. You don't live in the same world as the rest of us."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're one of the very few guys out there who could play a full career and retire in the same jersey you were drafted in," Showy says calmly. "If that's what you want. Trades happen to other guys. Any guy that leaves here is competition on another team, not someone you might join eventually."

Showy shrugs again. "I get it. But most everybody in this game thinks twice about buying a place instead of renting. Or gets a sick feeling when the phone rings around trade deadlines."

"I think about that stuff too," Kent replies.

"Yeah, 'cause the office's done a great job manipulating you into thinking you're more of a problem child than you are," Showy answers, tone harder for a moment. "But I promise you, Parse, you worry about it a lot less than most guys."

"What the hell?" Kent says, tugging his door shut again. "'Manipulated'?"

"Are you...." Showy frowns, staring at him. ". . . Parse. Jesus fuck. Did you seriously think it was--no."

He presses a hand against his face, and then slides it back over his hair. "Let me rephrase that.

"Whatever the front office told you, it is incredibly abnormal they only signed you to a five-year contract. When you look at how you've performed for them, you were robbed," Showy says flatly. "You should've called their bluff and held out for a better deal. They'd never really just let you get away to sign somewhere else."

Kent thinks about one of the PR staff's "Is there anything you don't want to tell me, but would still be useful for us to know going forward?" comment after that asshole reporter tried to ambush Kent with a question about You Can Play and a more veiled question about the Aces' attitude toward gay players--and why the club had to have that attitude in the first place--and thinks, Bullshit they wouldn't.

"The lockout was coming," he says.

"Yeah," Showy replies, tone harder again. "They were a little too obvious about timing that to keep you for cheap. They had no legit excuse," he adds. "Lewis started that insubordination bullshit with you, you didn't begin it with him. You shouldn't've fallen for it."

Kent exhales through his teeth and opens his door again. "Little late now."

"Parse," Showy says sincerely, getting out of the car as well, "I figured you were in talks with another club after the shit with Lewis, and you and the GM had a deal to trade you there in offseason. I would've said something if I'd realized you intended to stay. They played you hard."

Kent lets out a longer, slower breath, and finally lifts his shoulders in a long shrug. "It's done," he replies. "Nothing to do but go forward."

For a moment Showy looks like he's about to say something else; but then he doesn't. "All right."

"Heads up though," the man adds, pointing at him as they're heading for the lobby doors. "First game next season that you chirp my wife--because we both know there's no fuckin' 'if' there--I'm breaking that nose. And then I'm telling all the Vegas books they're welcome for finally closing that bet in the interview afterward."

Kent tries to stifle a snort of laughter and fails. "You do that."

"I will. Glad we're resolvin' this in advance."

Kent shakes his head.
When they've gotten their keycards and they're the only ones in the elevator, Kent asks, "...Anywhere you're thinking of?"

Showy makes a tired noise. "I promised Rie I'd talk to San Jose. She liked the idea of moving by Japantown, giving Emiri a community to grow up in," he says. "But I told her, Impey'll probably trade me at offseason to wherever's looking for a rental and gives him the best deal."

Kent thinks about it and nods. "That'd be getting the most out of you."

Showy side eyes him. "Seriously, when you become a GM and write your memoir, leave my name out of it."

"I'll put you right on the dedication page," Kent replies, smirking. "Right at the top. 'Thanks to Zachary Short--I never, ever, ever would've considered this career path without his advice.'"

He dodges Showy's elbow to his side as the elevator stops at their floor.

Kent changes out of his suit and then plays cards in Vichy's room until eleven, because one of the rookies is hellbent on challenging him at poker.

Kent recognized by three games in that Catsby was actively trying to learn his tells. He respects the chutzpah; but he's still going to clean the guy out for it.

Plus, it's nice to have somebody else funding the end-of-season staff party through fines besides Kent himself. Even though Robber took mercy on Catsby and dropped the fee to $50 per loss.

After Vichy's kicked everyone out so he can go to bed, Kent returns to his room through the connecting door. He pushes his wallet back into his jeans, looks at his phone and keys and hat sitting on the nightstand, and thinks Are you really doing this?

Jack made it clear what he thinks of Kent the last time he saw him.

Just because they texted a little after Hurricane Sandy, it doesn't mean anything. Kent talked to lots of guys immediately after the storm that he normally wouldn't bother with. None of that meant anything in the long-term.

It obviously didn't mean anything, or else Zimmermann would've replied the next time Kent texted instead of ignoring him.

It's a stupid idea.

Kent pulls his wallet back out of his pocket, and then exhales through his teeth and drags a hand over his hair.

They bled vets during the offseason. They're still seeing growing pains from the younger players that replaced them. The Aces are high in the standings, but Kent wants higher.

Their offense is strong this season, but it's got to be better to cover for their weaker defense. It has to be faster. Tougher. Score more.

Kent can set up plays no matter how hard the other teams try to choke him--but those won't come to anything if the guys catching his passes don't score.
The way Jack always could.

The team's gonna have a void when Showy goes. The Aces are going to lose an alternate captain, a top offensive d, a leader in the dressing room.

Jack was always lousy at interacting with other guys without being a complete dork or a tightly-wound perfectionist, but he still knew how to manage them. If he didn't like someone's play, he worked with the guy to make him better, no matter how irritated he was.

He was always better than Kent at explaining things. Even now, with over five years' experience in the major leagues, there's still a point where Kent can't figure out how to teach hockey sense to someone who doesn't understand what he's saying. Jack could always get over that hurdle; he didn't give up on guys and start looking for someone better, like Kent did. He hung in.

Jack spent that time as a mites coach a while back, too. He's probably even better at mentoring now.

Once Showy's gone, all the burden of keeping a group of guys functioning for six-plus months of being thrown together in tight quarters is going to fall back onto Kent. His other alternate's never been any good at that side of things.

Kent felt himself getting tired faster than usual last season, with one of the alternate captaincies vacant after Waller's retirement; but it wasn't until he finally had somebody else around again this year to help shoulder the load that he realized how much he took it for granted when Waller was there. If the front office puts off assigning the second A again once Showy's gone, it's gonna be last season all over again. Kent doesn't even want to think about how exhausting that'll be.

Samwell's men's hockey team's been doing really good this season, but even if they go all the way in the Frozen Four Jack'll still be available before playoffs start.

The Aces are high in the standings; Kent wants more points, but as long as they keep their pace they're going to be a playoff seed. Even with the defensive issues, Showy was right: they're in championship form.

Showy's contract is the highest in the Aces after Kent's. When he goes, there'll be plenty of cash open. No matter what the GM's planning to do next summer or who he's thinking of trading Showy for, there'll have to be room for a player like Jack Zimmermann.

Impey can make room. He got Kent for cheap enough; he can find space for Jack.

Kent could make an easy case that Jack would bring in everything the Aces need: a power center with defensive ability, great hockey sense, speed and size, a repertoire of dekes, an even temper on the ice, and a slap shot goalies'll just have to watch go past them into the net. He'd be a player with zero interest in going anywhere near the Strip, a guy who won't create bad PR for the club. He could get through to the guys Kent can't figure out how to.

Postseason's a hellish place to start a career in the league, but Jack could do it. Kent's been through enough playoff games now that he can warn him about the worst parts, and once Jack's on the ice he'll adapt. Put him on the ice, and Jack always adapts.

All the Aces have to do is give him an amateur tryout. Kent can get much that out of the GM for sure. If Jack just gets a chance to show how he belongs in the NHL, if he goes through the playoffs' trial by fire and proves it, Impey will find the cap space for him.

If the Aces can make it all the way--if they can finally lift the Cup again, after three wasted years
of falling out before the finals—with Zimms on the team, the GM will find the fucking cap space if he wants to keep Kent past 2017.

If Zimms kicks off his start in the NHL on the ice when the Aces hoist the Cup, no reporter will ever fucking call him Bob Zimmermann Lite again.

Kent shoves his wallet back in his jeans and pulls on his hat, picks up his keys and phone, and heads out.

*

It's pretty easy to find the party. Kent looked up frat row on Samwell's campus map, programmed it in the GPS, and then just looks for the focal point of chaos once he arrives.

Actually reaching it is something else.

He finally gives up and parks in the closest spot he can find, even though it cuts off half of some other frat's driveway.

Kent's barely out of the car before a guy standing sentry on the porch is on him, brandishing a lacrosse stick that might've looked threatening before the fifth time Kent was deliberately hit with a puck in his career. "Move that, motherfucker!"

He shuts and locks the car door and stands his ground when the guy jabs him in the chest with the stick. Kent keeps smiling non-threateningly, and tries to gauge how drunk they guy is. He'll have to move the car if it's gonna get vandalized, no matter how much it irritates him to cave to a college bro. He doesn't need that publicity.

The bro keeps ordering him to fuck off and quit blocking his driveway, even as he looks over at another guy coming out of the house toward them. "Hey! Come help me with this fucker!"

The other guy isn't looking at them; he's looking at the car.

"Is that a--" and then he does look at Kent. He pauses, eyes narrowing.

A couple breaths later, the second guy's eyes widen before he calls back, "Oh my fucking God that's fucking Kent Parson!"

Kent raises a hand in greeting.

The first guy blinks and turns back to stare at him. Then he drops the lacrosse stick.

Kent holds down a laugh and gestures at the blue Honda in front of his Porsche. "You know whose car that is?" he offers. "If they pull it forward a couple feet, I can clear your driveway."

Kent doesn't have Jack's phone number anymore, but the second guy was loud enough that probably counted as early warning.

Kent hits the threshold of the hockey team's frat house and immediately thinks Jesus Christ, fire hazard.

It's hands down one of the bigger parties he's been to. Kent managed to sneak himself and some other Océanic guys into a frat party once during Juniors, but that was nothing like this.
So much for an early warning.

Fine. Whatever. He'll just deal with Jack's reaction to seeing him after he finds Jack.

It's past midnight, but it feels like the party's still trending upward. Most people are still buzzed and enthused, still in the opening stretch before the lull when groups begin splintering off and the leaden drowsiness sinks in, before the end when there's been enough drinking that the aggression and alcohol poisonings start.

Jack'll probably seize the lull to hide for a while before he has to start helping break up fights. But the early part of parties is when the dumbasses who drink too much too fast make themselves known. So Jack should be somewhere down here until all those idiots are kicked off the property.

Kent decides to start with the walls.

Called it.

Kent almost missed him, because he was looking for Jack's behaviors as much as Jack's shape and the two didn't match. Jack's talking to someone Kent can't see.

He looks like he's telling a story, like when he'd be three whiskeys into the party and talking about a really good play by them or their opponents or one of the teams he liked.

It's--weird, because Kent recognizes the gestures and smile but now they're on a Jack six years older, a Jack with no lingering baby fat, who looks comfortable in his skin; a Jack holding a cup but who doesn't seem particularly interested in its contents.

Jesus, it's good to see him doing better.

The thought hits him blindsided, making Kent stop in place. It is. He is.

He feels the low-grade tension in his back ever since he left Boston finally begin to ease. It's been over three years since they last saw each other. Kent's not who he was at twenty-one or eighteen or sixteen anymore, either.

Things can go better this time. Maybe they've finally got their shit together now.

They were friends once, despite everything. They should be able to do it again.

Kent clears another group of people and sees that Jack isn't telling a story. Jack's flirting with the guy next to him.

In public. At a giant party. At a party filled with possibly every college student in the Greater Boston Metroplex, at least 83% of who probably haven't lost their phones yet, with a guy who literally has a hand pressed to his heart and looks completely sappy for Jack and when Kent thinks Oh my God in his head it sounds exactly like one of his linemates' horrified disbelief.

The guy pulls out his phone, and Jack curls in closer to him. And behind the two of them, someone else starts to glance past Kent before quickly looking back at his face and pausing with a frown--and then his eyes widen.

When Kent thinks Oh hell no, it just sounds like himself.

He shifts past the edge of two more groups and at last breaks into the clear space near Jack. Kent
swipes a hand across his mouth to check that his half-smile feels right, then shoves it in his pocket and forgets to hook his thumb out. He catches the end of Jack's fumbled attempt to turn a chirp into a flirt: "--I mean, I don't get selfies, but you've--"

"I wouldn't believe it if I weren't seeing it myself," Kent says. Everything aside, it is pretty great. A+ to this guy for whatever black magic he's worked. "Jack Zimmermann. At a party. Taking a selfie."

Jack's back is still to him. Kent sees his shoulders tighten.

Shit.

But when Jack turns to face him, he looks more shaken than anything.

Which...isn't great. But it's a lot better than last time, when Jack looked like he wanted to throw him out of the building. It's an opening. "Kent."

"Hey, Zimms." The party is getting a lot louder behind him; he's definitely been recognized. "Didja miss me?"

Kent learns several things about college parties over the next forty minutes, namely that:

1. There's an apparently bottomless supply of dubious-quality alcohol that would make his nutritionist either freak out or quit on him,

2. Beer pong is way more inescapable than in Juniors,

3. NHL elite players usually do not just fucking roll up into them, and

4. Everybody here either really loves hockey or really loves celebrities or is buzzed enough to love anything exciting. Kent's cool with all three.

He'd enjoy it more if Jack hadn't run away as soon as Kent got caught in place for an impromptu photo session.

But still. It's impossible for Kent not to be enthused with all the fans, old and new and temporary, around him.

He forgot what it's like to be in the Atlantic. Really in it, outside of the hotel/restaurant/arena sphere, in the neighborhoods and places where fans actually live. He expects this kind of crush and familiarity around arenas and at fan events, but most people in Las Vegas don't recognize him when he's just out buying groceries or gas.

Kent's glad he was picked for Vegas; but he's definitely moving back to New York after he retires.

The guy Jack was flirting with comes up in the quasi-line to his left. "Hey," Kent smiles.

"Hi!" Southern accent. A little buzzed but not drunk; mostly giddy. "Eric Bittle," he introduces, after the photo's taken. "It's a pleasure to meet you!"

"You too," Kent says, shaking his hand.

"I just--sorry, I know I sound so--" He makes a brief flappy gesture with his hand that Kent's seen a million times, from kids and prospects and adults. It's automatic now to think Put 'em at ease.
"No worries." Kent gives him a quick grin. "Always cool to meet a fan. Lets me know I'm doing right. So is this normal for a Samwell Hockey party?" he adds, waving at the general area.

"Oh good Lord, no," the guy replies. "I think you've shown up at the biggest one we've had. Or second biggest."

"Dang," Kent says, and thinks 'We've.' "You're with the team?"


Short, lithe, forward: the first line right-winger paired with Jack during last season's playoffs. The one assisting Jack the goals upping his stats lately.

The kid interrupts himself with a self-deprecating laugh. "Well. Obviously not defense."

Kent shakes his head. "Nah, sorry, shouldn't've asked like that." He gives him a half-grin. "Believe me, I know the 'short' comments."

Bittle laughs again, but not at him. More like--happy someone understands? Jesus. Is this kid for real. "Not at all! And thank you."

Kent nods. "It's a cool party," he says, before glancing around the room again. "I was hoping to catch Jack before I had to drive back up for tomorrow's game, though. Did you spot where he headed?"

Bittle's face falls a little. "No, I didn't, I'm sorry. I can look for him? I don't think he'll have gone far."

"Thanks," Kent says genuinely, a little surprised.

He didn't figure one of Jack's friends--boyfriend? potential boyfriend?--would offer that. The kid looks young enough that he must not have been here when Kent last visited, but still.

Unless Jack just doesn't talk about him.

Which is . . . better than insults. It's not like Kent talks about Jack much. The opening's narrower than he thought, but it's still there.

"Not at all," Bittle repeats. He glances back at the line and straightens up. "It was really nice meeting you!"

"You too," Kent answers with another quick handshake.

And then he's gone and it's another person and another photo.

By the time Kent breaks free, he's figured out that if he puts down whatever cup he's been given somebody'll just push another in his hand half a minute later. So he starts covertly tipping them out on the floor instead. It's already a sticky wreck anyway.

The kid Jack was flirting with never comes back. And whenever Kent tries to track down Jack himself, he never gets more than a couple feet before someone else wants his attention.

By the time he's done more photos, played several rounds of beer pong and gotten his ass soundly handed to him by the tiny art major managing the men's hockey team, and still hasn't found anyone
who can give him decent directions to a bathroom, a sliver of nerves are starting to eat into Kent's enthusiasm.

It's almost two a.m. Jack's still hiding. Kent was swarmed before he got anywhere in talking to him.

He's still got to drive back to Boston. He's gonna be dead on his feet in the morning skate. He's taken so many selfies with people that he's definitely going to be caught breaking the club's rules about dress attire on roadies. He's gotta come back with something to show for this. Jack didn't have to flee the area, Kent didn't come here to start shit, Jesus.

Whatever. Fine. So he'll be in trouble. He'll deal with that afterward; he needs to find Jack first.

Kent finally ducks upstairs to grab a breather, and then just starts randomly trying doors since fuck it, that's the point he's apparently at now. He must look pathetic.

The first one leads to a weirdly nice bedroom for a frat house. When Kent opens the next door, Jack jerks in his desk chair and twists around to stare at him.

"Okay," Kent says.

Jack doesn't move; and Kent thinks again about how he must look, pulling this pathetic crap. "-- Not really where I wanted to start, but. You got a bathroom around here?"

"...Yeah," Jack finally answers. He nods at a doorway to Kent's right.

"Thanks, Zimms."

He hears Jack open the bedroom door while he's washing his hands. Kent tightens his jaw and wonders just how much of this night he's supposed to spend chasing him down just to fucking talk; and then he makes himself exhale. It's still going better than last time.

When he dries his hands on his jeans and starts to leave, Jack's still in the room, telling some drunk in the hall to get downstairs and get water. Kent hangs back out of sight until Jack shuts his door again.

"Is all of Boston here?" Kent asks, leaning a shoulder against the bathroom door frame.

Jack doesn't immediately turn to face him. "...It just feels like it," he says.

Kent snickers faintly.

Jack doesn't say anything else. His hands are shoved in his pockets, and he's tilted in Kent's direction but he's looking over his shoulder. Not meeting Kent's eyes.

"Was this the place?" Kent asks to end the silence. He taps his foot against the floorboards. "Where the basement flooded?"

Jack just nods, so Kent keeps going. "You got it fixed okay?"

"Yes."

A breath later, Jack adds, "I told you that."

Kent frowns. "No you didn't. You never answered."
"I did," Jack replies. "You'd changed your number."

Kent's frown deepens. "No I didn't." He pulls out his phone and unlocks it. "I never changed it, it'd be a hassle." He goes into his contacts and holds up the phone so Jack can see the number at the top of the screen.

Jack comes over, a little slow, and looks at the phone without taking it. He pushes his hands deeper in his pockets a couple breaths later.

"The text I got back said I had the wrong number," he mutters, and Kent blinks.

"Wait. Did you write a real answer?" he asks. "Or just some one word thing?"

"I answered," Jack says, a little defensively, which means the second one.

Kent blows out a long breath.

"I probably thought it was a wrong number," he says. "I get them sometimes. That's why I said you had the wrong person."

Jack makes a wordless noise in the back of his throat.

Kent tightens his jaw for a breath and slumps deeper against the door frame. "I took your name out of my contacts."

He leaves it at that. He doesn't want to talk about the rest of the stuff around then: the loss, the extra drinks, how stupid he was to reach out to Jack in the first place just because he felt worn out. Kent props a foot against the door frame, stretching out his leg, and wishes he felt fully sober. Fucking beer pong. "Anyway. Glad it got fixed."

"Yeah."

Kent's resigning himself to the way this conversation's going to go when Jack adds, "Why are you here?"

"Good to see you too, Zimms," Kent drawls.

Then he shrugs. "I was in the area. We're on a roadie."

Jack presses his lips together slightly. "Boston's forty minutes away. And it's late."

"Yeeeéah, I coulda timed it better." Kent adds, "I figure as long as I get back by four, I'll get enough sleep to go in good."

Maybe the structure will help: it should give Jack a distinct timeframe, letting him know there's a roughly set end so he'll quit the invaded space body language. And it'll remind Jack that Kent can't afford to wreck his schedule more than he already has.

"How's your family?" Jack asks. "After the storm."

Kent blinks, and then smiles a little for real.

"Good. They're good," he says. "I mean, don't ask about Sandy at dinner unless you wanna listen to a whole lotta rage about FEMA and insurance underpayments, but everybody's okay. Uncle Nel got his house rebuilt."
Jack nods a few times sincerely. After a breath, he crosses over to his desk and leans against it. "That's good."

"Yeah. Thanks," Kent says. "Everything good with your parents?"

The corner of Jack's mouth lifts briefly at that, but it's too fleeting for Kent to really read: maybe sharp, maybe frustrated. Maybe tired. "Yes. Dad mentioned seeing you during offseason, but I'll tell them you asked."

Kent tries to remember what charity event he ran into Bob at. Or was it a league thing? Offseason feels like years ago.

"You don't have to," Kent replies. "I wasn't trying anything, I just wanted to check." He shifts against the doorway, letting his leg drop. "I fell out of touch once things were better, but the Océanic guys in Ontario were doing okay last I heard."

"That's good."

Kent nods, sliding a hand into his pocket.

Jack shifts against the desk, gripping his fingers around the lip of it. "...Why are you here?"

Kent hooks his thumb out and raises an eyebrow. "Is it really hard to guess, Zimms?"

Jack exhales.

"...I'm not.... I'm still talking with clubs," he finally says. "I don't have any plans yet."

Kent drops the eyebrow. "Any idea which conference?"

Jack makes a slight, aborted gesture, his fingers curling in the air. "No," he says; and it doesn't sound like a lie.

Kent frowns and straightens up.

"Not really," Jack continues. "A lot could depend on the Frozen Four. Michel said some clubs are just doing potential checks right now."

The corner of Jack's mouth lifts bitterly. "Some I haven't heard anything from."

Kent frowns deeper, even as he notes that Jack's still got his old agent. Good. At least someone in his life isn't an idiot. "Screw those teams, then. They should know better than to pull that crap."

Jack curls his fingers in more and drops his hand to the desk. He shakes his head once.

"I can't sabotage my options like that," he says. "They aren't treating me different than any other undrafted player."

"You aren't any other undrafted player," Kent retorts.

When Jack doesn't respond, Kent exhales through his teeth. "You still need to put them at the bottom of your list," he tells him. "If they're already wavering, they're not gonna commit to developing you as a franchise face. One season where you're not inhumanly perfect and they'll whine about 'regression' and trade you, and then you'll have to deal with that PR bullshit too."

Jack clenches his jaw and grips the lip of the desk hard.
Goddammit--Kent tugs his hat off and drags a hand through his hair. "Jack. I'm not trying to be a dick," he says, frustrated that he's already having to apologize just for trying to help. "That's how it is. Don't sign with a team that's not committed, they'll just fuck you over in a couple years. It's how things are."

Jack squeezes his eyes shut. "I know."

Kent starts to push his hair back again and then catches himself in the tell at the last second. He drops his hand to his side.

He got too used to having a team that actually listens to him. To having a group of guys that're used to him, so even if Kent screws up and leaves a call-up or trade thinking he's weird or assholish, the other guys'll buffer it until the new one adjusts. He got spoiled.

He forgot what a minefield it's like, talking to Jack sometimes.

Kent wonders briefly if the kid downstairs is any better at it.

Except thinking about Bittle is a mistake--because now that Kent doesn't have to concentrate on the crowd, all the stuff he'd been keeping out of his mind hits hard until his thoughts are a jumbled mix of *How could you not be paying attention for cameras for fuck's sake* and *Kinda got a type there, huh Zimms?* and *Good luck kid, you'll need it* and this weird, really unpleasant sensation in his chest that Kent doesn't want to think about but which feels a lot like miserable relief.

Kent slumps hard against the door frame again and squashes down his cowlick distractedly.

But.

It's not like it's the worst thing to happen. It might be a good one.

How many times did he tell himself it'd be stupid to want to date Jack again? How much did the last time he visited grind that in? That was where it all went wrong in Juniors.

Things got even better at first, sure. Things were great for a while.

But then they weren't. And then they just got worse, and worse, and worse, until Kent was so fucking tired of handling Jack's damage by the end and so pissed at himself for being such a shitty friend that he was tired in the first place.

But if it doesn't have to all be on him anymore, then.

It'd be weird, yeah. It'd be real weird at first. He'd have to figure out how he was supposed to act around Bittle. But it wouldn't be so different from how things are with the rest of the team.

They're all Kent's teammates, and most of them are his friends, and some of them are good friends. But at the end of the day they go home to their girlfriends or families, and Kent goes home and gets a break.

So. Maybe if there's somebody else, if it's not all on Kent this time. If there's someone else to pick up the slack with Jack, then. Maybe they could get it right this time.

Maybe if he and Jack have their own spaces outside of the clubhouse, they can manage being together in it better. They can get their shit together and be friends and not have all the problems build up between them until they're at each others' throats over and over.
It'll be weird, but it's a way better alternative than never interacting off the ice. Kent's been a captain long enough to know that can't work without fucking up the team.

But this is doable. Maybe the part where they went wrong was trying to be more than friends when it was the friends part that mattered.

Okay. All right. Not great, but not the worst.

The Aces need a player like Jack on the ice. Kent needs another guy he can trust to be a leader off it, like Jack. If they can just pin that down, he'll figure out how to deal with all the rest of it later. Kent just wants--

--he just wants someone he can be around, without trying to figure out who he's supposed to be while he's there. He wants somebody who already knows who he is.

Jack already knows more about Kent than anybody else in the world, because Kent told it all to him back when they were seventeen.

He wants a friend again like he had in Zimms.

So. Nowhere to go but forward.

Kent grips the brim of his hat a little tighter, and then makes himself exhale. He straightens up and shifts to face Jack. "...You have no clue?"

"I mean...." Jack curls in a little more, leaning harder against the desk, shoulders slumping. "It could be Montreal, it could be L.A. Okay?" His knuckles are going white. "I don't know."

They both know why Kent's here; but if he has to say it out loud to make Jack acknowledge it, all right. It's worth it. They can make it work this time.

Kent pushes away from the door frame and moves toward him. "...What about Las Vegas?"

Except they can't make it work.

Except they can't even talk for ten minutes before Kent says the wrong thing, because with Jack Zimmermann there's always five thousand wrong things to say for each acceptable one, and then he's getting shoved away again despite everything he put in to try and reach out until Kent's too pissed to keep it down anymore, and then it escalates until he and Zimmermann are trying to hurt each other more than they're being hurt and Kent wonders at what goddamn point in his life he's finally going to recognize that sometimes past performance is a really fucking good predictor of future behavior.

And then when Zimmermann fucking throws him out again, Kent wrenches open the door and finds the kid there. Spying.

--Or coming to make sure Zimmermann was okay.

It's not like it's Kent's job anymore. It's obviously someone else's now, someone who's better at it than he ever was.

Maybe where he really went wrong all along was thinking they were ever friends and not just good linemates. Maybe Kent can't ever do anything right in Zimmermann's mind off the ice because he's had the wrong idea for years and years.
Zimmermann's fine with leaving behind what they had in Juniors, and Kent's wasted six years of his life trying to create space for something that doesn't exist and maybe never did.

Fine.

Bittle lifts his head but doesn't know where to look, palpably uncomfortable at being caught or overhearing or Kent doesn't know and doesn't fucking care. Zimmermann's silent behind him; when the kid's gaze cuts over Kent's shoulder to Zimmermann, worry starting to replace everything else on his face, Kent is done.

"Hey. Well. Call me if you reconsider or whatever," he says, moving past the kid and fixing his hat. "But good luck with the Falconers."

If they're not even friends, if he wasted so much time and fucked up his schedule before a game just to be humiliated. If he's been replaced entirely.

Then it's not like he's ever held back against any other competition he has info on.

Kent adds, "I'm sure that'll make your dad proud."

He hears the door slam behind him while he's heading down the stairs. Kent shifts through the crowd, his basic PR smile on because it's the easiest default and he doesn't have to think about it. He gives a few guys handshakes, squeezes one girl's shoulder, dodges a spilling drink, and then he's finally out the door and into breathing room again.

Kent spits onto the grass and wipes his mouth with the heel of his hand, but it doesn't get rid of the taste of those last words.

So he just gets in the car and leaves.

He doesn't let himself speed. It's after three a.m. when he gets back to the hotel, but he's still angry enough that he has to keep consciously unclenching his fists. He takes the stairs up to his room instead of the elevator to work off more of it.

Kent's brushing his teeth when he hears a mattress groan. There's a distant clatter of a clock on a nightstand, and then Vichy calls, "Motherfuck, you finally back?"

"Go to sleep," Kent replies, cutting the water down. He should've checked if the connecting doors were still open. Or remembered to shut his before he left. "Sorry for waking you."

He doesn't hear a response, so Kent figures he listened.

But while he's spitting out the toothpaste Vichy comes to the bathroom door, frowning blearily. Because obviously nobody fucking listens to Kent, who was he kidding?

"Tell me you didn't drive back here," Vichy says, folding his arms.

Kent gives him a look.

"No," Vichy replies flatly. "You don't get to pull crap like this before a game and show up smelling like a brewery, and then get mad at me for asking that."

"I'm not drunk," he snaps.
"I've got a nose, Parson."

He spits out more toothpaste and wipes off his mouth, and tries to remember if he walked too close to the desk when he was crossing the lobby. He'll have to air out the car before returning it. And get the hotel to clean his clothes before they leave. "Everybody was drunk. And the place was packed. It kept getting spilled on me. You seriously think I'd drive drunk?"

"No," Vichy answers. "Normally."

Kent looks over again; but it's too hard to gauge Vichy's expression under the sleepiness, and anyway Kent's fucking tired of reading people for the night. He turns the water back up.

"You okay?" Vichy asks, leaning against the door.

Kent spits again, rinses out his mouth, and then rinses his face. Vichy yawns, still frowning. Kent grabs the nearest towel and starts drying off.

"No," he says.

He tosses the towel on the countertop a couple breaths later. "I will be. Get back to sleep, the alarm'll be off soon."

". . . Alright," Vichy says at last; but he doesn't move. Kent thinks about a shower and then decides it can wait.

"You know video of you getting slaughtered at beer pong's up on Youtube," Vichy adds.

Kent stills.

Then he slumps forward and thumps his forehead against the mirror with a groan. "Who the fuck's that good without cheating," he demands.

Vichy half-smirks. "Parser. The irony of you saying that."

"Like goddamn Bryant and Lin and Curry rolled in one," Kent mutters.

When Vichy doesn't comment, Kent exhales through his teeth and pushes away from the counter. Vichy moves out of the way when he turns to leave the bathroom.

"...You sure you're gonna be all right?" Vichy asks.

Kent drops onto the nearest bed. "I'll be fine," he repeats. He kicks the coverlet to the floor and drags a pillow under his head. "Just lemme sleep."

"Alright," Vichy says again. Kent hears him shut the connecting door a few moments later.

He tries to fall asleep.

*

When his alarm goes off four hours later, Kent forces himself out of bed and goes to shower and shave and fix his hair with more care than usual, swearing steadily the whole time.

He needed the extra sleep he's losing; but he has to look perfect after last night. The last thing he can afford is appearing hungover.
He ties up last night's clothes in a laundry bag and leaves it at the front desk. At breakfast, he sits at a table on the far wall with his back to the room, earbuds in and reading on his phone while he eats.

It buys him about three and a half minutes of being left alone before someone yanks one of the earbuds out and drops their plate on the table.

Kent gives Showy an aggravated look that his alternate ignores as he sits down across from him.

"You know how I was talking about 'not subtle' yesterday, Parse?" Showy says flatly. "Applies to you too, pal."

"What?" Kent replies, rubbing his sore ear.

"Hm, defense is a problem for us this season," Showy says sarcastically, imitating Kent's voice. "I know, I'll just fuckin' fix it myself. I'll just go--"

"What the fuck do you want me to do?" Kent interrupts icily, because he can see where this is headed. He pulls the other earbud loose. "Watch us lose?"

"How about have some motherfucking sense of self-preser--" and then Showy cuts off and takes a long, slow breath.

"Alright," he says eventually. "I thought I was fine for this, but no. I'll talk to you later, Parse."

"Just spit it out," Kent says flatly.

"Nope," Showy replies, picking up his plate. "Trying to have a conversation when you're pissed never does any good. You know that too."

"...Fine," Kent says, since he's not wrong.

Last night fucking proved that yet again, didn't it?

Kent puts his earbuds back in. "See you at video."

Showy thumps his shoulder harder than necessary as he leaves. Kent makes another irritated face and goes back to his phone, reviewing the damage on social media from last night.

He gets through the Aces' morning video review in a loaned room at TD Garden; but when he starts to head for the away team's dressing room with the rest of the guys taking the optional skate, Kent hears the coach say flatly, "Parson. What are you doing?"

Shit, Kent thinks before turning around. "...Getting dressed for skate?"

"Go back to the hotel," Coach Moss tells him, and Kent thinks Shit, no, my streak, not like this. "I need you rested for tonight more than I need you skating now."

"...So I'm playing tonight?" Kent checks, swallowing away his dried mouth.

"I'm putting you down for first line," Coach Moss says evenly. "Go get more rest, and then come back and prove I'm making the right choice."

Kent says, "I will."
"Good," Coach Moss tells him. "Be back for special teams at one."

"Okay."

Kent crashes for another three hours in his hotel room, sleeping through the team's pregame meal and only returning to the arena after his alarm goes off for the power play meeting.

He concentrates in the special teams' meetings, finally grabs some food and more coffee afterward, and downs them while he's soaking in the hotel's hot tub. Then he throws himself into the focused immediacy of his post-tub workout.

Kent sinks into the structure of a game day, glad to know--despite how disrupted today's been--how he's supposed to act at any given point: encouraging with some guys and discussing potential plays with others during the afternoon; on-point and agreeable with the media during pre-game; focused but still engaged with the Aces' fans during warmups.

He gets through the rest of the day and does his job at all points. And then they're finally in the side-hall to the ice, waiting for TD Garden to wrap up the pregame theatrics announcing the Bruins so they can skate in. Kent closes his eyes and draws a deep breath, half-listening to the PA announcer do his spiel.

A heartbeat later, he exhales it all and lets himself be really fucking pissed once more.

By two-thirds of the way through first period, the Bruins' captain is taking Kent's abnormally high number of hits on his team personally. Kent spends most of the last several minutes when their shifts overlap avoiding the boards.

"Little fucking warning next time, Parse!" Showy yells at him as they're entering the dressing room at first intermission. Someone stops Kent while he's heading for his stall with a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Parson," Coach Moss says seriously, "do we need to stage a suicide intervention for you?"

"What the fuck?" Kent says before his brain registers Coach, politer. "No. Sorry. What?"

"Because I can't figure out why the hell else you're egging Zdeno Chara to murder you," Moss says flatly. "Knock it off."

Kent breathes out through his teeth and then closes his eyes and makes himself nod. "Yes, sir."

"Don't 'yes, sir' me, Kent," Moss replies. "You're better than this. You got something to prove to someone, prove it by humiliating the defense with your stick handling. That's what we pay you for."

Kent snorts on a laugh.

"Alright," he says a breath later. "Got it, coach."

"Good," Moss says. He releases Kent's shoulder and turns to the room. "Okay men, they're pissed as fuck at us, so let's take it further. Make them remember who they lost the Cup to back in 2011."

Kent snarks to himself again, and then strips off his jersey and drops onto his seat to listen to the game plan.
Coach Moss blends their lines during intermission, shifting Scrappy onto Kent's to take Mitts' place at left-wing.

Scrappy's lineys jostle Mitts between them as they head out of the dressing room, mock-warning him to live up to the energy line. Scrappy heaves a long sigh as he falls into place beside Kent and Vichy. "Guess I'm babysitting you tonight."

"We'll try to keep up," Kent says dryly.

"Fuckin' better. Don't make me look bad."

Kent shifts his stick in his grip as they make their way down the hall, because yeah. The coach wouldn't be cutting Mitts' ice time for no reason, fucking with the KRS line, and setting the Aces' top agitator to play alongside Kent unless Coach Moss thought Kent was being too emotional on the ice and really did need a babysitter. Or a bodyguard.

"Sorry," he says, quieter; and both Scrappy and Vichy look over. "If I'd realized he'd--I would've warned you. Let you do research."

Scrappy keeps watching his face for a moment.

Then he snorts and shakes his head.

"Any time we're playing I know a rat's gonna try taking you out. I researched." He pauses, and then shoves Kent hard in the bicep. "Some warning woulda been nice. Asshole. The fucking Bruins."

"Sorry."

Scrappy tosses his stick between his hands. "Jesus Parse, quit sounding sincere. You're creeping me out."

"Soooooooorry," Kent drawls.

Scrappy half-smirks. "That's better."

"Am I getting an apology?" Vichy asks.

Scrappy answers before Kent can. "Vich, you knew what you were getting into with this dick."

"Pretty much," Kent agrees.

Vichy scowls at them. "Fuck you both."

Kent slaps him on the shoulder as they skate out into the arena.

He lays off the hits, because he was told to but also because now the defense is expecting them and wasting energy trying to catch him on one.

Kent chirps instead. He embarrasses the Bruins further with toe drags and dekes, and basically does everything he can to be an asshole.

They get up by a goal, because when most of the opposition wants to kill him they aren't concentrating enough on his lineys--and Vichy and Scrappy have always had great chemistry, so
they can capitalize on it. Kent intercepts a Bruin's attempt to clear the puck and one-times it to Vichy who uses Scrappy's screen on the goalie to force it into the net; and during the celly Kent yells across the ice to Lucic, "Thanks for the assist!"

"Goddammit, shut up!" Vichy cackles, slapping him on the back and sounding torn between horror and glee. "Gonna have to put you in witness protection to get outta here. Airport'll shut down for the lynch mob."

Kent laughs harder.

He's being chased as he crosses the neutral zone when it happens. Kent senses the hook coming up on the back of his skates; he jumps to clear it, wobbles when he lands but manages to pass the puck behind and over to Showy, an unformed Not this time in his head as he gets back in his stride and heads deeper into the offensive zone.

And then Scrappy's tearing past him, throwing his gloves off and looking more angry than makes sense.

By the time Kent breaks to a stop and spins around, Scrappy's already on the Bruin that tried to trip him, wrestling Lucic to the ice and slugging him in the face. The linesmen are already trying to rip him off. This isn't normal.

Kent and Sunny help a ref tear them apart, with Scrappy fighting them every second of it. Lucic's face is bleeding. "Jesus Christ," Kent starts, "calm the--"

"Motherfucker!!" Scrappy explodes, so loud all the mics have to catch it. Showy grabs a handful of his jersey too. Marchand moves toward Scrappy when the ref's grip slips; Vichy gets between them. "You tried to slew-foot him fucker!"

Kent tenses.

He and the d-men manage to drag Scrappy farther away. The other referee comes with them too, telling Scrappy to calm the hell down. Sunny keeps an arm hooked hard around Scrappy's torso while Scrappy clenches his fists, still breathing hard.

Vichy glides over to pick up his gloves and brings them back. Kent keeps a hand pressed to Scrappy's chest, and watches the Jumbotron.

There's no missing it in the replay. Kent sees the near-grab of his jersey, the kick he just barely cleared with his jump. It would've cut above his skates. He doesn't wear kevlar socks. It could've sliced his Achilles.

It's the same leg he broke his ankle on last year.

The refs finally settle on the penalties after Kent and Chara argue with them: a double minor to Scrappy for the roughing and the blood, a minor to Lucic for unsportsmanlike conduct. Lucic's still getting his nose dealt with, so the Bruins' coach sends another guy to serve his time.

Kent plays the last thirty seconds of his final shift in second period and watches the ice from the bench.

"I said 'take it further,'" Coach Moss says in the dressing room during the break. "And you did.
Good job, Jeff," he tells Scrappy. "I know we can count on you not to let that shit pass."

Scrappy nods while one of his usual lineys, Robber, thumps him on the thigh. Kent pauses from striping down to add an appreciative noise and then rubs his face hard with a towel.

"All right," Moss says. "But now we need to keep out of the box. Make them be the ones taking penalties. We know they're gonna come for us this period. Keep them in their zone, keep forcing them to defend. Don't get protective. We're Vegas, we fuckin' gamble."

"Fuck yeah," Vichy says, punching a fist into his palm. Kent belatedly adds a "Damn right."

"Good," Moss says over the guys' agreeing noise. He goes to the white board and bites open a marker. "All right."

When Moss is done reviewing the plays, Kent goes through his sticks and then catches the equipment manager. "Get my extra sticks."

"Yep," Nick tells him.

When he brings them, Kent takes the two with the piece of blue tape by the butt.

He wraps the handles to hide the tape, and then checks twice that there's no bubbles in it. He bounces a puck off the blade as he moves to an empty edge of the room, readjusting to the harder composite. "Box."

Their goalie blinks and looks over. "What?"

Boxy needs to rest after all the shots the Bruins have taken at him, but Kent needs to check this. He doesn't have time to waste readjusting on the ice. "Bring your glove here a second."

He does. Kent points to a spot. "Hold it there."

Boxy looks at the stick in his hands. "Blue twig?"

"Yeah."

"Rask's been favoring his left hip since that catch at 5:13," Boxy tells him. He stands where Kent pointed and sets his glove. "If you're doing that, push him there."

"My left or his?"

"His."

"Ok." Kent glances at the wall and then drops the puck so it hits the ground. He snaps it into the wall, and it rebounds off and into Boxy's glove. Boxy closes around it.

"Alright," Kent says, since it'll do. Their goalie needs to rest. He practices with these sticks for a reason. "Thanks."

Boxy nods and tosses the puck to him before going back to his seat.

Kent triple-checks that the tape's smooth on the handle. He does the same for the second stick before giving it to Nick to carry out.
Scrappy elbows him again when they're in the hall waiting for the cue to return to the ice. "You good?"

"Yeah."

Scrappy keeps frowning at him. Kent asks, "Why?"

"You look...." Scrappy works his jaw for a moment. "I dunno. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," Kent replies.

Mitts comes up and tosses an arm over his shoulder, leaning forward to look at him. Kent turns his head to look back.

"Well, shit," Mitts says for some reason a couple breaths later. He holds out a fist. "Okay. Let's fuckin' murder 'em out there, Parse."

Kent bumps his fist and then shrugs off his arm when they get the cue to head out.

He tunes out the crowd as soon as he skates into it. Kent scans the ice again as he's heading for the center line and notes where cuts remain despite the re-icing. Bruins' 63 says something as he passes, but Kent discards it. He takes his spot, focused on his center and the sticks between himself and the puck.

The Aces score two more goals with Kent assisting both. He watches the opposition get more desperate and lose finesse. The flaws expose spaces in the ice, and Kent sends the puck through them.

His shots have less power with this stick's lack of give, but the precision it gives is worth the tradeoff.

Kent ricochets off the boards and the puck goes where he wants. He sets up his shots on the goal to force 40 to stretch on his bad side, and his center gets in 40's space to keep him from controlling the rebounds. Kent dodges the opposition that comes after him. He watches for where the puck's going to go and makes sure he gets there first. Scrappy and Vichy hold up their ends of the line.

It must be late in the period because he's starting to get winded sooner into his shifts. It feels like there's an opening into the net. There's 33 coming at him. Scrappy's angled and moving fast enough to reach him first. Kent trusts without thinking about it and takes the shot.

Scrappy intercepts 33 and forces him to the side before he manages to hit Kent. The puck rebounds off 40's shin guard at the five-hole.

In front of the net, Vichy punches the air and yells. A goal.

Kent thinks vaguely he should start a fight for the Gordie Howe hat trick. 63 and 33 have been hitting Scrappy the hardest.

Then he registers the noise of the buzzer.

A breath later Vichy bangs into his side, wrapping an arm hard around his shoulders and yelling. Scrappy's doing the same, high-fiving Vichy; more of their guys are on the ice and shouting, the crowd's noisy wherever Aces' jerseys are, and Kent knows he needs to be doing something but it's overwhelming going from concentrating to not so abruptly and he can't remember what it is and it
feels like he's running out of time.

Someone hauls him over from the side, noogieing his helmet, more yelling. Mitts. Kent flails as his face is shoved into the man's chest. He still can't remember what he needs to be doing but nobody can see him right now, he's got a second. This feels familiar. Breathe.

They won the game. They dominated the Bruins--got them back for that chickenshit attack, for all the hits the guys took tonight, for everything. Made them pay for being a living example of a club that fucks up managing young talent, showed them where that'd get them in the end. Showed everyone watching where that'll get a team in the end. This jersey reeks. They fuckin' won, they were great.

Kent shakes free of Mitts' hold and whoops in glee, pumping his arms. More of the guys crowd in around them, loud and joyful as they head over to congratulate Boxy for defending the goal.

Back in the dressing room, Kent fist bumps the guys while their victory song plays. He doesn't get chirped for the way he acted in first and second period like he expected.

There's something tense about the room Kent can't place. Something like too much effort behind the enthusiasm from some of the guys. But not all. Scrappy's off, but Mitts and Showy and Boxy aren't. Vichy's been weird since they left the ice.

It doesn't make enough sense for Kent to figure out. So he goes to shower and get the rest of the way back on his game instead.

Scrappy's pulled away for a call from the league's rules enforcer while Kent's washing off. The front office culled Kent from postgame interviews after a Boston reporter brought up the party last night in pregame, so he hangs back outside the dressing room with a couple other guys until Scrappy returns.

Kirbs stands up from his fold-out chair as soon as Scrappy returns. "You alright?"

Scrappy rubs at his good eye but nods at his liney. "Yeah. Just gave me a warning," he mutters. "Said he knew I'd been cleaning up my act since 2011, to keep working on it."

Kirbs exhales. "Good."

Scrappy shrugs shortly, and then shifts out of the way so one of the equipment guys can get through the hall. The rest of them take the hint and drop it.

The club's reserved one of the hotel ballrooms for their post-game meal. It's lamb and fries, a nice change from the usual steak; but Kent's too hungry to appreciate it.

Most of the guys head out once they're done eating. Kent's about to do the same, trying to figure out if he wants a salad before room service ends or if his adrenaline'll fade soon enough that he can just sleep, when Scrappy drops into a chair beside him with a smothered grunt.

"You got that out of your fuckin' system, Parse? Or this gonna be a thing up here?"

"Wha?" he replies, before his brain catches up and processes what Scrappy means. Kent decides to go for sleep over food. "I'm done."
"You better be," Scrappy mutters. "Or I'm buying stock in aspirin."

"Aspirin's not a company, Scraps."

"Go fuck yourself," he replies. "What the hell was that shit third period?"

Kent's fingers curl in slightly; and then he catches himself and pushes his chair back instead. "You mean those goals?" he asks, with a half-smile and raised eyebrow. "Might be time for you to turn in, if you're havin' to ask."

"Go fuck yourself," Scrappy repeats, getting terser with aggravation. The bruise under his left eye is darker now, making the the bloodshot side of it look worse. "You fuckin' liar, saying you were good. What was that?"

"What are you asking, Scalfano?" Kent says shortly.

"Oh my fucking God," Showy says wearily a table over. "I just wanted one fucking meal. Scrappy, I got this, okay?"

Kent gives him a sidelong look. Scrappy shifts in his chair, and then drags a hand over the good side of his face.

"Why do you always make shit so hard?!" he demands from Kent. "Just give me a fucking answer! What the hell was all this?" He gestures vaguely at his eyes.

Kent scowls and wishes he'd just left sooner. He doesn't want to get into this. "All what?"

"That thing where you're not showing anything anymore," Mitts says from a couple tables away. "Like--Cup finals, or those Memorial Cup games. You mean the one before we play teams with former guys, right?" he asks Scrappy.

"Or we could just set off the fuckin' landmine, sure, that works too," Showy mutters into a last forkful of lamb.

Mitts replies, "Maybe we haven't met, man. I'm Smith, I start shit around here."

Showy gives him an unamused look.

Kent stares at Mitts.

So does Scrappy. "--Yeah. What? You watched Parse's Juniors games?"

Mitts shrugs. "Yeah." He adds to Kent, "When they started putting me on your line that first camp, I figured I'd better do research."

"Alright," Kent replies, since that's not weird.

--Was that was why it felt familiar, the way Mitts grabbed him during their celly on the ice after winning. Was he intentionally hiding Kent's face?

Zimms--Zimmermann would do that, after he knew to see when Kent was trying to readjust. He had to do it for him a few times during their Memorial Cup games; Kent knew it was their last run playing on the same team for a while, until they were free agents. He went into those games to win.

If those were some of the ones Mitts watched, then....
Kent doesn't know how he feels about that; and he doesn't want to know, so he quits thinking about it.

"That's what I'm asking," Scrappy says. "The fuck is that?"

"Jesus Christ," Kent says in agitation, because he didn't want to get into this. Why the hell didn't he leave faster, why has everything been fucked up ever since he got on that road to fucking Samwell. "I was just concentrating, why are you making such a goddamn deal about it?"

Showy closes his eyes and eats the last of his fries.

Scrappy stares at him in disbelief. Farther away, Mitts glances over again as he's scrubbing his mouth with a napkin.

At the next table over, Chazzer twists around in his chair, slinging an arm over the back of it as he looks at him. Beside Chazzer, Vichy eyes Kent for the first time since they left the arena.

Kent's shoulders tense.

"What?" he says; and Scrappy makes a strangled noise and bends forward, digging his fingers into his scalp.

"Yeah, okay," Mitts agrees, either with him or with Scrappy. He pushes away from his table.

"Are you try to kill me, Parson?" Scrappy demands, dropping his hands and straightening up.
"'Concentrating'? What the fuck? What the fuck, what the fuck you doing all time before?!

"Playing," Kent says edgily. "What's your problem?"

"If the Pens don't deal with this much shit I hope their fuckin' arena burns down," Showy says calmly. "That will be the only true justice. I'm pretty sure what Jeff's asking is can you explain the difference between 'playing' and 'concentrating'?"

Scrappy mutters something in Italian; and Showy says, "Okay, 'Can you explain the difference between 'playing' and 'concentrating,'" and also insert about seventeen 'fuck's into that sentence."

Mitts cackles on his way out of the room. Scrappy balls up Kent's napkin and lobs it at Showy's face.

"Jesus," Kent mutters, slumping back into his chair. He catches and stops himself before he drags a hand over his hair. "It's just....

"I don't pay so much attention to other shit," he says. "The clock, how the barn's reacting, what the other guys are doing on their bench. Who their coach is tapping next. If I'm concentrating I tune that stuff out."

Scrappy drapes an arm on the table, still staring at him.

Kent makes a small, sharp gesture. "That's it." Half of it.

The other half is the part he knows not to talk about. He heard enough from his dad about the negative consequences of dehumanizing enemies whenever he was complaining about the war that Kent knew that much even before Juniors. He never talks about that half.

Jack got it, when Kent was struggling to explain it the second time they were shotgunning weed
that afternoon alone in his billet family's backyard while everyone was out. He understood tracking
guys' skills and weaknesses while throwing out everything else, friends and parents and girlfriends
and past good times--and now in the NHL the shared charities, special conferences and events,
lockout experiences. Names. All the stuff that usually holds guys back on the ice.

But then, Zimmermann was probably stoned in more ways than Kent thought that day.

And anyway he thinks Kent's worthless, so what's his getting it say about them both?

Says a lot that now that Zimmermann's gone clean, he doesn't want anything to do with him. He
could only stomach being around Kent when he was dosed with pills or booze or both.

Kent clenches his jaw and shoves that thought down.

Chazzer props his elbow on the table, chin in his palm. "No, sure, that's totally normal," he
comments. "Do it all the time myself, bro."

"Piss off," Kent mutters, before telling Scrappy, "Quit being weird about it already."

"Me weird," Scrappy retorts. Vichy sets his silverware on his plate and pushes back from his table.

Kent watches him start to leave, eyes narrowed. His linemate's been acting weird since they won--
yet another thing Kent has to deal with. Soon.

Scrappy turns toward Vichy too, frowning. "Vich?"

Vichy says something cold in Italian.

Scrappy frowns deeper. "Fuck is skipping the combi--?" and then he changes to Italian as well.

"Oh shit," Showy says almost inaudibly; and Kent processes what they must be talking about.

He shoves away from the table so hard his chair falls over.

He catches Klimentov before he can get out the door, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him
around to face him. "What'd you fuckin' say?!"

Klimentov drops his shoulder hard, pushing Kent's arm away. "Get off--"

Kent grabs his jacket labels and shoves him against the wall. "Fuck you think you are?"

Too late, he realizes he's never going to be able to pretend it was a rumor anymore. Not after
reacting like this.

It was the stupidest thing he ever did in his life, throwing his whole fucking future on the line
refusing to take the combine too because Zimmermann was so freaked out that somebody would
figure out why he couldn't, and then Zimmermann didn't even care, he still doesn't care, he never--

Someone wrenches Kent back as Scrappy breaks his grip on Klimentov's jacket. Klimentov shoves
him away hard, making Showy grunt when Kent stumbles against him. "Goddammit Parson--!"

"Why'd it take Nadiya so long to marry you?" Kent sneers out, because if this is the game
Klimentov wants to play Kent plays to win. "You almost lose out to somebody else?"

Klimentov tenses up--and then he lunges at him. Scrappy and Chazzer both grab him and hold him
back. Showy backs himself and Kent up.
Kent makes a note that that's a much more accurate attack than he predicted. He snorts derisively, smirking wider.

"You're a fuckin' one-trick pony," Showy growls, pulling him farther away before wrapping his arms around Kent's chest and hauling him off his feet. He starts for the door. "Fuck it, you two are taking thirty."

Kent elbows him hard in the gut. Short swears and drops him back to his feet, but doesn't let go as Kent tries to twist free.

"You didn't hear anything," Short orders at the only other person still in the room, the Aces' rookie defenseman sitting frozen at a table watching them.

"Yes sir," Lean says reflexively, and Short drags Kent out of the ballroom.

"Fucking let--"

"Hell no," Short cuts him off. "I am hanging onto you for your own goddamn safety, Parson. Don't try to fight the strongest guy on the team. *fuck.* You're bad as goddamn B.Gally. Vichy can take down *me,* your ass would *die.*"

Kent snarls and tries to rip loose again. Short headlocks him before pulling out his phone.

"God*dammit* Short--!"

"Yup, nope," Short says blithely. "Needed to get this done anyway. Put your PR face on, you're about to meet a fan."

"What the *fuck*--" and Short hits someone in his contacts.

He lets Kent out of the headlock a moment later when they pick up with a "Yo."

"Hey, Andy get there yet?" Short asks, grabbing Kent's jacket collar when he tries to leave down the hall.

"Uh, yeah, he's home. Why?"

"Cool, point the phone at him," Short says, before switching to FaceTime. Kent exhales through his teeth and fixes his hair.

Whoever's on the line yells "Andy!" The phone shows video of the back of a couch, a living room, and a doorway; Short starts walking, still holding his collar. Kent gives him a sidelong glare.

Someone else calls back "What?" and comes into view through the doorway. Showy nods at the phone.

"Hey, brat," he says casually, shifting the hand on Kent's collar into an arm around his shoulders as Short pulls him closer into the frame. "Since you couldn't make it to the party, I figured I'd bring him to you. Say hi, Parse."

"What the *fuck*?!" the guy who answered says as the phone whips around to him. "--Dude."

Kent smiles. "'*Sup*?"

"Hey, yeah, hi--" and another, younger guy crashes into view over the back of the couch, shoving the first one hard with "*You asshole,* you said it was a fake!"
"Zach told me it wasn't him!"

"I say lots of shit, man," Showy says cheerfully, and Kent snorts under his breath. "--Wait, your mom's not in hearing, right?"

"Nah."

"Cool. Hey Andy, you gonna congratulate me on our win?"

"No, fuck you, go Bruins," the younger guy says. "Holy shit. Hey Kent, can I take a photo?"

"Of the phone, loser?" the first guy derides. Kent says, "Yeah, 'course."

"Get the fuck out've the way, Zach!" Andy orders as he's angling his phone, and Kent tries really hard not to snicker so he won't mess up his camera smile.

"You're welcome, you little shit," Showy drawls; but he leans most of the way out of the frame.

"I have known you way too long," Showy mutters while Andy's taking the selfie. "I forget other people think you're hot shit. I have a Cup ring too, you know!"

"Try it when you have a thirty-three game point streak."

"Those latest points against your team."

"Fuck you."

"Jesus Christ, you fucking nerd," the first guy says, shoving Andy over and half out of view. "Forgive him, he's star-struck."

"No problem," Kent grins. "Always cool to meet a fan. You and Zach friends?"

"Eli and I played together for Michigan," Showy says, tilting his chin at the first guy. Kent makes a note it's a college teammate.

Kent says seriously, "I'm so sorry you were stuck with him for that long."

Showy headlocks him again while Eli's laughing. Andy takes another photo.

They talk with Showy's friend and his little brother for a few more minutes, switching out of FaceTime when the elevator makes it lag. Kent tells the kid good luck in the Beanpot when he finds out he plays for Boston College; and once they're on their floor Showy makes a comment about curfew and the flight tomorrow, and hangs up after they've said goodbye.

"'Get outta the way, Zach,'" Kent drawls as soon as he's sure the phone's off.

"That little shit," Showy smiles, shaking his head. "I fuckin' taught him dekes and this is the thanks I get."

He glances over at Kent as he's dropping the phone back in his jacket. "You better?"

Kent pushes his hands into his pockets and hooks his thumbs out. "I'm good."

"I'm real glad you still haven't figured out that's a tell that you're bullshitting," Showy replies. Kent scowls. "It's real helpful."
"Piss off."

"You crossed a line, Kent," Showy tells him. "Vichy's my friend too."

"He started it," Kent bites off.

Showy exhales tiredly. "Yeah, I know," he says, pausing in front of Kent's door. "Which really isn't like him, huh?"

Kent tightens his jaw and says nothing, refusing to take the bait. He pulls out his keycard instead.

Showy leans against his door, blocking the lock. Kent gives him a flat look and then folds his arms.

"I am dead fuckin' tired, Parse," Showy says. "We can deal with this in the morning. Can you just promise me you'll go to bed and not kill each other before then? That is literally all I'm asking for."

"What's his fucking problem, if you know so much?" Kent replies flatly.

"Wheeeeeere to start," Showy considers. "How 'bout to begin with: Parse, this season you have basically looked every American-born player in the eye, chucked the point streak bar into the heavens, and gone 'Ha ha mortals, fuck you!'" he says, two middle fingers raised.

Kent snorts on a laugh despite himself. "Knock it off, we're in public."

Showy drops his hands. "Even I'm torn between 'God damn, I play with this man' and 'You couldn't've just been born a few more miles up over the border, asshole?"

"Let's bypass the middle, which is basically you and Vichy both have some toxic hangups," Showy adds while Kent's stifling another snicker, "and go straight to the end.

"You are the only other person who knows exactly what opening the roster'll have next season," Showy says evenly. "So after last night, there's now twenty-one guys here thinking 'I don't wanna be the one cut when Zimmermann signs' and a whole AHL team thinking there's gonna be one less roster spot possible next season."

"He's not--" Kent starts gutturally.

And then he cuts himself off and grits his teeth instead.

"... Yeah," Showy says, quieter, after a long pause. "Alright. I think you managed to nip that one in the bud, anyway, with how you've been since you got back."

He shrugs a moment later. "Doesn't change the fact that that's what everybody thought when they saw their phones this morning. You're the only one with a full no-move clause, Parse."

Kent exhales through his teeth.

"It'll hold 'til morning," his alternate captain says. "So could you go to sleep and not fight anymore teammates tonight?"

"Jesus," Kent mutters. "Yes. If you move already."

Showy pushes away from the door with his shoulders. "All right. See you tomorrow."

"See ya," Kent says shortly, keying open his door.
"And just checking," Showy adds. Kent makes an aggravated noise. "That rumor about the combine was just a rumor, right?"

Kent freezes, fingers tight on the door handle. "Yes."

"Got it," Showy says again, heading up the corridor to his room. "Thought so."

He adds, "Everybody does dumb stuff for the people that matter to them. That's probably why it's still lingering."

Kent tenses more, and then shoulders his way into the room and kicks the door shut behind him.

As he shrugs hard out of his suit jacket, he thinks he's been a fucking idiot about pretty much everything.

He got too used to having a team that listened to him. To having a group of guys who were used to him. He got spoiled. He started buying into that authenticity bullshit.

He started being honest again.

Which is where everything always goes wrong: when people know him.

It happened last year with Ivanovich when Kent told him too much after Tobin's overdose, even if it took until now to come to a head.

It's happening again with Showy, because Kent's not too much of an idiot that he doesn't recognize the implication in the man's last comment. Showy majored in drama and theater and shit; Kent knows the stereotypes. He knows the rumors that were around him and Zimmermann back in Juniors. Time's mostly faded everything but the drug ones, and those pretty much all shifted to Zimmermann--but they aren't gone. Nothing ever fully goes away.

Showy didn't imply he knows Kent's gay like it was a threat . . . but it still means Kent fucked up somewhere. He exposed a weakness.

And then he pretty much fucking confirmed it tonight, never mind what could happen to his career if it really gets out that he was covering up another prospect's drug abuse.

He wasn't a minor. He was already eighteen. His juvenile record was already closed when he screwed himself over like that for Zimmermann, because Kent thought they were friends.

All of this already happened with Zimmermann, and Kent failed to learn from it. Zimmermann knows more about Kent than anybody else in the world, because Kent told it all to him back when they were seventeen.

Before he learned to keep it to himself, or else anybody who learned too much would ditch him.

Kent never needs another fucking friend like that.

He hears voices in the next room after he finishes his shower. Kent looks at the connecting door to Ivanovich's room; and then he gets re-dressed and goes down to the front desk.

He asks for the laundry he dropped off earlier, and chats casually with the woman still behind the desk as another guy goes to get it, making a couple jokes about the people in the room above him being on their honeymoon until she offers to transfer him to a new room.
"Oh," she says a moment later, starting to frown as she checks on the computer. "It looks like we don't have anything open near your group's block...."

"Hey, no worries," Kent smiles, still leaning an arm on the counter. "Anywhere'd be cool. --Well, maybe not a room right next to them."

She flashes another brief smile and then trades out his room.

By the time he's transferred his stuff to it and dropped into bed, Kent's worn out enough that he falls asleep fast despite everything.

*

They go from Providence and Boston to a roadie up through New York, because of some scheduling bullshit that lost them their home barn for a week. They're still having to use Orleans Arena--Caesar's Palace never followed up on those promises to start building a new arena in Vegas where the Aces would have top scheduling priority. And now that MGM's claiming it's going build one, Caesar's has withdrawn completely.

Sometimes Kent tells himself he wouldn't have gone through all the hassle of Caesar's Hurricane Sandy charity game back during the lockout if he'd known the organization was lying the whole time; but he knows he still would've. It was for New York.

They win their game against the Rangers. Kent hounds Zuccarello until he's in the guy's head deep enough that Zuccarello finally takes a stupid penalty slashing Kent in the back of the neck after yet another chirp. The Aces capitalize on their power play and then hold that lead.

They lose to the Isles. But it's in a shootout, so at least it's a point. They're holding their place in the rankings, and there's still over half the season to go. The team's still killing it on the ice, even though Kent and Ivanovich have barely talked to each other outside of games and practice since Boston.

Kent keeps his point streak going through those games as well, because he has to.

Over the past weekend he broke club rules about road trip dress attire and comportment, broke curfew, did it all the day before a game, and then picked an even worse fight with a teammate than the previous one he already has on his record. The only possible reason the front office and coaches haven't disciplined him yet is because nobody wants to fuck with his streak.

So he has to keep it going.

*

The last game of the roadie is in Buffalo. It's the first one where Kent feels mostly back to normal again.

"You can only throw two pucks," the assistant coach reminds him during warmups, because everybody knows this is the game each season where Kent's family floods the barn.

Montreal and Ottawa are both closer to his hometown; but most of his relatives that don't have a CDL don't have a passport either. So they all drive over to Buffalo.

"It'd be easier if you just made it one," Kent tells Coach Kurlansky. "Then I could just toss it to the youngest. I always gotta defend the second one at Christmas."
"My heart bleeds, Parson," Kurlansky says dryly. "Two. And don't shoot a third puck into the net so it drops through the gap."

"One time--"

"Two pucks," the coach repeats. "They gotta sell this shit."

"Okay, okay."

Kent's lifting a puck on his stick to drop it over the glass to his cousin sitting on her dad's shoulders when the fines master bumps to a stop against the glass nearby and says "FIiiiiiiine."

"Zero fucks, Robber," Kent grins, dropping the puck to Chrissy; and on the other side of the glass his aunt yells "Language, Kent Parson!"

Robber busts up laughing so hard his footing slips.

Kent deadpan mouths "Thanks" at Aunt Jenna, and then high-fives another cousin through the glass before skating off to practice his spins.

His goal and assist in their shutout of the Sabres takes Kent's streak to thirty-six games.

The point streak record for American-born players is now double what it was before this season. Kent's closing in on his 400th career point and has a good chance of hitting his 200th goal within the season too, as long as he can stay healthy and on fire.

"You could just take a pic of yourself with a middle finger to the Olympics' decision team, bro," his PK center says in the dressing room, over the noise of the Aces' victory song blaring. "Hashtag 'see you in Pyongchang!' It'd be quicker."

"Classy," Kent tells Chazzer; but he can't help snickering.

On the way to the bus he slaps two fifties into Robber's palm before telling him to lay off already, he's paid.

* Kent buys kevlar socks and practices with them over the Christmas break until he's started to adjust to the increased inflexibility.

He keeps three pairs with his equipment, and another pair in his carry-on luggage just in case.

* In early January, the Colorado Avalanche achieve the season's first shutout win over the Las Vegas Aces and break Kent's streak in his own barn.

Fucking Avs.

Kent misses the postgame interviews because he takes too long in the showers. It makes him look like a coward, running away from the media; but he lost track of time. He doesn't register that the showers are almost empty until one of the guys comes back in and says the presser's done.
Kent's already surpassed his four hundredth career point.

He's seven goals away from his career two hundredth, with almost half the season left to make them.

He holds the third longest point streak in NHL history.

The only two players with longer streaks than him are Mario Lemieux and Wayne Gretzky. That's the company he's put himself into this season. That's the summary of all he's achieved--so far.

But all he can do is brace his fists hard against the tile as he stands under the shower, trying to swallow down his nausea and thinking *Fuck. Fuck. Over.*

*

The head coach puts him down for first line in their next game two days later. His ice time stays around the same.

It isn't cut. He isn't scratched. The front office doesn't discipline him aside from the fines he already paid for breaking the curfew and dress attire rules. The league seems to've decided to ignore everything around December 13th and 14th.

Kent thinks, *Seriously?*

A colder part of him thinks Showy might be onto something about the club manipulating him into believing he's more of a problem than he is.

Even if it wasn't their initial plan when drafting him--if they just decided to roll with it after that perfect storm of Kent's problems with the former head coach and the You Can Play debut--it's definitely been a strategy that's worked out for them.

Nobody ever even talks to him about the fight with Ivanovich. Not even the head coach.

That's unusual enough for Coach Moss that eventually Kent starts to wonder if that part of Boston never made it over to the coaches or up to the front office.

There's no way to bring up what Kent did and said without talking about what Ivanovich implied first--and that'd be a pretty big claim the man would have to back up. Especially with how long ago it was, and how all the evidence is circumstantial as long as Kent and Zimmermann deny he knew anything.

And Zimmermann. . . .

Despite everything, Kent can't see Jack screwing him over like that. Jack could be jealous, he could get angry, he could be a real fucker about being verbally and physically intimidating when he was really pissed; but a move as cold as that is beneath him. He wouldn't always look down on Kent for thinking that way if it wasn't.

Besides, getting involved would drag up Zimmermann's past when he's in the middle of trying to set his future. He'd stay away from it all and return "no comment"s. He's a non-factor.

So Kent was stupid to react like he did; but Ivanovich also put himself at risk making the accusation.
And aside from the rookie defenseman, all the guys in the room that heard it are friends of Ivanovich's. They wouldn't hang the man out to dry like that. And the rookie isn't going to make waves against franchise faces.

So. Maybe one less thing to worry about, at least.

Good. Kent's got enough on his plate right now as it is.

*

Soon after his streak's broken, he goes into a slump.

Kent hounds all the centers besides Ivanovich to hang back after practice and work with him, and then starts pulling in the d-men and the goalies as well.

The fourth-line center, Robber, puts up with it for the shortest. He'll stay to work with Kent on potential plays for the penalty kill; and since they almost never skate together outside of the PK, Kent doesn't bother pushing him to stay longer whenever Robber decides to leave.

The now-main goalie puts up with it for the longest, even when Kent accidentally chips his mask while working on snap shots. Boxy rips him a new one in both English and French while he gets the paint out of his contact over at the practice rink's bench; but once it's clean, he puts the contact back in and pulls his mask back on and skates over to the goal, still cussing Kent out the whole time.

"You're paying for the repaint," Boxy tells him, getting back into the net. "Again."

"Fair enough," Kent agrees, taking another puck out of the bucket.

He experiments with cutting his sticks different lengths to see how that affects his shots and his puck control. He comes in early to watch more tape of past games, and spends more time in the workout room trying to figure out how to make it harder for other players to choke him on the ice without gaining bulk that'll hamper his speed. The strength and video coaches occasionally remind him that they have families outside of the building.

Kent knows the problem's mostly mental.

If a goalie has a few losses, you send in the backup for a game and have your starter do a strong practice until he's made some good saves and gotten his confidence back. If a defenseman has some bad games, you send him out in the offensive zone until he's settled down and shaken them off. If a forward's in a drought, you review who you're playing him with and who you're playing him against, and adjust lines accordingly until he's able to score a couple goals and get the monkey off his back. And you do it fast, because the longer your player's screwing up, the deeper their mental rut's going to get.

Kent knows the majority of the problem's in his head; but knowing that doesn't help. If the problem was his body, he could change his diet and workouts and do whatever conditioning he had to to overcome this. If the problem was how he's playing with teammates, he could do drills until he's learned to predict what they'll do so he can pull out of this slump.

If it's his own damn brain betraying him, what does Kent need to do to get over that?

*

When another guy temporarily goes on the injured list and somebody else gets called up to fill his
roster spot, the head coach starts significantly changing the lines.

By the time Kent's gone four games with no goals and only one assist, Coach Moss starts consistently assigning Chazzer to play center for Kent in practices and then in games.

Ivanovich is shifted to fill Chazzer's place on the second line. Mitts stays as the first line's left winger, but Kent suspects that isn't going to last.

Chazzer's a more defensive-minded center than Ivanovich, and he sends the puck to Kent and Mitts more frequently than he keeps it to shoot himself. Mitts is good with trash goals; but the specialty he's honed over the last few years is clearing the ice for his lineys so they can shoot. He and Chazzer don't have the chemistry he and Ivanovich did.

So Kent rearranges how he thinks out on the ice.

He starts setting up plays where the other winger's parameters are still mostly hits, screening, and digging the puck out of the corner; but now the center is a factor for assists instead of goals. Meaning Kent has to become the vector turning those assists into goals.

It takes a little adjustment. When he was a kid, a coach chewed him out once for trying to win the game by himself; and after that, Kent started thinking about the ice in terms of making assists instead of just scoring.

When he hit Juniors the coaches there kept encouraging that mindset, because it complimented Jack's skills so well.

Things didn't change much when he reached the NHL, though Kent started striking more of a balance between assists and goals as he developed on a long-term default line--one where the three of them knew each other's tendencies and abilities well.

But things have changed. So Kent readapts.

*

In late January, Holler goes permanently on the injured reserve list with a season-ending hip surgery. The Aces' lines get rearranged even more in their next games, as the coach tests out a couple forwards called up from the feeder team.

Kent follows the western conference's rankings antsily as the openings for playoff berths get narrower. The Aces had several losses in January, two of them back-to-back. Other teams have closed in on their former lead.

By early February, the GM's pushed up his negotiations with Colorado and traded a draft pick for a large forward. On Troy's first day with the Aces, Kent arrives at the clubhouse to find the trade already in the parking lot, looking around with a jacket slung over his shoulder and his sleeves shoved up.

Kent makes a mental positive note that the guy's an early arriver and parks nearby.

"You get used to the weather," he calls as he's getting out. Troy starts over toward him. "Well, not summer. Not unless you're a native like Vichy."

Troy snorts. "It was twenties and snowing yesterday, and now." He looks up at the sky again. "Phone said a high of sixty-eight. In February."
"Sounds right," Kent agrees, sliding his hands in his pockets with a light shrug. "You spent some
time with Atlanta, right? Our ice is about the same. Maybe a little better without the humidity."

Troy glances at him for a moment, and then nods. "Okay.

"Hey, Parson," he adds, holding out a hand. "No hard feelings about last year?"

"Ah," Kent replies, shaking it and trying to remember what he did. He had to pay that fine for
cross-checking Farkas in the head when he wouldn't quit targeting Scrappy one game, but that was
the Aeros. Was there anything significant with the Avalanche? "Thanks. Sorry about it."

Troy pauses, giving him another look. "'Sorry'?"

Kent decides to just get this over with and gives Troy a rueful half-smile. "I piss off a lot of guys
on the ice, so, uh. I don't remember what I did," he says. "Thanks for being cool, though. I
appreciate it."

"Uh," Troy says. "I broke your ankle."

. . . Right. That was him.

So it's not Kent's chirping burning bridges for once. This'll be way easier.

"Riiiiight," Kent says. "Nah, don't worry about it. It was already busted. That slide wouldn't've
been a problem otherwise. We're good."

Troy blinks at him once.

"Okay," he says. "I thought Smitty was shitting me. You really broke it before that?"

"Smitty?" Kent replies, because that Smith left the Aces long before last year.

"Brandon."

Mitts. "Got it," Kent says, before lifting a shoulder. "Yeah, it wasn't my smartest night."

He remembers the video he saw of the bench-clearing fight Chazzer started with Troy while Kent
was blacked out, and adds, "Sorry 'bout that brawl."

Troy lifts the corner of his mouth wryly, since the refs ejected Chazzer for keeping his gloves on
while he was hitting him. "Thanks."

They lose tomorrow's game again too; another back-to-back loss. The Ducks won theirs, pulling
ahead of the Aces in the rankings.

Kent locks his phone and readjusts his cap with a clenched jaw, trying and failing not to think
about how useless he was during his January slump.

* 

The lines finally start stabilizing again. The coach moves Mitts back to Vichy's line where he'll be
used better, and begins working with Kent and Chazzer and Trojan on developing the latent
possibilities in their line into chemistry.

Kent throws himself into it. Trojan's good at winning fights for the puck in the corners of the ice,
and he's tough enough to force back guys that try to check him. He's there to do the dirty work on Kent and Chazzer's line even more blatantly than Mitts was when Kent played with him and Vichy, but Kent's glad for it. He spent a fuckton of the first half of the season getting hit as guys tried to break his streak; it's nice not be so bruised and bashed up after games for once.

And Kent decided he liked working with the trade the first time one of the energy line guys hit an opponent against their bench and Trojan used the cover to silently grab the Schooner's blade where the ref couldn't see.

It trapped Fearn against their bench and stranded his defensive partner while the Aces skated into the Schooners' zone.

Kirbs saw what Trojan was doing and kept his arm draped over his and Fearn's sticks for a couple extra moments after the hit, hiding Trojan's hold from the officials—even though the TV announcers noticed and commented on it. Kent shoved Fearn hard in the shoulder and told him to get the fuck away from their bench while the Schooner was still trying to rip his blade free of Trojan's grip.

It also helps that when other guys have to go through Trojan to get to Chazzer, they think twice about using Chazzer's short fuse against him by hounding him until they've gotten in his head. Kent and Mitts did what they could, but a couple of their losses in January stemmed directly from Chazzer taking dumbass penalties and the other teams capitalizing on the resulting power play. It's even nicer to see that strategy starting to fail.

Especially because at his best, when he's focused and got his head together on the ice, Chazzer can be pretty creative. He and Kent already have chemistry from working together on the penalty kill; and Trojan adapts quickly to what their line needs.

When Chazzer's **not** at his best—when an opponent's yapping's gotten in his head or he lets physical attacks get to him—then he tries to get too creative and fucks up. The Aces have a couple more losses in late February when their defense can't clean up turnovers well enough.

The defensive coach that's the cause of so much discord between the Aces’ d-men still has his job, so rather than let Chazzer add fuel to that fire by tearing into the defensemen after games, Kent keeps the man's attention focused on him.

He's used to dealing with yelling; and he's taller than he was in Juniors, so Chazzer can't loom over him like Jack used to be able to. And Kent doesn't let anyone back him up against walls anymore, anyway.

Somebody usually shoulders between the two of them on the way to his stall if it's starting to get really loud—and then Chazzer stalks off to the showers, and finally gets his head off the ice and back to normal, and returns chilled out enough to be able to do postgame. Kent considered the issue handled up to the morning Vichy checks in with him about it.

"You're freaking out Trojan," Vichy says, a leg propped up on the bench rail as he stretches.

Kent looks over from where he's playing around with some of the new sticks he got during the latest All-Star game. "Seriously?"

"He came in the exercise room yesterday asking me and Jeff if he needed to be worried about a fistfight between the two of you," Vichy replies. "Saying he was half-joking's an overstatement."
"Jesus," Kent mutters; but he reminds himself New guy on new team. He exhales. "All right. I'll talk to him."

"Eh," Vichy shrugs. "Boxy already told him you two are total dipshits but you'll be fine."

Kent gives him another look over his shoulder. "Sounds a little less like Boxy and a little more like you there, Vichy."

"Well, translating's hard work," Vichy replies with a slow grin. "You want me to say it in French instead?"

"B-chirp," Kent says dryly, giving him a slow clap at the reference to how much their Quebecois goalie likes to remind Kent his accent and pronunciation of French is garbage. "Took too much build-up to get to it."

"You say 'too much build-up,' I say 'sufficient foreshadowing."

"I know I'm monolingual, Vichy," Kent replies. "You don't have to remind me I can't speak Nerd, either."

Vichy gives him a look as he drops his leg.

Kent just smiles back. "You walked into that one and you know it."

Vichy shakes his head and mutters something in deliberately-just-loud-enough Russian, because he's a troll. And then he dumps a few pucks onto the ice and starts practicing toe drags.

* *

When you spend over half a year every year working with the same guys nearly every day and trusting them to have your back in high-adrenaline games most nights, you learn to put up with each other's shit.

Kent and Vichy never talk about what they said to each other in Boston.

The other guys who were there too take the hint, even if the alternate captain's exasperated with them both for it. They all leave it behind and move forward.

It's easier now that the coach is clearly restructuring the lines in preparation for the playoff berth they're getting closer to clinching.

Kent knows he plays best when he's focused on offense, and when he can spend the majority of his ice time with linemates he's used to--whose tendencies and abilities he's familiar with and processed into his plays--because then he can focus more attention on their opponents. That's why his most common lineys in the Aces have been Vichy and Mitts for years, as long as they're healthy and not needed more urgently somewhere else in the lineup.

But adaptability's always been Vichy's strongest skill, and that's wasted on a static line.

Taking him off Kent's and having him center a fluctuating one instead, where the coach can shift around who Vichy plays with from one night to the next to counter whichever team they're up against, uses the man better than keeping him with Kent.

Kent figured it was going to happen eventually. It opens up more options for the head coach. It creates a new, flexible second line--Chazzer's personality limited the amount of guys who could
play consistently with him. Hens and Holler were the ones who held out the longest.

Kent expected the change to come a lot sooner, considering how Coach Moss was playing him and Vichy on different lines and different sides in training camp and preseason. But maybe the coach wasn't willing to tamper too much with the old method when Kent was lighting it up with that streak.

But that's over now.

The new line designs use Vichy better; and they give him and Kent some distance from each other.

Kent's used to dealing with other people's envy, too. At least getting space from a teammate actually helped, this time.

*

Over the course of March, the Las Vegas Aces pull themselves back up toward the top of the rankings as the team starts tallying up a lot more wins again.

*

During the second wave of AHL relocations in March, the club finally gets its feeder team out of Kansas and moved closer.

"Reno," Vichy says in disgust, after they get the announcement about the Sovereigns' relocation during breakfast.

"Gonna have to curb some of that shade around the call-ups, Las Vegan," Kent grins.

"No," Vichy says with finality. "It'll toughen 'em up. They can do their time in the 'little city' and we'll see if they deserve to come to a real metropolis."

"Get it outta your system now," Kent replies, rolling his eyes as he pulls a gatorade from the fridge. He twists it open and adds, "We're gonna have to work together and get out in front of the water issue real soon, with both clubs here next season."

Vichy makes a guttural noise and drags his fingers through his hair.

*

They win their last home game and lose their final road game of the season, putting them ahead of both Anaheim and St. Louis in the rankings by one point.

The Las Vegas Aces take home both the Pacific Division and Western Conference championships for the first time in the club's history.

They become the top playoff seed of 2015, one year after scraping in as the final wildcard.

*

Coach Moss forces him to take another maintenance day when the Ice Center's owner rats Kent out for coming in hours early for personal practice and then napping in his car until the other guys show up. The trainer lectures him on not overexerting himself.

"Playoffs are in five days, Parse," Elliot tells him. "Rein it in."
Kent blows his breath out through his teeth but forces himself to nod and agree. He knows the man's right; he knows he can't keep going forever without rest. It just feels like it.

He never knows what to do with himself during the gaping hole that maintenance days create in his schedule, so Kent takes his tablet to the main room and watches a couple of the Flames' past games. He ends up napping on the couch and waking up when Mitts and Trojan come into the room.

"--Buffalo, fine. I don't care who wins the lottery as long as they're eastern," Mitts says.

"So if it is Arizona? Or Edmonton?" Trojan asks in amusement.

"Fuck me," Mitts grumbles. "Shit you not, I never heard Parse say anybody's name like that 'cept Tavares. Anybody can have him, as long as they're east."

"You mean McDavid?" Kent calls, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

There's a brief pause of dead silence; and then Mitts says, "Motherfucker, where--?"

There's a thump as he starts cracking up hard, cackling something about rivers and fireflies and spaceships. What?

A moment later, Trojan comments, "Think you broke him, Parse."

"Well shit," Kent says, pulling himself up and looking over the back of the couch at where Mitts is sitting on the floor, arms around his stomach as he laughs. "He was my pick for who's finally gonna sock me in the bet. Now what do I do?"

"Who told you about--!?" Mitts gets out before another laughing fit. Trojan slides his hands into the pockets of his workout shorts and just keeps watching him with a smile.

"Confidentiality," Kent replies, folding his arms on the back of the couch. "I don't say Tavares's name weird."

"You just fucking did it!" Mitts retorts.

Kent makes a face. "No I didn't," he replies; but Mitts shakes his head and keeps laughing into his knees.

"So what's this bet?" Trojan asks Kent casually.

"On who's gonna finally snap and lose it with me. Tell Robber you want in," Kent replies. "He's tallying it. I wanted to pick the head of PR, but apparently front office staff was 'disallowed,'" he adds.

"Fuckin'--who told you?!" Mitts demands.

"Confidentiality," Kent repeats, and Mitts manages a "Fuck yooooooou."

* 

The next day Kent stays on the ice after practice, honing his snap shot and working with Catsby on his backhand passing, until the assistant coach comes back out and yells at him to get his ass to the dressing room already.
Their third day of postseason practice, Coach Moss pulls Kent aside before leaving the ice and says to come speak to him before heading to the clubhouse.

Kent leaves the ice with the majority of the guys and half-washes up in the bathroom before meeting the coach in the side room the Ice Center's been renting to the Aces, until MGM's new arena is finished and the team can stop this ridiculous transit requirement between the clubhouse and the practice facilities. Kent can't wait; it's gross having to pick between rinsing off at a bathroom sink or driving sweat-soaked to the clubhouse to get a real shower.

"Parson," the coach says, after they're seated at the cramped desk and Kent's trying to figure out if he can keep toweling off his hair or if he should just let it drip. He doesn't really know what Moss considers rude; the man doesn't yell outside of games like all the other coaches Kent's known since bantam. "I want you to just concentrate on your game during playoffs."

Kent pushes back the hair dripping into his eyes. "Have I been screwing up on the ice?" he asks.

He didn't think he was, not enough to justify a closed-door meeting like this. He had that slump in January and a couple rough patches adjusting to new linemates, but he worked past them. He thought.

"No," Moss tells him. "I mean it literally. I want you to just concentrate on your game. I know you do a lot of extra research on other teams, on the city, trade talks, media rumors, front office work--"

Kent drags the towel off his shoulders and wraps it between his hands, but Moss continues before he can speak.

"That's not bad," the man tells him. "I've been impressed by your dedication to this club and your responsibilities as its captain from day one, Parson. You probably have as good a feel for what's going on in the city and the league as most people in the front office.

"But they're paid to do that. And they're not expected to also play games and do practices and keep up with workouts and your civic and PR obligations at the same time," Moss says strongly. "You know how brutal playoffs are. I don't want you to burn out trying to keep this up through them, too. I'm impressed you've balanced it all season."

--So not another coach pissed off thinking Kent was trying to do their job for them.

He makes himself stop twisting the towel between his fists. "Thanks. I mean, thank you."

"Just focus on what you need to do as a player for the coming games," Moss tells him. "Know the guys coming in against us, that's good; but let the other stuff wait until offseason. And get enough sleep."

He keeps eye contact with Kent. "I know our defense is a concern, and I'm working on it. But our offense is going to have to step up for the playoffs, and I'm counting on you to lead that."

"I will."

"If the offense stays hard on our opponents, and the rookies get through the learning curve," Moss tells him, "I know we can bring the Cup back to Vegas."

When Kent nods, the coach tells him, "I want you to take all the energy you put into keeping on top of the whole league and focus it on playing against Calgary. And then the guys we're going to
play after that. And then the guys after that. And then whoever we're going to face from the east in the finals. All right?"

Kent's face feels weird from smiling when he's not sure that's the right response. He tries to force it down and slings the towel over his knee, and nods again. "I will."

"Good. I've been worried about you spreading yourself too thin, Kent," Moss replies; and Kent blinks at the sincerity in his voice. "You didn't carry it into games, so I wasn't going to disrupt your system. But that was regular season. Vegas will still be here in June."

Kent rubs a hand against his mouth, and drags his hair back again. He wipes the water from his eyes and still can't get a feel for anything that's a lie or manipulation, beyond the basic obvious handling.

He nods again. "I understand. ...Thanks, coach."

"Good," Moss says once again. "All right. I'll see you tomorrow. Let's crush those motherfuckers."

Kent snerts and stands.

As he leaves, he wonders whether Moss's job is on the line if they don't get the Cup this year, and the front office is just keeping quiet about it. There's another year left on the man's contract; but coaches can always be fired.

Then Kent puts all of that out of his head and makes his way to his car.

*

They beat the Flames after six games.

Kent escalates his chirps over the round, but he keeps an eye on the refs and linesmen and everyone else wearing a mic.

He doesn't bother with the players who'd ignore him and stay on their game regardless; that's a waste of air. Kent targets the volatile players. He starts getting tripped often enough that he has to dive a couple times to force the refs to acknowledge it.

*

They come back to Vegas and the city definitely remembers it has a hockey team.

Kent starts seeing even more signs and banners in restaurants around the arena offering discounts if customers show their ticket stubs. They've sold more jerseys this season than they have since they won the Cup in 2011. Blurbs about them run on the front pages of the Review-Journal and the Sun, not just in their sports sections.

Guys on the team who haven't been this deep into playoffs before start actively asking Kent to stay behind with them to review video on mandatory off-days or for extra practice when they have it. The coaches or Kent's alternate captain interrupt and haul him off the ice whenever they think he's overexerting himself.

*

They take down the Ducks after five games.

Kent makes Chazzer give him a crash course in Tumblr before the round starts so he can trawl it as
well as Twitter for any players' screw-ups that he's missed. Fans documenting everything on social media now makes that way easier.

He catches most of the Aces' new radio ad while he's driving to practice: it's the exclusive song the club commissioned for playoffs, intercut with broadcast announcements of goals from the last round. Kent arrives at the Ice Center so pumped up that the coaches, the trainer, and his regular and special teams lineys all tell him to calm the hell down.

He makes Boxy check his pronunciation and grammar on the French insults he's memorized, until Kent's second alternate overhears and tells the goalie and then the rest of the team not to be accessories to murder.

Vichy refuses to help him on any Russian because "Someone has to fucking save you from yourself, Parser."

"I'll play it smart," Kent replies.

"Like shit," Vichy says flatly. "We'll get up against the Caps or Falcs and you'll start yapping, and next thing we know you're out the series 'cause Mashkov's snapped and strangled you. No. You goddamn lunatic."

"We're never gonna be up against the Caps," Kent replies. "You need to have more faith in me."

Vichy says, "Hell no."

* 

The Blackhawks fight them to the very end, metaphorically and literally. During game six Kent's on the bench, still winded after pulling a double shift on the last PK, as he watches Toews skate up for the face-off. He goes deliberately between Scrappy and Shaw to do it, forcing them farther apart and breaking up their snarling.

Won't help, Kent thinks vaguely. Coming for him.

His favorite moment that game isn't his assist on Catsby's gorgeous wrap-around goal during a power play. It's the four seconds off the clock later, when Kent ended up behind a Hawk defenseman before spotting Scrappy skating toward them while the refs were over by the bench and distracted with telling Mitts and Shaw to shut the fuck up already.

Kent timed it perfectly: slapping his stick against the back of Keith's leg with a dig about the rumors of his wife sleeping with a teammate before skating off so that when Keith turned around with his teeth bared and a glove half off, he found Scrappy right there behind him.

The media replays that clip a couple times, showing the moment when Keith has to draw up short to avoid a real fight on top of the potential penalty. Scrappy tells Kent he's a fucking asshole and "Someone's gonna kill you one day, Parse! It'll suck for team but all we'll say is 'Fucker deserved it!'"

"You're not wrong," Kent agrees, grinning because they're tied at three games apiece now. Scrappy swears more and yanks him into a headlock.

In game seven they beat the Hawks at 15:38 into double overtime.

And then the Las Vegas Aces are advancing to the Stanley Cup finals once more, at last.
Kent paces his apartment restlessly when he finally gets back, torn between raw joy and even rawer panic, because *he can't fail this*.

Zimmermann signed when he wasn't paying attention. There's no more time left. He can't go into next season already second best.

Kent eventually manages to pass out on top of his bed only because of how grueling the last eighteen games have been.

* 

This Cup final isn't as brutal as the last one. The rules enforcement cleanup of the last couple years had a small impact; most guys cool the deliberate head hits.

Kent's glad, because this time around he's a way bigger target than in 2011.

He never shuts up on the ice any more, yelling instructions at his line and ripping into their opponents. Kent dredges up every piece of information he's ever collected and turns it back on any Lightning player he gets in hearing range of during game one, ignoring the mics on the refs and all the unspoken rules about what's off-limits. He's the cause of eight shoving matches, one roughing call, and a full fight after Boxy sticks one of the Lightning players in the nuts when the guy tries to force a frozen puck out of his glove and into their net.

He gets an assist and a goal during the game.

The coaches have never told him to back down or lay off at any point during the playoffs, so Kent doesn't. Not even when a chirp gets him high-sticked hard enough during game two that his jaw's still scabbed going into Tampa Bay.

They won the first two games in their own barn. They lose the next two in the Lightning's.

Kent makes Chazzer keep his cool as best he can in the dressing room between periods and after each game. After the second loss, he grabs the back of Chazzer's neck and drags him into the far corner as soon as they cross the dressing room threshold, kicking one of the guys' bag out of his stall so he can still change and they have privacy.

Kent reminds his liney that they got through this before in round one: the rookies had to adjust to the difference between regular season and playoffs, especially on the road. Almost all the new guys from the last four years have to adjust to the difference between the rest of the playoffs and the Cup finals. There's a thin fucking line between motivating through anger and wiping them out entirely.

"Keep a lid on it," Kent says, low and terse. He smacks the Stanley Cup Finals patch on Chazzer's jersey. "We're back here. We just need two. Don't demoralize them."

Chazzer's eyes are squeezed shut and his fists are still clenched; but he's visibly trying to even his breathing.

Kent stays with him until Chazzer finally exhales slowly and forces his hands to relax. When he opens his eyes and nods tersely, Kent thumps him on the back and leaves to check on Boxy, who's
been developing a twitch under his eye since the previous game's loss.

He works on the energy in the dressing room, but it takes almost everything he's still got. When they're finally on the plane back to Vegas, Kent sinks into his seat and falls asleep before anybody sits next to him, glad that he's got Chazzer to keep him steady.

If one of his linemates is that angry after a loss, then Kent can't appear to be. No matter how much he is, he can't show it. He has to balance out.

They win game five in Vegas.

The next day Kent starts to leave the ice once morning skate is over, and then goes back and retrieves Catsby when he realizes he's planning to stay behind with the other rookies.

"It's fine," Catsby argues. "I want to practice longer."

"You want to show the coaches you're dedicated to keep your ice time," Kent replies, because his tolerance for lies has plummeted over the past twenty-three games. "Moss knows. Get off, we can't afford you getting overexerted."

Catsby gives him a long look.

"You're kinda a fuckin' hypocrite, captain," he eventually says, but he starts skating for the exit.
"Five minutes on a broken ankle."

Kent falls in line beside him and whacks him in the shin with his stick. "That was then. And it was four."

"Oh, that's way better," Catsby drawls, and Kent whacks him again. Catsby prods him back, and they keep the stick fight up until they have to quit to get through the door.

They lose again in Tampa Bay.

Kent smashes his stick on the railing as he returns to the bench after his final shift, two goals down and less than a minute and a half left in the game, his head and shoulder and knee hurting like hell. Scrappy leans to the side to dodge the fragments as it breaks and keeps his eyes on the ice.

It's harder to salvage things in the dressing room afterward.

Kent tolerates the media's need to talk about how it's not like him to break his sticks, because one of the reporters uses a replay to praise Scrappy for not flinching. It's one more piece building up Scrappy's transition story from being a hotheaded pest to being more steady but still out there to protect teammates. At least it had use.

It doesn't make up for all the pundits' speculation on whether this is going to be yet another playoffs' loss for the Aces. On whether this year is another sign that hiring a coach from the NCAA and not the standard league pool inevitably leads to postseason failure.

There's one more game. It's not fucking over yet.

He spends a little time with his parents when everyone in the family area's released before the guys have to get their stuff from the hotel and head to the airport, but he's too angry and jittery to appreciate it. This was supposed to be the end. The Cup was *in the building*. Kent was supposed to
be seeing them on the ice, not in the back halls.

His mom tells him she's trying to get someone to cover her shift Wednesday and that they'll crush those bastards back in Vegas. She starts to hug him, then pulls back when Kent hisses as his shoulder spasms.

"Just put it on the card I gave you," Kent says, forcing away his grimace and smiling. "We're gonna kill it. I'll see you on the ice."

She nods and squeezes his forearm gently.

His dad's still looking at his shoulder with a deep frown. "Take care of yourself, Kenny," he says gravely. He starts to add something else, but then stops.

"Sure," is all Kent says in reply, because what's he expect him to do, be careful and lose?

Kent tries to doze on the plane back to Vegas, despite the heat patches on his shoulder and the ice on his knee.

They're losing 0-1 at the start of the second period when Kent's driven awkwardly into the boards by one of the Lightning's d-men and breaks his left forearm.

He hears it before he feels it. Kent braces himself on the boards as the d-man glances at his arm wider-eyed and then skates away. He clenches his jaw as some assholes in Lightning colors start banging the glass and jostling him.

Kent fumbles his stick up off the ice and forces himself straighter. He kicks away from the boards and starts skating for the Aces' bench, arm limp at his side, eyes on the red line. He just has to get to the bench before the pain really starts. Then they can get someone else out and he can get it braced. He just has to get across the ice.

"Parse!" Trojan yells, sounding horrified. When Kent glances over, he sees Trojan's sent him the puck.

There's no one around him.

Everyone's in the Aces' zone. Tampa's d-men are all past the blue line, turning for him.

Kent catches the pass and breaks away for the Lightning's goal.

He's skating so slow trying to keep his left arm still that he can't stand it. The puck keeps sliding away from his blade and he has to grind his teeth into his mouth guard to force himself to steer it that much. He can feel the defense closing in on him too fast. He has to shoot the puck too soon or it'll be a turnover.

As soon as he does Kent knows he's wiffed it. The angle's wrong. He can feel his arm now, starting to hurt too much to process anything else.

The Lightning's goalie freezes the puck. Someone crashes hard into Kent's broken arm.

He goes down with a scream as his vision blacks at the edges.

He manages to catch himself with his good forearm before he smashes onto the ice. Kent twists his head to the side and wills himself not to puke. He hears more shouting. A Lightning player's
thrown onto the ice beside him.

Someone grabs Chazzer before he can continue the attack. He turns around and slugs them instead. Sunny breaks through the crowd and punches the Lightning's player below the visor twice. Someone yanks him away.

Trojan forces the guys around Kent back and grips his good shoulder, hissing "Fuck fuck fuck" under his breath. "Parse. Can you get up?"

"Yeh," Kent manages.

He slips on the ice and his vision goes blurry with colored light at the edges this time as he gets to his feet. A linesman catches his waist and helps steady him. Trojan starts skating them toward the bench. The trainer's coming onto the ice.

Kent flails his good arm free and grabs the first black jersey he can reach, jerking Sunny back from the Lightning player he's swearing at.

"Win," Kent hisses.

Trojan pulls his grip loose and wraps Kent's good arm around his shoulders and starts them moving again. Kent keeps his head down and his jaw clenched.

"I'm sorry Parse, shit I didn't realize 'til I sent it--"

"Win," Kent repeats.

Trojan hands him over to the trainer. Elliot guides him straight past the bench and down the hall to the doctor's room.

Kent argues with doctor so much that Elliot finally contacts one of the equipment guys and tells him to have Kurlansky radio at the next commercial break. Kent argues with the assistant coach so much that Kurlansky finally tells Kent to shut up and let them put the fucking cast on before signing off. The head coach comes in while Kent and Elliot are still arguing a second time, and Kent bashes a fist against the cot when he realizes he's already wasted the whole period.

"Parson," Moss says flatly. "Stop this and let them put the cast on. You're done for the game."

"Just brace it and I can play!"

"I said you're out."

"I'm sick of them talking how we can't win playoffs since Lewis left!" Kent spits out, because he wouldn't let them give him any painkillers that would take him out of the game and his arm's killing him and he just needs it fucking braced so he can get back to the ice. "Brace it, I won't fuck this up, we can win this, please!"

Moss takes a long breath.

He digs the heel of a hand against the bridge of his nose, and then walks over.

"Kent," he says quieter. "If you hadn't been hit again we could talk. But that compounded the break, and we're not. You're out.
"We're already tied at one," he adds, before Kent can speak. "You're right, we can win this. But to do that I need to get to the locker room and calm the men down enough that we stop taking penalties, and keep them pissed enough that we grind these fuckers to their death. They'll be more motivated being angry about your absence than being inspired if you come back but they have to watch you struggle. Got it?"

"...Got it," Kent finally makes himself say.

"I know this is shit, Kent," Moss tells him, pressing his good shoulder gently. "You've given us everything this season. But this is the last thing you have to give."

Kent nods jerkily.

"Thank you," Moss says. He straightens and pulls away, heading out. "Get a cast on him," he tells the doctor. "Ell, come with me. I need you to look at Alexandre."

Kent curls his fingers around the edge of the cot as Moss and Elliot leave the room. He's still shaking so hard one of the medics has to hold his good arm still so the doctor can give him a painkiller shot before getting to work on the break.

By the time the bone's reset and his cast is in place, the Tampa Bay Lightning have beaten the Las Vegas Aces 3-2 to win the 2015 Stanley Cup.

Kent lays on the cot for a long time afterward, good arm slung over his eyes, until he can finally stop crying in frustration and anger.

The equipment guy that brings his clothes over from his stall pretends not to hear.

Several people stop by the door, but the only one who comes in besides the coaches and medics is his second alternate.

Showy doesn't say anything until Kent's twisted his face away and scrubbed at it hard. "Sunny broke his nose for ya."

Kent forces himself to laugh once, and doesn't ask about penalties. No point now. "Tell 'im thanks."

"Will do."

He swallows hard. "An' tell Boxy good job."

When Showy doesn't reply, Kent rubs his good hand viciously over his face again. "Three goals allowed don't change twenty-nine stopped."

Showy shifts on his feet. "Thirty-seven."

"Fuck." Kent swallows again, and wishes he had water. Whatever pain meds they gave him are drying out his throat. "Tell him. All of 'em. Good job."


"Thanks."
He sets Kent's phone on the cot by his good arm. "Your parents've been calling. I think someone kept them in the family room."

"Shit." Kent hopes their flight was delayed long enough they didn't get to the arena until after he was pulled. "Thanks."

"I told them they don't let guys on the phone until after the protocol, so." Showy shifts again and slides his hand into his suit pocket. He's favoring the shoulder he separated in the conference finals even more. Kent should let him go. "Want me to pass anything on?"

"Nah. I'll see 'em soon."

"Okay."

By the time they finish what they can of his concussion test with the meds skewing it and let him go, the arena's nearly empty.

Media's over. The fans have gone home or to bars. The last people that remain are the custodial crew, getting rid of the trash in the wake of the Aces' latest, most spectacular playoff loss. Kent fumbles with his phone as he leaves and tries to work up the will to call his parents.

Chazzer's sitting on a folding chair further up the hallway from the doctor's room, texting, his face set in a tight scowl.

"Hey," he says without looking up as Kent carefully makes his way through the door and starts down the hall. "You ready to go?"

"'M good," Kent replies, slowly, because he's sure the painkillers will having him slurring and screwing up his words if he tries to talk at a normal speed. "Head on out. See you."

"Your arm's broken," Chazzer says flatly.

"Yeah."

"You're gonna just drive like that."

"No." He'd get pulled over, he's not an idiot. "Parents're here." It's late enough, maybe security made them leave. "Or cab."

"Right," Chazzer says, still typing sharply. "So I should just head out and leave you here to take care of yourself. You can't even walk a straight fucking line but it's not like you need anybody."

"What's yer problem?"

Chazzer pauses in texting and glares up at him.

"Do you actually fucking comprehend what friendship is, Parson?" he asks. "Is it just a one-way street where you do shit but anyone else tries the same gets shoved away? How the fuck are you so good at reading people but so shit at this?"

He's not so dosed on painkillers that he can't tell when Chaz is spoiling for a fight. Everyone else must've had the sense to get away; how long's he been left sitting out here? Why didn't someone from the front office send him home already? Why the fuck does Kent always have to take care of everything?
"Not doin' this with you tonight, Chazzer," Kent says evenly, leaning against the wall. "You wanna talk, see you tomorrow."

"Did Zimmermann fucking make you like this? Or've you always been this way?" he demands. "Because depending I'm gonna start agreeing with Vichy."

"Back off, Prochazka," Kent says coldly.

"Goddammit," Vichy says wearily from further down the hall. He limps up to them while his wife pauses by the corner. "What part of 'just wait 'til I get here' was so confusing?"

"Go to hell," Prochazka says. "I'm fucking sick of this."

"You think I'm not?" Vichy retorts. "You're not gonna make it any better tonight. Just fucking chill it, Chazzer, I can't deal with both of you right now."

Prochazka snarls something under his breath, but lets Vich help him up to his feet. He winces hard as he straightens, pressing a hand to his ribs.

Vich shifts in front of Kent, blocking Prochazka from his view. "You alright?"

"Broken," Kent replies. He juts his chin at Vich's leg. "You?"


"Not driving with a bad leg."

"I'm not goddamn arguing this with you is what I'm not doing, you're not driving with a broke arm."

"I'm good, I--"

"Parson I'm not fucking--"

"Look--"

"No," Vich says with finality. "Oh my God. I'm not fuckin' arguing this with you, Kent. You're not fucking good."

Kent tightens his jaw. "Parents're here," he replies. "I'll ride with them."

Vich exhales heavily through his teeth, but he backs down. "All right. You coulda said that earlier."

"Didn't let me finish."

"Everybody knows not to fuckin' listen to you when you say you're good," Prochazka mutters, and Vich tells him to stop.

"Where they at?" Vich adds to Kent.

"Family room," he answers. "I guess? Showy said."

"Alright." Vich looks back over at Prochazka. "You sure you're good to drive?"

"Yeah," Prochazka says, more tired now.
"Would you just let Dad take you home?" Vich asks. "Give me one goddamn less thing to worry about, huh?"

Prochazka drops his head back against the wall and says several things in Polish before finally finishing with "All right. All right."

"Thanks," Vich tells him. "Don't start any political shit."

Prochazka huffs but heads over to where Nadiya's standing by the corner. Vich calls something else in Russian to her, and then he nods at Kent. "C'mon, Parser. They're probably worried about you."

Kent pushes away from the wall. "Sure."

The walk's just long enough for Kent to process exactly how much he doesn't want to do any more tonight. Especially not deal with his dad when the loss is still so raw. He wants to be done with today, he wants to be done with everyone. He's tired.

He catches Vichy's suit jacket before they're at the door to the family area.

When the other man turns around, Kent leans against the wall and rubs his face hard and tries to will himself to feel more awake and coherent and not so damn drugged up.

"...You okay?" Vichy asks.

"Yeah." Kent exhales hard. Doesn't matter what he wants, shit has to get done. "'S fuckin' do this."

Vichy frowns deeper; but Kent moves past him and into the room.

Kent's parents are slumped into one of the couches by the turned-off TVs. His mom blinks her eyes open briefly at the noise of their arrival, and then blinks more at the sight of him. Then she straightens up from his dad's shoulder and shoves to her feet. Behind her, his dad gets up slower, looking at his sling. Kent tightens his jaw.

His mom pauses in front of him, holding back from a hug while she tries to check his injuries. Kent forces himself to half-smile and wraps his good arm carefully around her shoulders. "Hey."

She exhales wearily and presses a light hand to his shoulder, tilting to avoid his bad arm. "Kenny. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he replies. "Don't worry, we've got a good doctor." He leans back to check the bags under her eyes. "When'd you get in?"

She smooths her hair back. "About seven."

"Delay that bad?" Kent says. "You should get some rest. You need a ride to the hotel?"

His mom gives him a flat look, and then looks at his sling, and then looks back at him. Behind him, Vichy stifles a snort.

"I think we can walk across the street, Kenny," his mom says. "You need a ride."

"I agree," Vichy says; and finally Kent sees the trap.

"Not cool, asshole," he tells Vichy flatly. His mom says to watch his language, he's off the ice now.
Kent kept a room booked for his parents at the Orleans throughout the playoffs, since it let him leverage for discounts and also kept a place ready so he could focus on games. His mom wasn't always able to get time off or someone to cover her shifts at the prison, even though her boss and most coworkers were pretty sympathetic to "My son's playing for the Stanley Cup!" But at least when she did, there was a place for her.

One of the arena's security staff gives them a ride over to the hotel on a disability cart. They're trundling across the parking lot when the sheer fucking patheticness of this as the end of two months of fighting through the playoffs hits Kent.

Somewhere in his own goddamn barn the Lightning were celebrating with the Cup; and Kent's taking the loser's ride away from it on a golf cart.

Second fucking best already, and Zimmermann hasn't even hit the Falcons' training camp yet.

He ends up laughing quietly and half-hysterically because he can't swear or punch the seat in front of his parents. Kent finally makes himself stop when he realizes it's probably the painkillers fucking with his head, and that his mom and dad and Vichy are all looking at him weird.

Kent sees his parents to the elevator to their room, and then he and Vichy make their way back to the players' parking lot at the arena. He only belatedly realized he should've retaliated against Vichy setting him up by ratting out his sprained ankle; Kent's mom would've forced Vichy to swear not to drive on it if he had. He's so fucking tired.

"You sure you're okay?" Vichy asks, after they're across the street.

"Yeah," Kent says distantly.

"You sure?" Vichy says. "If you wanna spend more time with them, I can get Natty to come back for--"

"Don't need a fuckin' lecture 'bout playing too physical on top of tonight," Kent bites off, because for all that Zimmermann hated trying to live up to his family name yeah it must be so fucking awful to have a dad that supports his career.

He's angry at all the wrong things.

Whatever, not like it matters.

Kent shoves his good hand into his suit pocket. "No. I wanna go home."

". . . All right, Parser."

Vichy's quiet for several moments, until they reach Kent's car. ". . . You wanna crash at my place tonight?"

Vichy's wife doesn't like him, and Kent just can't take having to be the captain of this fucking failed team for hours more tonight. He can't take being around a teammate for much longer. He needs a goddamn break.

"Gotta feed the cat," he says. "Thanks. I wanna go home."
"...Okay."

Vichy fills him in on the rest of the guys' injuries that he knows of while he's driving Kent's car back to his apartment complex: something's fucked with the first alt's knee, a guy was definitely targeting hits to Showy's separated shoulder, Scrappy's gotten more stitches on his face. Their goalie threw up during second intermission, but the trainer was pretty sure it was stress and not an injury, so the head coach kept Boxy in the cage instead of sending in the backup.

But eventually they run out of things to say. It was a shitty, shitty end to the season.

Vichy parks his car, and then tells Kent he's fine when Kent says he can wait in his place: it'll be easier for Vichy's dad if he can just get Vichy off the sidewalk, instead of having to park and call or text; but thanks.

Kent's pretty sure it's bullshit, but he's too tired to care. He nods and tells Vichy good night, and heads for the elevator.

He staggers into his apartment, throws the locks, checks that Kitt still has food and water left, ignores all his messages and voicemails, and sets his alarm so he'll wake up in time to see his parents to the airport.

Kent takes a second Percocet, stretches out gingerly on top of the bed as his cat jumps up beside him, and half hopes he'll just sleep through the damn thing and get to skip it all.
The morning after the Aces lose the 2015 playoffs, Kent wakes up blearily at sound of his alarm, feeling vaguely nauseous with the lingering painkillers in his system.

He forces down breakfast and coffee. His mom texts that she and his dad are taking a cab to the airport and that he should get some rest; she'll call him later. They'll see him during the summer.

Kent sends back an okay and tells her to have a good flight, and then starts making appointments with his personal doctor and his physical therapist.

*

He stays holed up in his apartment for the next two days.

Mostly. He goes to a doctor's appointment on Friday; and by Saturday evening, he's stir-crazy enough that he heads up to the rooftop pool.

Which is a mistake. The Aces' 2014-15 season and their playoff run was big enough news in this city that more of his neighbors recognize him now.

Kent makes himself stay at the pool for a hour, thanking the people that express concern about his arm and carefully commiserating with the ones who talk about how the loss sucks. It forces him to get back on his game, at least.

Monday's the Aces' clean out day, with exit interviews with the front office and the media. At least this is useful.

*

On Sunday morning, the Aces' second alternate captain sends out a team-wide text, telling everybody to show up at his house that afternoon for a poolside barbecue. *bring drinks & ur families*

He sends Kent a personal text a minute later: *i'm flyin out 2morrow 2 tour hou, so u better show i no u don't still have ur phone off' cause it's sayin that delivered so don't try that stunt, Showy adds.*

Kent rolls his eyes. *Not gonna miss you, Short bs & u no it Parse*

Kent just sends *See you in several. Need steaks?*
yes i want 2 serve th steak that breaks th camel's back 2 a steak-glutted team Showy writes. no. Rie's makin burgs, bring liquor

You know burgers also come from a cow, right?

bring 2x as much liquor if ur gonna b an ass Parse he replies. Kent half-smirks.

By this point he's blown through chunks of several TV shows that the guys told him to watch during the season--although he's only retained a fraction of the plots. Kent left the television on just to have something going on to keep him from thinking too much. He left his blinds up for the view of the Strip in the distance all weekend for the same reason.

But he's sick of being alone and uncomfortable in the same space by now.

The broken arm doesn't help. When Kent wrecked his ankle, it screwed up his mobility and forced him to re-drill on all his skating habits; but being down an arm slows up everything, from cooking to laundry to texting. The only bearable part is that at least it's not his dominant arm.

At least the barbecue'll get him out of here.

Besides, Kent has to go no matter what. Exit interviews are Monday: he needs a final idea of the team's frustrations and internal issues before talking with the GM.

He texts around for a ride to Showy's place. One of the guys says he'll pick Kent up at four; and then Vichy agrees to make it three-thirty instead, so Kent can buy drinks first.

That afternoon the temperature drops from 100+ degrees and the wind dies down to less than twenty miles per hour, just in time for it to start raining. Trojan, the guy traded late in the season to Vegas from Colorado, spends most of the barbecue hiding indoors with the central AC and fighting down Mitts' sadistic efforts to physically drag him outside.

"Couldn't bother to check the weather first?" Kent asks Showy. They're the only ones currently out on the patio, because they're the only ones crazy enough to be standing around a grill full of fire. Even the bottle Kent brought of top shelf whiskey that's sitting on a nearby table hasn't been enough to draw more than a few people over.

"Fuck off," Showy retorts. "Vegas is sad I'm going. It's crying."

"Vegas is saying 'Fuck you, get out,'" Kent replies, taking another drink of his nonalcoholic beer. "'You want rain and humidity? Here ya go. Have fun with all that flooding and venue changes.'"

"I'm keepin' track of all these comments I'd be slugging you in the arm for if you weren't conveniently keeping that cast facing me, Parse," Showy says dryly, taking another sip of whiskey. Kent smirks against the rim of his can.

"So, Houston?" he adds, as the timer goes off. "Not San Jose?"

Showy stops the timer and starts flipping over the burgers. "No room," he answers. Kent nods automatically at Vichy when he sees the man heading toward them. "I think Impey's still trying to work out a deal with the Aeros, but maybe."

"Huh," Kent mumbles, making a note that the front office's kept that quiet. There's been no real trade rumors about Showy in the media, and only minor speculation given he still hasn't had a contract extension announced.
Showy exhales. "Maybe," he repeats. "Their GM invited me to tour, but my agent said he had a lot of questions."

"Don't go anywhere you don't like enough to stick it out a few years," Kent replies. "You shouldn't've been stubborn about not renegotiating. Now the new club gets to set its own terms."

He sets down his can and wipes the condensation off onto his jeans. "They're gonna claim you underperform and got overhyped here 'cause the rest of the d was too old or a young hot mess. Take a short contract so they can't shortchange you too much."

Showy side-eyes him. "... Had plenty of time to say that to me sooner, Parse."

Kent shrugs his good shoulder. "A new contract would've wrecked the Aces' cap. Why should we eat that if you were gonna leave no matter what?"

"Oh, fantastic," Showy says flatly. "You've gone into 'Losing playoffs kills my internal filter' mode. This is so great, I was really looking forward to this. Stay away the fuck away from the kids, Parse."

Kent rolls his eyes. Going near the kids still out in the pool would mean leaving the shade, and he's not crazy. "That's the business, why does everyone act like I'm being--"

"So you weren't re-signing," Vichy says.

Showy startles and twists around to face him, eyes wider.

And then he looks back at Kent—who was angled to see Vichy approaching—and says, "Why?"

Kent blinks. "--You ain't told him?"

It's been days since the end of the season. Showy and Vichy were friends even before Kent's rookie year. Seriously? He wasn't supposed to assume this already happened?

Kent's former second alternate gives him a narrow look for a long moment.

And then Showy exhales through his teeth and sets his shoulders. "Alright," he mutters. "I'm giving you this one 'cause you're still fucked up with painkillers."

"It's been three days," Kent says reflexively. "I'm not still on that shit."

Showy starts to say something; and then he stops himself. "Triage.

"Alright, Vichy. I guess we should talk," Showy says instead, to the other man.

"Guess so," Vichy agrees quietly.

Showy shoves the spatula into Kent's good hand. "Don't fuck up the food, Parse."

"Why do I--" okay, apparently he pulled a dick move that he hadn't intended to. "Yeah, all right."

"Good," Showy says, before picking up the bottle of whiskey and gesturing for Vichy to head into the house with him.

Showy's wife eventually either takes pity on him or decides Kent's going to ruin her burgers, and takes over at the grill. Kent keeps making rounds and touching base with all the guys, getting a feel
for how everyone feels about the past season and how they're going to be heading into the clubhouse tomorrow.

Later, when it's early evening and the guys with really young kids are heading out, Kent catches Showy alone as he's scooping someone's Barbie out of the pool. "Look, I thought--"

"I was being a coward about it," Showy interrupts. "Had to tell him sooner or later."

"Alright." Kent slides a hand in his pocket. "...Sorry, man."


"I didn't break both arms," Kent drawls, since Showy's between him and the pool. "I could push you in easy."

"Cept you know I'm fast enough to yank you in with me, pal, cast be damned," Showy ripostes.

Kent snorts. "Definitely won't miss you, Short."

"Bullshit and you know it, Parse."

*

Monday isn't great, but it isn't as bad as the night of the loss. Guys've had time to deal.

Kent keeps an eye on the closed door exit interviews, even as he does post-season wrap-up with the media and struggles to clean out his stuff one-armed. He notes the massive discrepancy between the two alternate captains' interviews: Showy's is short, he leaves the room looking fed up until he resets for the media, and the door stays shut for several minutes afterward before the GM calls in the next guy.

Sunny's interview goes on for much longer, even though he's on crutches with a cracked patella and the GM usually releases injured guys sooner. Showy and the rookie defenseman help Sunny's wife pack up his stuff while he's occupied.

In his own interview, Kent's blunter than he's ever been before.

By five minutes in, he can tell it's making the GM antsy. Impey has a good enough game face that Kent isn't sure whether the man's irritated with him, angry at the wasted season, or tired of already hearing the issues Kent's laying out from the previous twenty-two players; but it doesn't matter.

Kent keeps talking anyway, because he never wants to live through another night like last Thursday. He never wants another team celebrating with the Cup in his own fucking barn ever again. He doesn't care if that's unrealistic, the GM better at least try to prevent it.

"If Leo was causing this much contention in the dressing room, why didn't you tell me sooner?" Impey interrupts, when Kent's talking about the impact that the defensive assistant coach's problems with the d-men had on the whole dressing room.

"I didn't need to," Kent replies. He hates exit interviews; he always has to waste so much time stating the obvious. "I knew Short was already talking to you about it. I'm the captain, my job is to help the coach get the players buying into his system. I'm not gonna set an example disrespecting Moss by going around him to the GM."
Impey's expression shifts at that.

But he resets it too fast for Kent to interpret. The GM braces his elbows on his desk and cups a hand over a fist, resting his chin on them. "And Zach doing so?"

"Someone's gotta tell you the players' views before we get to this point," Kent says. "Sturluson wouldn't because he disagreed with all the drama, I can't, so that left Short. You need to make sure the next alternate is somebody like him or Walczak, someone who'll do that."

Impey straightens slightly; but Kent has zero interest in pretending Showy might still stay in Vegas. He gets the conversation back on track instead.

By the time Kent's finished condensing the various seething frustrations he's heard from teammates both last night and over the course of the previous season into a series of bullet points of necessary changes, the GM's made several shorthand notes onto a legal pad.

"All right," Impey says. "Anything else?"

Kent shakes his head. "That's pretty much it."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"These are all team-centric concerns," the GM replies. "I know they're coming from the other players. What about you?"

"These are my concerns too," Kent says. "Or I'd say they're someone else's complaints, not real problems."

He thinks for a couple moments. "...Video could use a better TV. Bigger, higher definition, so we can really catch details."

The GM makes another note. "Anything else?"

"What's the status on the new arena?" Kent asks, since free agency's edging closer. Potential signees are going to start calling him and other guys on the team soon to learn about Vegas's culture and player amenities. "When can I start giving a solid date on the new clubhouse?"

Impey taps his pencil against his desk. "This still isn't official," he warns, since he knows why Kent's asking. "But MGM's closing on the subsidy talks with the county board, and they've almost clinched a main sponsor. We should be moved in for the 2016-17 season."

"Cool," Kent says. Fucking finally.

The equipment manager loans him a cart so Kent can get all his stuff out to his car before midnight.

Vichy still gives him shit for how long it takes, despite the fact that when he picked Kent up that morning they took Kent's car to the clubhouse, since Vichy's sports car is all glitz, zero trunk space.

*
Two days before the league's annual awards ceremony, one of the guys sends out a group text with a link to Puck Daddy's article about Seguin being in this year's Body Issue.

Mitts adds *Guess he wanted to show up your topless photoshoot parse*

Kent skims the article to make sure there's no additions, and replies *I'm still winning unless they put him on the cover*

*Keep telling yourself that* Mitts answers. *Wait is this a real contest*

*when did u 2 stop hating ea other?* Showy adds.

**NLA**

*The fuck, what?!* Vichy sends. *Why're you still such a dick to him?*

*He thinks he's a fashion plate*

*Sure bro* Kent's center, Chazzer, replies while Kent's still typing.

Kent finishes and adds *And it makes Benn focus on more fronts*

*There it is* Chazzer sends.

Kent glances upward. *What?*

*I'm just sayin of all the guys here only one ripped a guy that doesn't know French in French until he pissed off the Frnch-speaking dude by him* Chazzer replies. *Protip: that one is you*

*Wait when was this??*? another guy demands.

*i remember that* Showy sends. *fuk u still parse we shoulda let him have u*

*It was only 3 stitches he barely scratched you*

*Parser. Vichy chides, the same time* Chazzer writes *Woooow*

*fuck. you. still. parse.*

Mitts adds *That game was the best I thought marty was gonna murder you for real*

Showy tells him *u approvin proves me rite*

*St. Martin? He never does that shit.* Kent's other liney sends.

*Parse chirps enrage guys 57% above base level* Mitts tells Trojan. *That's the new sports books number next season get in on the ground floor*

*Sure thing.* Trojan replies, while Kent's snickering.

*Nude beats topless cover or not* Mitts decides.

Showy asks *r we still talkin normal mags or...?*

*Alright* Kent agrees. *I guess there's always Playgirl*

...........................................plz fuckin tell me ur jokin
Someone call this fucker's agent. Vichy orders.

You should do it parse dont listen to the haters

Shut up Mitts I don't wanna live in a world where my gf buys a playgirl issue with Parse

Breakups are hard Kent commiserates.

Jesus Christ please no

Hahaha do iiiiiiiiiii Mitts sends.

Goddammit Smith, this is all your fault.

Im not making them strip

QUIT BLOWIN UP MY PHONE ASSHOLES the team's fines master sends abruptly.

Scrappy shows up to ask his center 'Sup Red Robin figure out who keeps showing messages on the lock screen yet?

FUCK U SCALFANO IM GETTIN YOU FOR THIS Robber threatens.

Then he adds Shut up parse your a fashionplate you bugged me about coller stays

Scrappy you bastard thats beautiful whod you bribe Mitts asks.

I was helping Kent tells Robber.

Fuck u parse he predictably repeats.

There's an easy solution to the collar problem Chazzer says; and then he starts posting pictures from what Kent guesses is the shirtless Seguin tumblr linked in the article, until Robber's responses degenerate into a mix of swearing, sworn vendettas, and pleas to quit.

*

The day before the awards ceremony, Kent gets a call from an unknown number. He picks up, because at this point in the year it's usually another NHL player calling to ask about the Aces' organization.

It is. Brown says that he's going to be in town for the awards, and asks Kent if he's got time the morning after to talk about the club.

Kent raises an eyebrow at the fact that the man wants to talk in person instead of on the phone; but he keeps it out of his voice and says sure, of course.

Brown's a playoff seasoned veteran who's still on the right side of thirty, and a defenseman who sucks to play against because he's good at pulling little shit without being caught: getting behind a guy at the net and holding the back of his jersey to limit his movement, using his stick to pin an opponent's to the boards for a few extra seconds after a scramble for the puck is over and the refs have turned away.

It'd be great to have that on the Aces' side. Kent would have to be in a coma not to make time to meet him.
At the awards ceremony Kent uses his cast to excuse himself from most of the pre-ceremony niceties. He keeps on one of his good smiles and wills himself to want to be here more.

Nobody would ever have sympathy for him wishing he could skip the awards for once. But he's been at this ceremony every year since he was a rookie, and having to be on-point in front of cameras and other players and league staff so soon after the playoffs is yet another reminder how little of the offseason Kent actually gets off. It was exhausting even in 2011, and that time they won the Cup.

He doesn't actually want to be absent. That'd mean he did so bad during the season that he wasn't even in the running for an award, and that's way worse.

Kent doesn't know what he wants.

Not to've lost the playoffs for yet another year. Not to have next season already racing up on him so fast. To not be facing Zimmermann on somebody else's team.

Someone sets a hand on his good shoulder. Kent rubs his mouth quick to make sure he's still wearing his smile, and then tips his head over to look at them. It's Bob Zimmermann.

Kent straightens up automatically.

"Hey. Hi, Bob," he corrects. Kent pushes out of his seat and holds out his hand. "Good to see you."

Bob gives him a half-PR, half-real smile as he shakes it. "You too, Kent."

"So, lotta former Habs here tonight," Kent comments, setting up neutral territory immediately out of years of habit. "Price's gonna sweep us all, huh?"

"Well," Bob deflects, smiling wider. "They keep the votes private until the reveal."

"Nnnnnnrg," Kent groans, hanging his head. "I had to vote for him for the Lindsey, but I wish I could say I'm doing it under protest. 'Nice job blocking my shots Price, great goaltending work, just take it already.'" He gives a thumbs up, still scowling.

Bob chuckles as he shakes his head. "If it helps, I think everyone knows there's protest involved when you're not voting for a teammate," he offers.

When Kent snickers and drops his hand, Bob adds, "How've you been?"

"Angry," Kent answers before thinking about it.

Bob goes quiet.

Kent shifts on his feet, and stops himself from reaching up to mess with his hair. He reminds himself that people are already in the area and taking their seats.

"Just the usual postseason stuff," he walks back with a half-smile, before shrugging his good shoulder. "No big. How've you been?"

"Doing well," Bob answers, poised again already. One day Kent's going to be that good.

"That's great," he replies.
When Bob steps back, Kent guesses they're bypassing the awkward small talk and can't make himself feel bad about it. He nods at the man and then sits back down.

Bob moves into the row and takes in the empty chair next to him. Kent blinks and looks over.

"They're always hard losses," Bob agrees, nodding at his cast. "The Aces had tremendous speed this season, but the Lightning had good enough defense to counter." Bob gives him a smaller half-smile. "But that was last season. Some of your younger players are making themselves real contenders. Who knows what the next one will bring, eh?"

". . . I'm worried about my coach," Kent says, low so it won't be picked up by the people milling around.

When Bob leans in slightly, Kent adds, "It's four playoff losses now." He tightens his jaw. "We're running out of time."

Bob nods again, slower.

"There's no stability in this game," he says sincerely. "That's why off-ice life is so important. Most all coaches are fired eventually."

Bob lifts a shoulder before raising an eyebrow slightly. "If it's because he helped develop your team's core to the point they need veteran coach to grow them further, then he did his job. That's not something to be held against him."

Kent shifts in his chair.

"You've had some difficulties with coaches, Kent," Bob says, which is a classic Canadian understatement if there's ever been one. Kent starts to slump back in his chair and then forces himself to keep sitting up straight. He's not seventeen anymore; he can handle hearing this. He handled it before, when Bob talked to him one day while he was still in Juniors.

"So the fact that you've thrived while Aaron Moss is coaching the Aces hasn't gone unnoticed," Bob continues.

Bob looks over again.

"You don't make it to the playoffs unless you can lead a team through a consistent, high-scoring season. You don't get players who are a certainty for the Art Ross unless you coach them right. He's made quite a resume over the last four years." Bob gives him another small smile. "When the Aces replace him with another coach that best fits the team's next direction, I'm sure he'll do well for himself. And make his next team a pretty dangerous opponent."

Kent's starting to fidget again, but he has to snicker at that. "Aw, geez. No kidding."

He leans back in his chair and looks over with a brief grin. "Thanks," Kent tells him, meaning it.

Bob chuckles; but the sound is off, and his face is still serious. When he doesn't say anything else for a few moments but doesn't get up either, Kent tilts to face him more.

". . . You're a very loyal person, Kent," Bob says at last, which is. Not what he expected.

Or how he would describe himself. At least, not anymore. Not since Ja-- ...not for a while.

"I'm sure that makes some of this harder," Bob adds, while Kent's still trying to figure out how to
reply. "More than it was for me."

When Kent looks at him again, Bob folds his hands together between his thighs. "I was lucky Alicia was so flexible with her career. As long as there was an airport near to fly to events, she was willing to move wherever I signed. So I was free to go where a team was ripe for a championship."

He gives Kent another half-smile. "You know, our house? That's the first one I ever actually bought. It was always rentals before. I had no idea how complicated buying a house was. I was thirty-five years old and pretending I understood what 'closing costs' and 'escrow' meant. Alicia just tried not to laugh at me in front of the realtor."

Kent manages to stifle a snicker. He doesn't want to sound rude; it's already still a little weird to talk to Bob like an equal even after years in the league. It's even weirder for the man to be this open with him. "Huh."

"The guys I called for advice didn't let me forget it, either," Bob adds, smiling wider. This time Kent does laugh.

Bob chuckles briefly himself, before looking at the stage.

"I can't say I regret it," he adds, quieter. "I met a lot of good men. I played with some of the best."

"But all the same, I admired the players who spent ten, fifteen years on the same team." Bob shakes his head slightly. "There's very few who can put in that kind of commitment. Or inspire it from their club. Those men are always remembered, no matter how many times their name goes on the Cup."

The corner of Bob's mouth lifts slightly, but this time it's--heavier? Determined? Tired? Kent can't tell. He hasn't seen that expression on the other man before.

Bob looks back at him. "But I won't lie and say loyalty's often rewarded in this sport," he adds. "So, it's not wrong to ask for help, when a situation is starting to feel overwhelming. Even if it feels like you're betraying a teammate doing it."

Bob rubs a thumb over his wedding band but keeps his focus on Kent. "Coaches, the other staff, they're there for the club's bottom line. But they are also there to help the players, too. Even if it doesn't always feel like it. It's not wrong to ask for help when you need it."

Kent realizes, finally, that they're talking about Jack.

"Okay," he manages, because he's blanked on what to say. His heart's started beating harder.

The man looks at him for a few more moments; and then he smiles slightly. More distant.

"Well," Jack's dad admits, "I might be rambling."

He looks past Kent, and then pushes to his feet. "I should head to my seat before this person arrives," he says, patting the back of the folding chair.

"--Wait," Kent says.

He immediately regrets it, because speaking without thinking's never done him any good before.

But he doesn't want to fuck this up, too. Not any more than he already did all those years ago.
And anyway, Bob's looking at him again. So. Nothing else to do but keep going.

"I mean. Thanks. And, okay." Kent swallows to try and get rid of his dry mouth. He starts to drag a hand over his hair, and then stops himself before he wrecks the product holding down his cowlick. "Thank you. It's--that's good advice. Thanks. I appreciate it. I'll--I won't forget it."

Bob looks at him for another moment, and then he sets a hand on Kent's shoulder again. "Good. And you're welcome," he says, squeezing it briefly. "It's good to see you again, Kent."

"You too," he replies.

Bob gives him a small, real smile; and then he pulls his hand away, and heads off down the aisle.

Kent stays in his seat, tugging out his phone and opening up Instagram so he has something to look at as he tries to will his heart rate back down to normal. He braces his forearm on his thigh as he scrolls through it, to keep his hand steady.

Even with his slump in January, and even with a couple other players chasing Kent's heels to the very end--even with the Stars' captain racking up four points in his final game and almost passing him--Kent still has the most points of any NHL player this season, earning him the Art Ross.

Which makes Kent Parson the first American-born and -bred player in NHL history to win that trophy.

Kent does good media through the award's receipt, delivering his speech smoothly and like he planned.

Once the ceremony's over, Coach Moss offers him a ride home while the PR team's taking Kent's trophy back to the clubhouse to stage it for the upcoming fan event. Kent tells him thanks but says he'll get a taxi.

"You've got prep-work to do for the draft, right?" he adds. "I'll be fine. Thanks though."

"Okay," Moss agrees. "Great job this season, Kent. You earned that."

Kent grins. "Thanks, Coach."

Before earlier that night, he might have meant it.

Moss pauses and gives him a longer look. "... Are you sure you don't want a ride?"

Kent tries to remember how it felt back in April, when he cared more about being a shoo-in for the trophy.

He reminds himself of one of the other things Bob said: the Art Ross doesn't just represent Kent's own points tally. It also reflects on all the guys who sent him good passes and set him up for his shot, and all the guys who caught Kent's passes and turned them into goals. It represents the system that Kent and all the Aces played by this season. The system that Coach Moss brought to Vegas.

Kent smiles again, and this time he manages to make it more real. "Yeah, I'll be good. Thanks for the offer, though. I appreciate it."
"All right," Moss says, after a moment. "This is an incredible achievement, Kent. You worked damn hard for it. I'm proud of you."

Kent shifts slightly on his feet, smiling a little wider. "Thanks, Aaron," he says, meaning it.

Moss claps him on the shoulder with a nod.

The man shakes Kent's hand and congratulates him on the season once more, and tells him to have a good summer. When Moss heads over to where his wife's waiting, Kent pulls out his phone to order a ride.

After he gets back, Kent hangs up his suit and spends most of the next hour sitting on the bathroom floor until his cat eventually comes in and curls up beside to him, feeling like he's going to puke.

He knew Bob and Alicia thought he was involved in Jack's overdose.

He knew it.

He should've told someone. He should've told them. He should've gotten Jack some real help, he should've been a real friend, he should've done a hundred things differently but he didn't and it's just goddamn fucking luck Jack's still alive and Kent knew the Zimmermanns thought that too--

He grinds the heel of his hand into an eye until he sees spots.

He can't believe Bob even talked to him in the first place. The man didn't have to; the cameras weren't on yet. Why would he waste his time...?

Because of that publicity blip, Kent realizes. When he went to Samwell last December like an idiot.

It got buried fast as Kent kept extending his streak and stayed out of any further negative spotlights, but still. If Bob saw anything about it, it would've been obvious why Kent was there. And if Jack dodged questions about it, Bob probably assumed the worst.

If Bob asked Jack in the first place. He probably didn't; it must've been clear that Jack was being smarter about his future than Kent was. That he'd moved on.

Kent's the one too stupid to do that. The one screwing up Jack's plans by trying to get back into his life.

The one humiliating himself in front of Zimmermann and his new guy by being the pathetic ex who couldn't just fucking move on.

Last December just was the latest entry on the list of how Kent fucks up everything when it comes to Zimmermann.

He should probably be grateful Bob tried to break it to him easy that Kent needed to shape up and start thinking about the future, not the past.

He shouldn't have dragged Bob's name into that fight with Jack. The man deserved more respect from him than that.

He should be grateful Bob understood Kent was trying to do the right thing.

What he thought was the right thing. He thought he was protecting Jack by covering up for him
until he got better. He thought Jack would get better, eventually. He thought he was being a good friend.

He didn't realize he was the worst possible person Jack could've had in his life back then. Not until later.

He thought he was doing the right thing.

Kent swallows hard until the bile coating his throat fades slightly. He drops a hand to scratch the back of Kitt's neck when she settles heavier against his hip.

* 

The next morning, Kent goes to the Ice Center to meet the pending free agent looking at Vegas. Brown tells him that he already talked with the Aces' GM yesterday, but he wanted to get a player's view.

Kent discusses the annoyance of the commute between the practice rink and the clubhouse and the game arena, and talks off-the-record about the plans for new arena in 2017 that'll finally wrap that up.

He's up-front with Brown about the issues among the defensemen and the current head and assistant defensive coach, because he's been in the league long enough to know that honesty with free agents really is the best policy. You get the wrong guy on your team under false pretenses, and then you've taken a cap hit for someone who'll never play at his best because he's never gonna be used right.

And if the Aces land Brown, the man's gonna spend a lot of time paired with younger d-men in order to mentor them.

Kent doesn't like letting too much about his team out of the dressing room, especially not to someone who might sign somewhere else and take all that info to a competing club. But Brown needs to know about the residue of the past season if he's going to do a good interacting with the defensemen who were on the roster then.

And if he knows about all this in advance and still signs with the Aces, then he'll be showing he's committed to dealing with the problem and fixing it. Kent'll know the man can be relied on.

Afterward, Brown laces up and takes a few practice skates around the south rink, while Kent stays at the bench. Eventually Brown breaks to a stop along the rail next to him.

"Ice always this soft?" he asks, cleaning the slush off one of his skates.

"Here, yeah," Kent replies. "Orleans' fluctuates, but they usually hit pretty close to this."

Kent tilts his head. "Plus side, the front office pushed like hell for them to quit competing to host the circus. So we don't have to deal with that anymore."

"Those fuckin' elephants," Brown mutters, with the hatred of a man who's been on teams that had their ice sheet melted down before. The first time it happened to the Aces--when Kent learned that elephants won't move if their feet are cold, no matter how much insulation the ice technician uses--he called his family and told everyone to never to buy tickets for the circus again. One cousin still hasn't forgiven him for it, but Kent refused to relent.

"Yep. So, not ideal, but the club tries to do right by us." Kent leans a hip against the rail and adds,
"Anything else? I c'n call Ivanovich if you wanna know about the city. He can tell you more than me."

"One other thing," Brown says. "How for real's the front office about this 'You Can Play' stuff?"

Are you fucking kidding me, Kent thinks.

First that rookie traded to the Aces last year because of rumors he was gay, and now this? What the hell kind of reputation is Vegas developing in the league?

Kent makes a note to start publicly dating ASAP, and says, "Pretty for real. Vegas is way too tourism-centric to exclude any group's money."

Brown looks over at him for a long moment.

"All right," he says at last. "You got a rep for being a real vicious shit with the chirping, Parse. But Short said you don't go after kids. That true?"

Brown was with Philadelphia for most of last season; but he got traded to the Aeros back in February. Kent makes a note that he must have talked to Showy when the other defenseman was touring Houston, and answers, "Yeah.

"Talking shit about minors is stupid, y'know?" Kent adds, shrugging. "Refs shut that down faster than anything."

"Alright," Brown says, nodding again. He leans back, bracing his arms on the rail, and says, "We think my nephew's gay."

Kent blinks and looks over again.

Brown shrugs a shoulder. "He's too little to know, you know? Might be a phase, or--whatever. But if it's not, I wanna play somewhere they can visit and he won't hear fag shit around the guys."

Brown taps his fingers against the rail. "Houston's a good club, but the city.... There's some political pissing contest goin' on with a bathroom law on gays or cross-dressers or whatever. I don't wanna sign somewhere I'm gonna have to say we better only have holidays at their house."

"No, yeah," Kent says. "Okay. I mean, if that's a factor, here's good. That shit won't fly here."

He scratches the back of his neck. "I mean, our fans are the same as hockey fans anywhere," Kent adds. "But Nevada's got pretty solid anti-discrimination laws."

He looked into when Lean made it onto the roster last year. But Kent doesn't plan on bringing up that old, probably-fake rumor about the younger defenseman unless Brown actually signs. "They'd be fine here."

"Huh," Brown says.

"And he'd be fine if you wanted them to come t' family skate or something," Kent adds. "You let guys talk like that in the dressing room, pretty soon it comes out on the ice, and then you've got a PR bomb on your hands, you know? There's no place here for that shit. You hear anything like it, let me know."

Brown snorts on a laugh. "Man, Short was right about you."

Kent raises an eyebrow.
"Said you ran a tight dressing room," Brown replies. "Like Skalski, just different."

Kent's a little offended at being compared to the Aeros' captain, since Skalski's obsession with keeping the Houston Hockey Club viable in the face of the city's more popular football and baseball teams is a massive chip on the man's shoulder, making him one of the Central division's easiest chirping targets. Especially since the Aeros've already folded once before in Houston, something Kent brings up on the ice every single time the Aces play them.

But he doesn't mention it. "I guess. I expect guys not to fuck up the PR is all."

"Alright." Brown leans a little harder against the rail. "Thanks, Parson."

"Course," Kent says. "Anything else?"

"They got slot machines in all the gas stations?" Brown asks.

Kent chuckles. "Right? Grocery stores too."

"No shit?"

"Yep. Y'get used to it."

*

The second day of the draft, two days before free agency opens, Vegas finally announces it's trading their top defenseman Zachary Short to the Aeros, in exchange for bottom-six forward/agitator Tamás Farkas and an AHL defenseman.

On paper it comes off like an uneven trade, though when Kent looks up the AHL player Kawapit has some impressive stats.

But given that Brown's talked with several other guys on the Aces during the last few days, including Vichy and Kent's alternate captain Sunny, that was probably a factor in the GMs' decisions.

Soon after the Aces' final pick in the draft, Showy texts Kent: Ur comin over 2 help me pack

You're bad at asking favors Kent sends back.

I no how 2 ask favors from u Showy replies. Which is tell u ur doin them

Also i'm n ur lobby so don't gimme bs bout u can't drive

Ur doorman let me walk rite n this is a v insecure locale parse

Kent makes a face. Are you serious

The doorbell rings.

Kent checks the security camera, and then opens the door and tells Showy, "You can't get up here from the lobby that fast, liar."

"Pot, kettle, etcetera," Showy replies. "Get your butt in the car, Parse."
Showy agrees to detour to Chinatown so Kent can buy the man's daughter a final box of her favorite cookies, even as he tells Kent, "She's three. She's not gonna remember you bribed her, pal. It's gonna be all Aeros cheering from now on."

"We'll see," Kent says cheerfully.

He doesn't know how to talk about trade moving to a kid--Kent's parents have lived in the same house ever since they inherited it from his grandparents when he was in kindergarten--so he doesn't say anything. Emiri pretty much just takes the cookies and runs, so it's not hard.

"Not that I don't appreciate you setting the bar for the Aeros' captain," Rie says, hands on her hips as she watches Emiri head down the hall. "But why are you here, again?"

"I'm here to put things in boxes one at a time, I guess," Kent replies, lifting his cast slightly. "Talk to your husband, he hijacked me from my apartment."

Rie looks at Showy, and then back him; and then she just shakes her head. "Stay away from the good dishes, please."

"Will do."

Kent's confident Showy has an ulterior motive behind this stunt; there're plenty of guys on the team who'd be more help at packing than he is right now, and most of them might've even come back to Vegas to do it if Showy had asked. So he's not surprised when Showy finishes taping a newly-built box and sets it on the kitchen counter beside him before asking, "How you doin'?"

"I'm alright," Kent says. "How's this working out with Rie and Emiri?"

"Don't even play like this is about me, Parse," Showy replies. "We both know you're smarter than that. And it's going fine, she knew this was happening since last year."

Kent exhales, and starts pulling magnets off the fridge and dropping them into a plastic bag on the countertop. "Alright," he agrees. "What's up, Short?"

"Are you okay?" Showy says seriously.

Kent makes as much of an exasperated hand gesture as he can without dropping the magnets. "My arm's still broke, man. What're you asking?"

Showy leans an arm on the countertop and considers him for a long, silent moment. Kent raises an eyebrow and holds his gaze.

"Why'd you quit taking the painkillers so soon?" Showy asks at last.

Kent tightens his jaw, and then dumps the magnets in the bag and turns back to the fridge. "I don't still need 'em."

"I'm not claiming either one of us is a doctor, Parse," Showy replies. "But I'm pretty sure if you said the same thing to Elliot, he'd flip his desk before cussing you out for being an idiot."

Kent makes an annoyed noise, even though Showy might be right about the Aces' trainer's reaction. Minus the desk. "I don't like them."

"Why not?"
Kent gives him an irritated look over his shoulder. "Why?"

"Answer my question first, and I'll give you an honest answer," Showy says.

Kent exhales through his teeth and focuses back on the magnets.

"...I don't like them," he repeats, shrugging a shoulder sharply. "That stuff makes it hard to think. You can't drive, you're groggy, you sound stupid on them. Why would I wanna take them if I don't have to?"

"Okay," Showy says slower, thoughtfully. "That why you like that ARP machine? It lets you fix stuff that's hurting without having to take pills?"

"Why," Kent repeats harder.

"I guess this is on us for somebody not sitting down and telling you sooner," Showy says. "But you're the captain, Parse. Whether you mean it to or not, what you do sets the tone in the dressing room."

"And?"

"And when the only time you're willing to take anything stronger than ibuprofen is when you've got a broke bone, it sets a really hard bar for other guys to meet," Showy replies evenly. "It's been a real problem sometimes. Like I said, it's on the rest of the leaders for none of us telling you sooner. But better late than never."

Kent fully turns around, eyes narrowed. "A problem with who?"

Showy names a couple call-ups from the feeder team over the years, and then goes on: "Nino, but.

He shrugs tiredly. "Ell thought half that was him just reacting to finding Tobin when he ODed. He got him sorted out before it caused any long-term damage."

"Dammit," Kent mutters, rubbing the heel of his hand against the bridge of his nose.

He drops it and pulls another magnet off the fridge, making a note to keep an eye on this. Nino's been growing into a good, solid defenseman for the Aces; they don't need him damaging himself out of some stupid sense of machismo.

"Robber, too," Showy continues. "Scrappy just about beat sense into him when he figured it out, 'cause you know, that's not counter-productive or anything. But the kid'd still rather self-medicate with alcohol instead of just taking a damn Oxytocin, because at least you sometimes drink around the team."

Kent snorts derisively, because that sounds more like an excuse for Robber's excess drinking than a real issue.

Showy narrows his eyes slightly.

"Parson," he says. "I told you I'd give you an honest answer, and I'm doing it. We're a sport with a massive painkiller-abuse problem the league can't keep tamped down. So when the trainer actively fights with you in front of the rest of the guys to make you take a goddamn pill, it says a lot, alright?"

"Jesus," Kent mutters. "It's not that big a deal."
"Speaking as one of the guys that's watched you get more and more militant about this over the last few years, yeah, Parse. It really, really is."

Kent throws his good hand in the air. "Why're you making such a big deal outta this?"

"Because somebody should've said this to you years ago," Showy replies. "That's on us. It's on me."

"It doesn't matter whether it's taking too many pills, or it's you running to the opposite end of Zimmermann's actions by refusing to take any, Kent," Showy says, looking him in the eyes. "You're still screwing yourself up because of pills."

Kent carefully sets the ceramic magnet he's holding down into the bag, and then steps away from the counter. He reminds himself that Short's daughter is running around somewhere.

"Who do you think you are?" he says coldly.

"A friend," Short replies.

"If you can't believe that, then a guy who'd know he's a coward if I don't say this to you while I still can," the other man continues. "I should've done it years ago. This is a serious problem, Parse, both for the Aces' dressing room and for your own health."

"I don't like them," Kent bites off. "It's not a fuckin'--" toddler, somewhere "--it's not about that. I don't like them."

"Okay," Short says sincerely, throwing Kent off.

"If that's why, okay," he repeats. "I've known you six years, Parse. If you say you don't like painkillers because you don't like how they mess with your head, I believe you.

"But you have to talk about this in front of the other guys," Showy adds. "Tell them you're using an alternative solution. Use that ARP right in the dressing room. Tell the guys you don't expect them to wreck themselves playing through pain, because you're not doing that anymore either. You're just using a different kind of painkiller. If a machine works better for you than a pill, okay. But say that."

"What d'you mean, 'not doing that anymore'?" Kent says, narrowing his eyes again.

"Parson," Showy says bluntly. He waves a hand at him. "The 2015 Art Ross trophy winner is standing in my kitchen. You played some of the best hockey I've seen last season. You had a 41-game point streak. There are Internet wars over whether you or Sid're the greatest in the world.

"And you started using that ARP last year," Showy points out. "How many other years could you've played like that if you hadn't been fighting through pain you didn't need to be feeling?"

Kent clenches his jaw a lot tighter. "It wasn't that bad."

"I'm not trying to make you take pills if you don't want to, Parse," Showy tells him. "If that machine's working for you, you're way better off using it than taking addictive crap. That's not where I'm going with this."

Abruptly, Kent thinks of something the former Ace he boarded with during his rookie year said to him last year about the Aces' alternate captain, Sunny: the man who's been Showy's main defense partner for the last several years. "You get older, you know what other guys around as long as you have probably gone through."
"He's the only guy who's been here since year one," Waller said about Sunny. "You know what our kind of hockey is."

Showy's referenced the addictive side of painkillers more than once in just a couple minutes.

"But tell the rest of the team you don't think they're weaklings if they take a painkiller when the trainer or doctor tells them to," Showy continues; and Kent focuses. "Quit arguing with Elliot over it so much. Just say it's just not what works for you, so you do something else."

Kent exhalates hard through his teeth and looks over at the refrigerator again.

"If I use the ARP in the dressing room, I'm going to take even more crap from the guys," he points out. But even as he says it, Kent knows it's a weak argument.

"Parse," Showy says dryly, "chirping the life outta you is the number one Aces team bonding activity. You're never escaping that. You should've made your peace long ago."

Kent just makes an aggravated noise.

"Look," Showy says. "I don't think it's a fluke you were constant beast mode last season, okay? If that machine's working for you, praise it from the rooftops. Sell it like an endorsement. But tell the rest of the guys it's your alternative to pills. Let them know that trying to playing through pain is a dumbass tactic that just damages their value."

"Jesus," Kent says, because he can see what Showy's doing, using the way Kent talks against him. "I got it."

"Good," Showy replies, quieter. "I'm glad you found a method that's working for you, Parse. I mean it."

Kent snorts half-heartedly. "Yeah, we'll see if you still say that first game against next season."

"I will," Showy replies seriously, refusing to change the subject. "I've played some of the best years of my life on the ice with you, Kent. I never wanna be a guy who says 'I wonder what Parse might've played like if he'd stayed into his thirties.'"

Kent jerks, nearly dropping the alphabet magnets he was peeling off the fridge, and twists around to glare at him.

"Either way, it's still screwing yourself up because of pills," Short repeats. "You wreck your body enough, and it's gonna quit on you."

"Fu--" Toddler. "Jesus."

"You're never gonna stop taking dirty hits, Kent," he says. "Not with your mouth and your skill and the kind of hockey the Aces play. If that ARP helps with the pain, stick with it."

"I wasn't planning to quit," Kent snaps.

"Good."

"Jesus," Kent mutters again. "Anything else?"

"Nope," Showy says, picking up another box and starting to fold it together. "That's the last thing I couldn't forgive myself if I left here without sayin' it."
Kent makes an growling noise in the back of his throat.

"I've got friends on this team," Showy replies calmly. "Including you, jerkface. This needed to be said, for you and for the rest of the guys."

It's not like Kent doesn't believe him.

Showy's funny as hell: he could keep guys' spirits up during long slogs of roadies, and defuse tension in the dressing room with humor. And he really stepped all that up last season, when he became an alternate captain. A lot of the guys like him.

Kent believes that Showy likes them back. You can't fake that level of investment, not that much for that long. It's real with Showy.

Kent likes him. Most of the time. Not so much right now; but most of the time.

"Alright," he says. "I got it."

Kent dumps more magnets in the bag and starts pulling another handful off of the fridge. "...Is it really a problem?"

"Yeah," Showy says. "I dunno if anybody really got just how much. I think we all just took care of the guys around us and didn't talk about it. And then I'm alt and suddenly guys keep talking to me, and I'm like 'Holy--this is systemic. And oh look! It's the worst for patient zero here! The dude three friggin' different guys had to hold down to fix his arm!' I can't believe you don't have a Flogging Molly song written about you yet."

"Ha ha," Kent replies flatly.

"Actually, final thing, it'd be super great if people could start being able to talk to you about this stuff without having to kidnap you first," Showy continues casually. "Just, puttin' that out there. It'd be a value-enhancer."

Kent gives him a long look as he drops the magnets in the bag.

"Should I have used 'hijack'?' Showy replies. "That your preferred terminology?"

"Not gonna miss you at all, Short."

"Pal, I'm a hundred and ten percent sure you're gonna make me wanna sock you in the face first game against, so samesies," Showy grins.

"You can't have a hundred and ten percent, that's a garbage number," Kent says, because yeah he knows everybody uses that term but it's still not possible. If a goalie had a 1.10 GAA everybody would call that stat rigged immediately. Even if it was Price.

"Hundred and fifty percent, Parse."

Kent sighs melodramatically.

A couple hours later, there's more boxes in the living room than before Kent arrived, but there's still no visible dent in the amount of stuff in the house. Showy makes a weary noise when Kent points that out.
"Vichy recommended settin' the place on fire when he was here yesterday," the other man replies, a fist on his hip as he stares at the mostly-emptied kitchen. "Like, pretty sure arson'll make Houston cancel my contract, pal. This is a pretty passive-aggressive way to get me to stay."

Kent snersks. "Why'd you even ask him after the babysitting fail?"

"He ain't gettin' out of friendship duties that easy," Showy retorts. "His arms are fine. Putting crap in boxes ain't that hard if you could do it."

"Hey."

"What kind of fracture was that again, Parse?"

"Same degree as that separated shoulder, Short."

Then--since this is probably the closest to an opening he's going to get, at least while Showy's family aren't in hearing--Kent adds, "There anything I should know about Sturluson?"

To his side, Showy goes still.

Kent waits. Showy referenced the addictive side of painkillers enough times earlier that Kent suspected there was a reason for it; looks like he was right.

". . . I know how fuckin' smart you are, and I still..." the other man finally mutters.

Showy drags his hair back from his forehead. "He's trying to get better," he stresses. "He's been trying some alternative treatments, he was cutting back and detoxing--"

"I'm just talking about his game," Kent interrupts, "same as you."

Showy tightens his jaw. "I'm not--"

"Toddlers repeat a lot of stuff they shouldn't because they don't know any better, right?" Kent says. "I'm just talking about his game."

Showy rubs his face hard for several moments, and then lets out a slow breath.

"He wants to get better," he says, quieter. "He's really been trying. It's getting better."

So it's been going on for a while.

Early last season was when Waller asked Kent to keep an eye out on Sunny. So by that point the abuse must've gotten obvious enough that Waller picked up on it, or somebody else finally talked to him about it.

Waller asked him to watch out. He practically warned Kent about it.

But Kent got distracted with his point streak, and then with Samwell and its fallout, and then with fighting through a slump and adapting to new linemates and the playoffs. He let it fall off his radar, because Sunny hadn't seemed any different than usual.

But then, if somebody's been an addict the entire time he's known them, it's not like Kent has a clean frame of reference for how the guy would act. It wouldn't become obvious until things got so bad he's abusing enough pills that he's headed for an overd--

Stop it, Kent tells himself.
"Okay," he says to Showy. "Has he tried a chiropractor? The ART guy really works for me."

Showy exhales through his teeth. "I think he looked at it, but man, you know how much those cost?"

"A ton," Kent replies. "S' why I had to limit it to once a week. But it's worth it. My knee was getting really screwed up, but he fixed it."

Showy looks over. "I thought it was just a bruise."

"No, last year," Kent replies. "When I busted my ankle, it threw all this outta whack. He taps his right thigh. "Mark said that's how it usually goes--ankle, knee, then my hip woulda been next if I hadn't come in."

"For--this right here," Showy says exasperatedly. "This is what I'm talkin' about. How long'd you put that off?"

"Longer than I should've," Kent says. "I get it, Showy. If it's gonna help things out with the rest of the guys, I'll talk more in the dressing room."

Showy studies him for a long moment, and then nods slowly. "...All right. Good."

"Thanks for the heads up," Kent adds.

Showy shifts edgily on his feet. ". . . He wants to get better."

If you have to tell a guy something three times, you're trying to convince yourself more than him.

"Okay," Kent agrees.

Showy's wife comes out of the hall soon after, asking if Kent's staying for lunch and, if so, whether takeout's okay. Kent says yeah on both if it's cool with them.

Showy calls in the order while Kent tries to help Rie find which box they packed the paper plates into. As he shifts boxes around and checks their labels, Kent makes a mental note to keep serious track of Sunny this coming season.

If the man even makes the roster.

Sunny took a knee injury in the last game of the Cup finals. That's a hard thing to come back from after just a couple months. Especially if it's one more issue on top of a bunch of other problems.

Kent still needs to remember. He should've been on top of this last season.

Waller explicitly asked him to do it. Kent let him down.

* 

The morning of July 1, defenseman Brian Brown signs with the Las Vegas Aces.

The afternoon of July 1, the Aces fire their assistant coach in charge of defense.

Soon after close of business on July 1, news starts breaking of the club's main owner finalizing a deal to sell the bulk of his stake in the Aces.

Bruckheimer's keeping a small percent of the ownership, alongside the current minority owner
Foley; but once the deal closes, a new corporation will be the majority owner of the Las Vegas Hockey Club.

Kent tries to look the group up. He even calls the library and asks about business databases when the general internet fails him. But everything keeps running into the same wall three shell companies down.

That evening, Kent calls his native Las Vegan teammate even though Vichy's still at his conditioning camp up in B.C.

"What're they thinking?" Kent demands, because yeah yeah he's not supposed to ask about the backend dealings of the franchise but come on. "How did this stay quiet so long?"

Who's he kidding, Kent knows how: the silent investors. "Just--what the hell's going on?"

"I dunno," Vichy says wearily.

"I mean it," Kent replies, flatter. "What're they planning, Vichy? What the hell are we going into next season? Don't tell me whatever I'm not supposed to know, but what's gonna happen if we don't get the Cup next year?"

Vichy's silent for a long moment, before repeating, "I don't know, Parser."

"I don't do that anymore," he adds.

Kent reflexively pulls the phone down to stare at it. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

A moment later, Vichy exhales through his teeth. "Maybe Brown made it a signing condition? Dropping Heit?" he suggests. Blatantly shifting away from the ownership question.

"Maybe," Kent replies. He heads over to the couch and makes a note to thank Brown if so.

He drops down on the cushions. Kitt half-flattens her ears and glares at him for daring to disturb her. Kent makes a face back and adds, "So, they finally gonna make you an alt now?"

"I," Vichy says unhelpfully. "What?"

"Now that you stopped," Kent clarifies. "The conflict of interest or whatever's over, right? We need that spot filled. I told Impey it's gotta be someone that'll talk to him. If there's a line to the silent investors, even better."

Vichy says "That--" and then mumbles several things in Russian.

Kent narrows his eyes and sits up. "What?"

"It's not...." 

Vichy makes an indecipherable noise. ". . . I quit that back during the lockout."

"What?" Kent repeats. "The hell weren't you made alt when Waller retired? Why was it just Sunny and me?"

Vichy's quiet for a very long time before saying, "I wasn't working for the silent investors."
It takes Kent a moment to fully process that implication. "Oh Jesus fuck."

"Yeah. So--"

"Vichy."

"You should drop it there, Parser," Vichy says. "Forget the last couple minutes, too."

"Are you--"

And then Kent cuts off and dumps the phone on the couch.

He slumps forward, bracing an elbow on his thigh and pressing a hand over his face, and wonders yet again what he's done to deserve a team like this.

No wonder Kent's former first alternate warned him away from talking to Vichy about the silent investors.

--Which means Waller knew what Vichy was doing.

And Waller was a contact between the silent investors and the front office. Kent's certain about that. So....

. . . Well.

Explains why Vichy's stats were such shit whenever he and Waller shared ice time during the short season in 2013. If whatever happened to make Vichy quit happened then, during the lockout.

It hadn't come up much, so Kent didn't address it with Vichy. There were more important things to fix back then.

Kent figured it was just stress over the cramped schedule, mixed with frustration at having to play alongside their third defense pairing.

But apparently it was because Waller, the Aces' first alternate captain--a good leader in the dressing room and on the ice, the man Kent lived with during his rookie year, one of the few people Kent trusts as much as he's been willing to trust anyone since he was nineteen--sold out another core member of the Aces to the silent investors.

Sold out Vichy, Kent's linemate and friend for years. The man who's one of the few other people Kent trusts, mostly.

Kent bites off all the nastiest swears he can think of in English and French; and then he throws in the two he knows in Spanish when that still doesn't feel like enough.

And then he rubs his face hard, and picks the phone back up. "Okay."

"You know I heard all of that, right?" Vichy says dryly. "You remember how phones work? Or did you have yours off too long after finals, you're still relearning?"

Kent starts to say one of the insults he knows in Russian, but then he stops himself because he likes Vichy's mom. "I don't wanna hear a damn thing out of you."

"Might as well turn the phone off, then. You remember how to do that? See that nice red button?"

"Great," Kent says. "This is great. You're really stepping up your game on the chirps this summer,
good work. These are almost passable. You're really getting there."

"Har har," Vichy retorts.

"I mean it, I'm proud of you, man. You're really coming along."


"Like the season wasn't bad enough," he adds in a mutter. "First McDavid to Edmonton, then Lucic to the Kings. Now this."

"Lucic was our fault," Kent says dryly. "We did too good building up the rivalry with Phoenix. L.A. decided it was time to hike up the skirt, get our attention back."

Vichy snorts out a cackle. "You mother**f**cker."

Vichy said to drop it, so Kent does. They end the conversation a little later.

After he signs off, Kent tosses the phone at the other end of the couch, making Kitt lash her tail again. "Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit."

He wonders what blackmail the silent investors have on Vichy.

It's obviously strong enough that they're willing to let the man keep playing on the Aces, even after crossing them. It has to be something big, if it's held up for three years.

But Vichy doesn't have any kind of past record like Kent. His off-ice reputation's always been reliably clean. He's never even been suspended or even fined by the league, because he doesn't play nasty. So what could be blackmail--

--Who could be....

_Drop it_, Kent reminds himself.

*

On July 1, buried under all the other news, the Aces also let the contracts for Burival and Sanfilippo--their older goalie and their oldest defenseman--expire without offering them renewals.

The defenseman signs with another team in the Eastern conference two days later. The goalie signs with another Pacific division team within a week.

*

Kent spends the offseason in Las Vegas, working with specialty guys recommended by the Aces’ trainer, and balancing his rehab with his conditioning for the coming season.

He skips going home for his birthday, since PR scheduled the fan event for his Art Ross trophy during the Fourth of July weekend, in order to take advantage of the tourist crowd as well as the regular fans. The store's got a backlog of merch to clear out.

It's the first year Kent doesn't go back to New York to visit his family even for just a day or two in early July.

But his mom tells him she completely understands. She also orders him to send her the newspaper
clippings from the event, as well as "real photos, Kenny, not texts." Kent almost tells her about Pinterest for the hundredth time, but instead just promises that he will.

It's a little weird not going home, but it doesn't really bother him. An afternoon around hundreds of people who've traveled and waited for hours just to see him is a pretty great way to spend his birthday.

And it finally gets Kent's head back where he should've been during the awards ceremony.

Winning the Art Ross is a big deal for any player. But being the first American to do it?

There's a reason people were already waiting at dawn just to get Kent's autograph.

This is yet another record added to his name. It's yet another first that he's achieved--not just in the new era, but in the entire near-century history of the NHL.

And Kent's only twenty-five.

He's got another good several years in him to keep tearing it up. Maybe almost a decade, if he can quit with all these injuries. Maybe even fifteen years, if he can figure out what black magic Jagr's using to keep playing into his forties.

He's done so much already; and there's still so much more ahead of him to seize.

Kent's autograph table is opposite the trophy's, which was set up for fans to take pictures with it while they're waiting to get an autograph and photos with him. The Art Ross's table is in front of the trophy case that Orleans Arena had to build after Kent was drafted into the Aces, so that they could display his Calder and then their Stanley Cup replica. The plaqued stand the Art Ross will sit on after today is sitting inside the case, waiting.

Every single award the Las Vegas Aces have, Kent Parson earned for them.

He's busted his ass to achieve everything he has. He should be proud.

Even the comments about not winning the Cup don't get under his skin today. Not like back in late June.

With the offseason rebuild underway, fans are swinging back toward a positive attitude again. Now, all the comments are pretty much about how far the Aces got this time, and they end with "Next year, it'll be all the way!"

"Absolutely," Kent tells a woman, as he's shaking her son's hand. "We're picking up some incredible guys. I can't wait for next season."

But eventually--near the tail end of the fan event, after the doors are closed but they're still finishing up the line inside, when Kent's hand's beginning to cramp and he's been talking for so long that he's on his third bottle of water and he's trying to subtly check how many people are left before he can finally take a piss already--the repetition starts getting harder to smile through.

Kent knows the whole purpose of the regular season is to reach the playoffs.

Every comment is yet another reminder of the expectations on him and all the Aces. Winning an award for earning the most points in a regular season doesn't mean much if the postseason was a
Being the first American player to win the Art Ross is a big deal--but there's a reason the Stanley Cup replica is the trophy sitting in the center of the display case. On top of the highest pedestal.

Kent keeps his smile in place as he signs another jersey and thanks another fan for coming and looks up at another phone for a photo, and he reminds himself to stay focused. Nothing makes people turn on an athlete faster than thinking he's ungrateful.

Like everything he has is a gift. Like Kent didn't earn every single bit of it.

Like he hasn't dedicated his entire life, ever since he first picked up a ball hockey stick and outplayed the rest of the neighborhood kids, to being the best he possibly could. Like he hasn't spent millions maintaining himself at the level of an elite athlete and a franchise face.

**Knock it off**, Kent reminds himself, as the next person comes up and hands him an un-glassed, framed photo collage to sign. **Focus.** "Wow, this is amazing, man. Thanks a lot."

He wishes he could check his face to make sure his smile looks happy enough. But there's no reflective surface in his line of vision, and he can barely set down the permanent markers long enough to flex his hand occasionally, let alone rub his face.

He has to rely on the PR rep beside him instead. Whenever O'Toole cracks another joke, Kent recalibrates and makes sure to grin a little wider.

At least everybody here today expects the best from him because they know Kent can meet those expectations.

At least they're telling Kent they want the Aces to win the finals next season because they know the team's proven it can do that.

2015-16 will be the Las Vegas Aces' tenth anniversary as a club. He knows that everybody's hoping for a Cup win even more than usual during that milestone year. Kent wants it too.

He knows everybody wants the Aces to take the Cup in 2016, because Kent helped win it for them for the first time ever during the club's fifth year anniversary in 2011.

During the first season ever that the Las Vegas Hockey Club wasn't teetering on the edge of folding and getting moved to a new city.

Because Kent Parson was its new captain, and ever since 2009 the Aces had been on the rise.

He finishes signing the collage and thanks the man again as he hands it back, before smiling over at the security guy holding the man's phone and taking the photos.

Kent reminds himself again to be glad that the expectations are high.

It could be worse. Vegas could still be a club that fills seats by giving away tickets or promising fights instead of wins. Kent could've failed to change all that over the last six years.

So his baseline is excellence. He set that himself, didn't he? It's not arbitrary, it's what he **does.**

After the event's wrapped up, the biggest guy on the PR staff stays with Kent at the side exit while he's waiting on his taxi. Enough people are still outside, milling around the fanstore and across the
road in the casino's parking lot, that Boswell's just cracked the door open enough to keep an eye on
the street. Kent's leaning against the wall on the opposite side, out of view.

"We get somebody new on social?" Kent asks, looking up from his phone. "Our Twitter's lit
lately."

Boswell grins. "Yup. Grace Tsui. Found her doing social for that band we got the exclusive from."

"Sweet," Kent replies. He makes a mental note to write up his annual list of front office staff soon,
so he'll remember the new people and their positions when camp comes.

He scrolls further down the Aces' Twitter account and likes one of the smart-alecky posts about the
fan event. "Somebody oughta tell the league, here's how to use emojis and not look all 'Greetings,
fellow youths!'"

Boswell snerks. And then he glances out the crack in the door again. "I think.... Yeah, your ride's
here."

Kent shoves the phone into his pocket and smiles. "Thanks, Joe."

*

In mid-July, Kent buys season tickets for the Aces' feeder team. Reno may be on the other side of
the state, but it's still way easier to get to than when the Sovereigns were in Kansas.

He renews his season tickets with all of Vegas's college and minor sports teams while he's at it.
They're basically wasted money since most of their seasons clash with his own; but it's good PR for
the teams to be able to mention that a professional athlete is a season ticket holder. And it builds up
local ties for the Aces.

And having seats to any game in the area is a useful way for Kent to get guys alone if he needs to
talk to them one-on-one, without visibly separating them from the rest of the team. So it's worth the
expense.

*

Everything about his broken arm messes up Kent's offseason schedule.

It slows down the time it takes him to tweet shout-outs to each of the Aces' picks during the draft,
which isn't the end of the world but's still irritating.

It fucks up a lot of the conditioning he'd normally do, which maybe also isn't the end of the world
but comes a lot closer.

Kent has to reschedule promos for most of his endorsements, except for the non-action
photoshoots. He spends most of July focusing on cardio and aerobic training, since he can at least
still bike and jog. But upper body workouts and weights are out, making him feel weird and off-
balance after a few weeks.

With so much more free time in his schedule than usual, Kent spends a lot of the summer going out
to parties.

*
He has the first one-night stand of his life in early July, when the bruise on his knee's fully healed. Kent decides it's also going to be the last; the amount of time and effort that serious flirting takes isn't worth it for just a couple hours of sex.

Worse, he only remembers the Aces' revised ban list after they've gone back to his apartment, and she's fallen asleep on the other side of the bed.

Kent forces himself to stay awake afterward, slumped into pillows propped up against the wall and skimming Deadspin on his phone as he waits for Brigit to wake back up.

He could just wake her himself and ask her to leave--but that's a great way to get rumors started about being a douchebag. And that stereotype's so prevalent in sports that if he lets himself get tagged with it, it'll never fully go away.

Plus, with his cast in the way, she did most of the work during sex. Kent's pretty sure that means he owes her an explanation. And he's completely sure his mom would read him the riot act if she somehow ever learned Kent just booted out a hookup, right before dragging him off to church to have the pastor do the same thing.

So it's a relief when Brigit's phone starts buzzing.

She muted it earlier; but once it sounds like somebody's called, left a voicemail, and now started texting with increasing frequency, Kent figures he's in the clear for waking her.

He nudges her shoulder until Brigit groans something into the mattress. "Hey, your phone's blowing up."

Once she pushes herself up on an elbow--and because he knows she came to the party with some friends before leaving with him--Kent adds, "You need to tell anybody you're okay?"

"Aw, shit," she mumbles, before rolling off the bed and stumbling over to the phone lying in the pile of her clothes. Kent takes the opportunity to head to the bathroom.

After he cleans up and starts brushing his teeth, he hears, "Okay, he didn't say yes, but--did he actually say no?"

A few seconds later: "Then--just show up? He's not gonna kick you out, it'd just be Jake and he burns stuff. ... Thank yooooou, you have no idea. I owe you, thanks a ton."

Damn, Kent thinks. Brigit had been trying to find someone to take over her shift the next morning while they were riding back to his place. He was hoping that would take care of this.

"You have no idea," she repeats, sounding pleased enough that Kent figures he's done pretty well despite being rusty and injured and feeling scrawny from the body mass loss like he always does at the end of a season. That's a plus.

He rinses his mouth and face and fixes his hair before heading back into the bedroom. Brigit's sitting on the bed, yawning; her phone's locked or off and lying on the nightstand.

"Okay, this is on me for not remembering earlier," Kent says. "So, uh. We're not supposed to let anyone stay overnight unless it's a wife or girlfriend."

She raises an eyebrow.

Kent lifts his hand, palm out. "I know, it sounds like bullshit," he acknowledges. "I swear. The club
added it to the ban list after Bieber's PR had to deal with that Rio video, since we've got a bunch of single twenty-somethings on the team now. And, y'know. Vegas."

"Oh my gawd." Brigit falls back on the bed laughing, which is a better response than Kent expected. "Dude."

"I knooow, I forgot, sorry. I'll get you a ride home," he promises.

"Dude. My job."

Kent offers, "I know it sounds like bullshit. Name any of the guys, I'll call them. They'll confirm it."

Brigit blinks and stifles her snickering, and props herself back up on an elbow. "For real?"

"Anybody," Kent agrees, getting his phone back out of the bathroom and grabbing his boxers on the way. "We all made a deal after the announcement. I promise I'm not lying."

"Wow." Brigit sits up and pulls a pillow onto her lap. ". . . Jakub Prochazka?"

"Really?" Kent asks, a little surprised. He pulls on the boxers and goes into his contacts. "I figured it'd be Scalfano. I thought he was everyone's favorite."

"Jeff's badass," she agrees. "But Jakub seems so chill and funny."

You haven't had to deal with him during a skid, Kent thinks; but he keeps that to himself. He hits Chazzer's number and sets it to speaker.

Chazzer answers just before it goes to voicemail. "The fuck Parse where 're you, 's not morning here."

"Yeah it is," Kent answers, since Chazzer's offseason home is by Seattle. "Just really early morning."

"What is this, why're you doin' this," Chazzer groans. A mattress creaks. "I'm not gonna forget this, asshole."

On the bed Brigit is stifling her giggles into the pillow. Kent leans against the wall. "I just need a quick favor."

Chazzer's voice gets more muffled. "Fuck you bro 'm hangin' up."

"The front office added non-girlfriends sleeping overnight to the ban list, right?" Kent continues. "]s all I need."

"Yeah?" Chazzer says, confused and drowsy. "Why? I know that. We're...."

There's about three seconds of dead silence. Kent decides to keep his phone plugged in every chance he gets so the chirping that's coming doesn't kill the battery.

"Bro."

"Yeah thanks that's all I needed."

"Parse. You're so fuckin' dead," Chazzer says gleefully. "The fuck'd you call me, you really thought I wouldn't say anything?"
"I can hear you typing, jackass. I know you're texting this," Kent says dryly. "I had to, she picked you."

"Mary Mother of God I'm on speaker--hi!" Chazzer says louder. Brigit collapses across the mattress, laughing herself sick into the pillow. "You have great taste, ma'am! Sorta, I mean you picked Parson, but still. Thanks for this!"

In the background, Kent hears a woman's voice and immediately cuts off the speaker. "Thanks man, way to help out a teammate."

"You brought this on yourself, bro," Chazzer cackles, right as Kent's phone pings with a text. He doesn't even look. "Hope you had fun, you're so goddamn dead."

"See you at scrim, Chaz," Kent says, hanging up while Chazzer's still laughing.

By the time he's pulled up his contact for the taxi company he likes, Brigit's mostly gotten it back together.

"Sorry!" she sniggers. "Sorry, uh, I didn't think it'd go like that."

"Nah, no worries," Kent shrugs.

"Wow," Brigit says, before shaking her head. "'Ma'am.'"

She snickers once more before stifling it with a cough. "Okay, okay. Okay. Uh. Can I get a shower first?"

"Yeah, of course." His phone pings again.

Kent looks down, sees the start of Kirbs's reply in the banner, and thinks Do something about the insomnia already before locking it.

At least that's the team dealt with.

Once he dates somebody long enough that it gets publicly noticed, that'll take care of the rest of this. He'll be covered for another season.

His phone pings again. Kent mutes it, and then plugs it into one of the kitchen outlets before shutting it inside a drawer.

At least this got him back on his game with flirting, Kent tells himself, as he goes to get dressed so he can walk Brigit down to her ride. And re-familiarized him with straight sex.

Which comes in handy at the end of July, when Kent finds the woman he decides to be publicly hooked up with for the rest of offseason.

*

He meets Elena at Caesar's lobby bar in mid-July. Kent starts chatting her up because he hit too close to $10,000 at the blackjack table, and she dresses and carries herself like someone who knows they're important. Kent figures the casino security'll let him leave without a hassle if he's got somebody like that beside him.

Once he learns that she works at an alcohol distribution house, he asks if she wants to head to a
lounge across the street with a better wine list.

That gets him her full attention. Kent knows he doesn't look like a wine guy: he doesn't dress any
different than usual when he goes into Caesar's.

Elena puts her phone in her purse and accepts the offer. Kent says he just has to cash out first.

As he does, he makes a note that she doesn't blink at the amount the teller hands over.

At the lounge, she orders a pretty nice bottle of that German white wine Kent can never pronounce
correctly.

Honestly, Kent's pretty sure he'd fuck up the pronunciation of anything as far as she's concerned, so
he dodges that entirely. So instead, he pulls on what he learned from the guy he hooked up with in
Switzerland during the lockout, and steers the conversation to the business side of the industry.

Conrad was the first person Kent met who talked about wine in a way that made sense: getting into
farming practices and weather and storage methods, instead of crap like "terroir" or "smells like tar
and roses." Kent started drinking more wine than beer while they dated for a reason.

Though, the only other person Kent knows who really talked about wine was the Aces' former
goalie--who also was a licensed mixologist. So maybe all that stuff was just Burival being himself.

Conrad worked in quality control, while Elena's in importing's marketing side; but Kent keeps the
conversation afloat anyway. He tells her a couple of stories about uncovering fake wines from "this
Swiss guy I met ... hah, yeah, I played in Switzerland for a few months ... eh, some contract stuff
was going on in the league, so a bunch of us had to play other places 'til it got worked out."

Elena seems interested enough in the stories, but Conrad basically investigated corks to see if they
fit what a wine claimed to be. It's not thrilling stuff. Conrad made it interesting mostly because he
told the stories from the viewpoint of "decent attempt at a hustle, should've been done better and
here's how," but Kent can't convey that part so great.

So he just returns the conversation back to her, since everybody likes to talk about themselves.
"You guys ever deal with stuff like that?"

Eventually, the evening's starting to get late even for Vegas. Kent asks Elena for her phone
number; she invites him back to her condo.

He thinks Okay, that works too, and says sure.

Hooking up with Elena shifts him into a different type of parties: the fancy-ass kind Kent usually
skipped unless he had to go to them for club business, since it's not a party if he has to wear a suit.

Besides, he was explicitly warned by his former first alternate years ago to stay on the face side of
the team, and not to learn too much about the backend. Kent avoided parties and events that might
fall within the silent investors' sphere.

But Elena doesn't push him to change his clothes; and it's something to do. So Kent navigates away
from people that seem like they're part of the casinos' world when he notices them.

It's not like he's out of place: he's a multi-millionaire professional athlete, even if he doesn't really
talk about that so he won't come off like a braggart. It's just that the pretentiousness gets old quick.
This kind of stuff's always been more Vichy's scene than his; when Kent goes out, he wants to have
fun.

On the upside, Elena's parties have more paparazzi around them.

The two of them aren't big news, but the paps've snapped a couple pictures anyway. Especially since Kent stood out more until he finally got his cast off. He's liked at least one of the online photos.

Kent didn't bother reposting them or commenting—that'd stand out as unusual. He's been a lot more careful about putting personal stuff on his accounts ever since the head of the Aces' PR dressed him down for the chirping war he and Seguin got into on Twitter back during the Cup finals in 2011. As long as the pictures exist, he's good.

So he and Elena are both getting what they want out of this, since Kent figured out fast that he's basically being used as arm candy.

Elena likes to introduce him to people, but once the small talk's done she doesn't care if Kent drifts off to hang out elsewhere. Which is fine. It lets him do what he wants.

The sex is the most boring part of the whole thing. But Elena's explicit in what she likes and what she wants from him, so it's not like Kent has to think much about it. It's decent; and he usually only goes home with her after a party, so he's already buzzed and in a good mood.

During the time Kent and Elena date over late July and early August, Kent taunts the hell out of a teammate by casually texting Vichy photos of each new VIP area he's in.

He meets a guy he initially took for yet another MMA competitor—Kent's lived in Vegas long enough that pretty much any time he sees a blatantly ripped dude he doesn't recognize from one of the big four sports, he assumes they're in the MMA business—but Good turns out to be a professional wrestler. Which lets Kent get the best chirp on the Aces' goalie that he has to date.

"You okay if I tell him you said 'Sami Zayn's lame in person'?" Kent asks, as he's texting the selfie to Boxy.

Good raises an eyebrow. "He an Owens fan?"

"Nope," Kent grins, "he's from Quebec City. He's got real strong opinions on the Quebecer who 'didn't have to go heel to maintain a storyline,'" he adds, using air quotes for Boxy's rant for extra-obnoxious impact.

Good snorts. "Go for it."

Boxy soon texts back Go fuck yourself Parse, your entire NHL career has been one long slow face-heel turn and Tu es le Seth Rollins du hockey

Kent doesn't need to look any of that up to know the chirp hit the mark. He snickers and goes to take a photo of the skyline, because he knows Vichy'll figure out where he's at from it.

Kent sends the pic to the other man with This place is okay I guess and Kinda trying to hard

Vichy responds with eight middle finger emojis, because by the start of August he quit answering in words and then he started adding one more finger for each new picture Kent sends. Kent's aiming for an entire screen's worth by the time camp starts.
He crosses paths with enough government staff and contractors that he picks up several useful pieces of information about Vegas's suburbs and Clark County and the new water pipeline's construction. He meets a handful of celebrities, and a whole lot of backstage staff in various entertainment and hospitality industries who have some great stories.

It's a pretty good time.

And then halfway through August, the thing Kent should've realized was inevitable happens.

* 

Elena's been busy with the same small group of people since they arrived, so Kent's making the rounds of this party on his own. He's still on roughly his second glass of wine when he meets a commercial music writer from L.A. and starts hanging out with him.

Usually whenever Kent talks to someone from Vegas or L.A., they're trying to work an angle or get an in. Nobody bothers to hide it; they all know what cities they're in. He's so used to it at this point that talking with Chavarría stands out because Kent can't find the hustle.

"Yeah, no, some bands still don't want to do this," Chavarría adds. "Or they stay anonymous to keep their cred."

"Yeah?" Kent replies, arms draped over the back of the couch.

Chavarría shrugs. "It makes you a 'sellout.' But man, I wasn't writing any better when I was doing basement shows and hungry all the time. At least selling out means a steady paycheck."

Kent makes a derisive noise. "You're a sellout because what, you're smart enough to play the game right instead of buying that 'authenticity' bullshit?"

Chavarría snorts hard and laughs. "I like you."

Kent shrugs and takes another sip of wine. "Just sayin'."

"Yeah." Chavarría shakes his head. "I do all right, but I need a topliner to expand out of instrumentals. It's that band mentality, I guess," he adds with a half-smile. "I wanna work with someone I know."

"Topliner?"

"Somebody that writes the hooks, a song's words," he clarifies. "Peanut Butter Wolf sent me a guy who was good, but just too much of a jerk. I don't need to expand that bad."

"This isn't real, Antwone," Kent drawls. "You're just saying words at me to see if I'm really listening."

"He's on Discogs and Wikipedia, look 'im up," Chavarría grins. "Spelled exactly like it sounds."

Kent drops his free hand to pull out his phone. "I'm gonna check the creation date on that page."

Chavarría laughs again and calls him suspicious.

Kent loses track of time eventually. Elena hasn't texted him; nobody else is settling in this part of the room; and he's having fun.
He likes pop, no matter how much the rest of the guys chirp him for it. It's way easier to zone out to Swift or Cyrus in the weight room than it is to the rappers Vichy or Korsy've made him listen to. But Chavarría's the first person who breaks down why.

He doesn't know music, so the stuff about notes and chords doesn't mean much. But when Chavarría talks about hooks and repetition and the psychological influence of familiarity, that Kent gets. It's like the music equivalent of muscle memory.

And it explains why some of the talented rookie forward Kent spent time with last season's music was okay, as long as it wasn't any of that slow, dying-modem-noise crap that Catsby called "intelligent dance music" and Kent called bullshit.

Eventually their glasses are empty. Kent slips a half-full wine bottle from the bar; and when he gets back to the couches, Chavarría's grabbed a handful of napkins from somewhere and started drawing music lines onto one. Kent refills their glasses and tells him those make as much sense to him as Cyrillic.

"Okay," Chavarría mumbles, flipping the pen around and tapping it against the napkin. "Huh. ...Have you heard Katy Perry's 'Teenage Dream'"

"Sure," Kent replies, pulling out his phone again.

"Okay. So the way the 'hands on me' hook balances the--do you have that on your phone?"

"Yeah," Kent says, pulling up Perry in his music.

"What is this?" Chavarría asks. Kent looks up with a raised eyebrow.

"You're sitting there in plaid and jeans I know aren't vintage 'cause they aren't dirty enough," the man says, waving a hand at him, "wearing the flashiest watch I've ever seen, drinking wine and saying you're a hockey player, with Katy Perry on your phone. Is this performance art? Has Punk'd sunk this low?"

"Did I call your bluff?" Kent smirks. "You stalling so you can figure out how to BS about the song?"

"Oooooooh," Chavarría whistles, narrowing his eyes. "Play it dude, I'll show you."

The party's ambient noise is loud enough that Chavarría has to move to Kent's couch so they can lean over the phone to hear the song. Kent replays the section Chavarría's talking about twice, until finally the man says, "Screw it."

Chavarría shrugs his braids behind his shoulder and looks over the back of the couch, at the doors to the hall. "There's gotta be somewhere quieter."

"Alright," Kent agrees, picking up his glass off the floor and standing.

He's looking around to see if there's anywhere to abandon the drink when his phone pings. Kent checks it and sees the text from Elena, and then finally pays attention to the time. "Aw, crap."

Chavarría looks over from where he's brushing off his jeans. Kent gives him a rueful smile. "Sorry man, I've been ditching my date for like, an hour. I gotta get back to her for a few."

Chavarría's expression shifts slightly.
"Nah, cool," the man answers. "Hey, for real you're with the Aces?"

Kent chuckles. "Yeah. I know I don't look it."

"Lemme give you my card," Chavarría says, pulling a case from his back pocket and snapping it open. "I heard the music manager for your arena is impressive."

There's the hustle. Huh. Kent must be running slow tonight.

"Sure," he smiles, taking the business card. It's true; the Aces' arena music is a famous, popular part of their brand, the same as Dallas' Jumbotron and Nashville's figure-skating ice girls. "Gonna warn you though, being from L.A.'ll be a mark against you."

Chavarría laughs politely.

"I mean it," Kent says, putting the card in his wallet. "After Urie moved out there, Bev changed the goal song for the guy that had Panic! at the Disco. Vichy asked her about it later 'cause he liked that one, and her exact words were 'Nobody gets the traitor's music.'"

Chavarría laughs again for real.

"Pretty sure the next time L.A. comes here, it's gonna be nothin' but The Killers and Imagine Dragons and Wayne Newton," Kent grins. "What I'm saying is she was personally offended."

"Gotta respect that," Chavarría snickers, before shaking his hand. "Nice meeting you, dude."

"Same," Kent answers.

"Hey," Chavarría adds, as Kent's starting around the couch. "Hockey's pretty restrictive about drug stuff, like football or basketball. Yeah?"

Kent pauses and looks back at him. "...Yeah."

"You might wanna stay away from the side bathrooms," Chavarría says, tilting his head slightly toward the far corner. "Or head out soon. It's gettin' a little too obvious over there." He taps his nose once briefly.

Kent's stomach sinks.

"Thanks," he says, before taking off to find Elena.

When he spots her--too close to the fucking side bathrooms--Kent doesn't even let her start the introduction to the guy in the pinstripe suit. "Hey, sorry about this," Kent smiles, "I just got a call. Club business. I gotta head out."

Elena frowns slightly. "We've only been here a little while."

They've been here too fucking long if there's drugs at this party, but Kent keeps his smile on. "I know, I'm sorry for bailing. Call me when you're ready to go and I'll get you a ride."

Kent kisses her cheek and says "See you later" with a quick hug, and leaves for the door before she can respond.

He's waiting on the elevator when he hears Elena call his name.
When Kent looks back, she's making her way down the hall toward him, fussing with her purse. He barely keeps from exhaling through his teeth; but he holds the elevator.

"What was that?" she asks tersely, after Kent hits the button for the garage.

They're the only ones in the elevator, so Kent says quiet and flat, "You promised me these parties were clean."

She gives him a sidelong look. "Yes. And?"

Kent breathes out through his teeth. "Never mind."

They don't talk the rest of the way to the car, or as Kent starts driving her home. Elena's on her phone; and Kent's trying to decide if breaking up tonight is too obvious.

Probably. He should just insist they stay in for a couple evenings--they don't have much in common to talk about, and Kent doesn't like the sex enough to start having more of it to fill up the time. A couple nights of being bored with each other while they binge-watch something on Netflix, and breaking up'll be realistic.

He should've planned for this sooner. Kent knew continuing to go out partying was risky ever since early August, when Kane fucked up even more than usual and suddenly all anybody wanted to talk about was how professional sports let players get away with anything as long as they keep their stats high. Kent should've quit and focused on the coming season as soon as he got his cast off.

Elena's phone buzzes with another text, and she frowns down at it. "Are. . . ."

"Did you call the police, Kent?" she demands, looking over.

"Shit." Kent starts looking for an opening into the right lane. "The cops're there?"

Elena looks back at her phone. "Thérèse says they've--"

"Are they gonna find anything?"

"Honestly," she says in annoyance. "Opioids, I'm sure. Perhaps some poppers. It will be taken care of."

"Shit." Kent speeds up and jerks his car into the right lane. Elena grabs the handlebar.

He ignores the honk and tailgating by the car he cut off, and opens the GPS to find the nearest gas station. Elena keeps watching him silently, one hand tense around her phone.

Once Kent has the GPS set, he calls Vichy.

The other man doesn't pick up at first. Kent's stomach sinks more.

With Showy gone to Texas and Waller in Europe working on player development, there's nobody else living off-season in Vegas that he can call. Kent can't drag Waller's family into this, not with the man's daughter set for college this year. Shit, shit. Why the fuck did he keep going out?

Vichy picks up. "I don't fuckin' wanna know where you are, Parser."

"Thank God," Kent exhales. "What're you doin'?"
"I'm--what?" Vichy says. "You okay?"

"No," Kent replies. "Can you come out to dinner? Bring Nadiya. Is she at work?"

"No, she--it's nine, this ain't dinner," Vichy says. "What's going on?"

"The party I was at just got raided for drugs," Kent says. On the other end, Vichy sucks in a breath. "I gotta prove I'm not there. I need photos, receipts. Just come out for an hour. I'll buy the food, whatever," he adds. "Please, Anatoly. Help me out."


Kent tells him the closest intersection. "I'm getting gas. I can meet you at a casino by your place--Wynn? Palazzo?"

"Mardi Gras's closer to you."

"It's gotta look believable. We're fuckin' Aces, ain't we?" Kent says, pulling into the gas station. "We go big. And the more visibility the better."

"Okay, yeah." Vichy exhaled again. "Palazzo. See you at...the waterfall?"

"Okay. See ya there." Kent brakes by a pump. "Thanks, Vichy. I mean it."

"Yeah. Don't worry about it, Parser," he replies. "See ya."

After Kent hangs up and cuts off the car, Elena says slowly, "What is going on, Kent."

"I can't afford getting drugs attached to my rep," Kent replies, popping open the gas lid. "Especially not now. I'm not there, I'm getting proof."

He looks over as he grabs the door handle. "I asked Ivanovich to bring his wife to make it look like a double date, but do you wanna go home? I can get you a cab once we're there."

"...No," she says after a moment. "That's fine. I'll stay." She taps her fingers against her purse. "This is probably for the best."

Kent opens the door and climbs out.

He wasn't low on gas, so filling up doesn't take long. Kent carefully folds the receipt and stows it in his wallet, and then gets back in the car and heads toward the casino.

He gets valet parking when they arrive and tucks that ticket into his wallet as well.

When he and Elena meet up with Vichy and his wife at the waterfall, Vichy blinks once at the sight of them. Kent finally realizes he forgot to mention he had company.

Whatever. Vichy adapts. The two of them go through a slightly overkill fist-handshake/back-slapping hug; and then his teammate pulls back and says, "You have not been texting me from all those places dressed like that."

"We can't all be fashionistas, Vichy," Kent replies with a half-smile.

"You are an embarrassment to the team," the man replies. "You are an embarrassment to Vegas." He turns his attention to Elena. "Hello. I apologize retroactively for everything about him."
Elena's mouth twitches in what Kent recognizes as a real smile. "Elena Luiselli," she says, holding out her hand.


"Ah," Elena says. "Kent's...'liney'?"

"You didn't even go with the simpler lingo," Vichy says at Kent. "Your date had to introduce herself. You are an embarrassment to hockey, yankee."

Kent waves a hand at himself. "What you see is what ya get."

Vichy visibly fights down a smartassed remark to that, before cupping Nadiya's elbow and returning his attention to Elena. "This is my wife, Nadiya Nikolaevna Byerozkin."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Luiselli," Nadiya says, shaking her hand as well.

"Please. Elena," she answers with a smile.

Kent realizes that the next hour is going to be an absolute hell of manners.

By the time they all arrived, the sports bar was closed for the night, wrecking plan A. That was the most likely spot for Kent and Vichy to be recognized.

The pizza place finds a patio table with a view for them, thanks to a combination of Kent's black Amex and the fact that the hostess recognized Vichy's name as the Las Vegas Aces' native son--and then figured out that Kent was that Kent Parson. Vichy pops his suit lapels obnoxiously and smirks the entire way to the table.

"Laugh it up," Kent retorts, before taking a selfie with him against the backdrop of the Strip.

He posts it to Instagram with Someone's trying to clinch the Best Dressed title before the season even starts #Can'tEvenPronounceThatDesigner

Vichy reposts the link on Twitter after the waiter's taken their orders. Somebody's *already* clinched the Worst Dressed title. Again. @kentparson90 #7yearsrunning

"You're on," Kent says under his breath when he sees it. Vichy deliberately snorts in the middle of his small talk with Elena.

They keep escalating the chirp war across both platforms. After a while the left-winger they shared a line with for several years starts liking both their posts, because Mitts can always be relied on to be a shit-stirrer. Another one of the Aces' centers DMs Vichy to ask if the heat's finally gotten to him.

"I like how he's assumin' I'm gonna win," Kent grins when Vichy shows him Chazzer's DM.

"I like how he's assuming you deserve mercy," Vichy shoots back.

Nadiya says something quiet and droll in Russian, and Vichy chokes before cracking up. Kent just shakes his head.

Vichy's wife isn't in any of the pictures, because Nadiya always avoids them. Even at team family events, whenever the cameras are on her and Vichy, the majority of the time Nadiya's fixing her
hair or turned aside to talk to someone or otherwise hiding the side of her face where her bangs are combed over an old scar along her temple. The video editor learned to work with it.

Elena's mostly cut off in the photos. But Kent makes sure he posts one with both of them in the frame, his arm casually draped over her shoulders even as he chirps Vichy across the table. He's been visibly dating her for almost a month; she needs an alibi too.

A little while later, after the four of them've killed most of the small pizza and the bottle of wine they ordered, Vichy gets a phone call.

He frowns at the screen for a moment; and then his face goes blank.

"Hello?" Vichy answers quietly.

Unnaturally quietly, given the noise level around them.

After a pause, Vichy starts to say, "I'm not--I don't do that any--" before cutting off for a long pause. ". . . No, sir."

Kent hides his face with his water glass and thinks Oh fuck, now what?

Vichy switches over to Russian. He grips Nadiya's hand tightly on the tabletop while telling the rest of them "Excuse me," and then he pushes his chair back and walks away, phone still close to his ear.

Nadiya readjusts her wedding ring from where it cut into her hand with the squeeze, and doesn't change expression as she nods at Elena's half-visible purse. "Marni?"

"Yes," Elena agrees, pulling it up and setting it on the table. "I was so disappointed when their shop closed."

"Mmhm," Nadiya says, with a classic Vegas hospitality nod. "It was a shame to lose them. Her style is so unique."

Kent drains the rest of his water.

He takes advantage of the fact that no one expects manners from guys his age and pulls out his phone to check the news again, while Elena and Nadiya discuss designers. Still nothing about the party getting raided on either papers' crime pages.

Vichy comes back pretty soon, no longer on the phone. But instead of taking his seat, he bops Kent's shoulder with a fist.

"There's a problem with the pre-camp scrim. Jim--ahhh," Vichy says, glancing around. "I know it's paranoid, but it's about that injury. So maybe...?"

"Yeah, probably oughta go somewhere private," Kent replies, catching the play. There's nobody on the Aces or their feeder team named "Jim."

"I'm sorry about this, ladies," Vichy tells Elena and Nadiya. "Do you mind?"

Vichy's wife shakes her head. "It's business," Nadiya says. "The team is important."

"Of course," Elena agrees with a nod. "We'll see you soon."

"Video poker?" Kent asks, once they're out of the restaurant. Those are usually the quieter spots on
a casino floor: a place near the walls and away from dealers' tables.

Vichy shakes his head once. "This way."

Kent's worked with Vichy for enough years to recognize when the man's seriously agitated. He slides his hands into his pockets and hooks his thumbs out as he follows Vichy away from the restaurant.

Kent raises an eyebrow when they head for the building's exit. If Vichy sees it, he doesn't say anything.

By the time they've taken the outside shortcut to the Venetian and Vichy's told him to hang back as he goes to the concierge desk, Kent's shifted to his default PR smile because it's the only thing he can easily maintain while thinking about how completely fucked this evening has become.

Vichy comes back with a keycard hidden in his palm, looking borderline panicked. When they enter the elevator, he hits the top floor button for the Paiza Club.

"What--" Kent starts despite himself. Vichy cuts him off with another head shake.

Kent shuts up and double-checks his reflection in the elevator door, and then shifts his cap around and pulls the brim down low over his face.

After Vichy keys them into the club, he speaks in Russian to a couple women at an imposing desk. Kent hangs back and waits.

One of the receptionists makes a brief call. A couple minutes later, a man arrives at the desk and starts translating between the Russian and another language--Chinese? Nobody's used any English since the receptionists' initial greeting.

Soon, the woman writes something down on a piece of paper and gives it to Vichy.

The translator leads them to a lounge area. Once they're there, the man speaks to another staff member before starting to chat casually with Vichy, still in Russian. Kent drifts over to a window and looks out at the Strip, shoulders tense.

One of the staff asks if he'd like anything to drink. Kent asks for a scotch and starts to hand her his credit card.

She shakes her head with a pleasant expression and says the tab was already set.

Kent manages to keep smiling and puts his wallet away. He turns back to the window as she leaves, resisting the urge to pull his hat lower, and wishes he were at least dressed for this place.

When the server brings his drink, she also offers him a menu. He takes it with a "Thanks," looks at the bilingual entries and the prices, and revises just how deep in shit he is.

Kent Parson is a multi-millionaire athlete currently considered one of the top in his profession, and he learned enough about the hotel business from the first woman he dated in Vegas to be pretty sure he shouldn't be here. Inez was consulting for Caesar's, not the Venetian; but Kent figures the basics are the same.

The gatekeeping, the prices, the fact that everything here's in Chinese and English: this is whale-tier high roller levels of exclusivity.
Kent's pretty damn sure he doesn't have enough money or clout, and definitely not enough of a relationship with the casino, to gain access to a club like this. This is a place for people that drop thousands in Macau.

But they let Vichy in.

Vichy, the only guy on the team that actively *likes* wearing dress attire, who sometimes won't even change into sweats like everybody else on roadies' shorter flights, who gets a new suit tailor-made at the start of each season like he's P.K. Subban or something.

Vichy, whose current suit looks like the off-the-rack stuff Kent buys next to some of the men in here.

Vichy, whose guest is Kent: a guy blatantly out of place here in a ball cap and plaid and sneakers, like this is some kind of flipped script *Pretty Woman*.

Vichy, a proxy for whoever was on the other end of that phone call.

Kent shifts the scotch in his hand and keeps staring out the window, and thinks he really should've listened to his former alt all those years ago and never gotten involved with Ivanovich.

But.

Vichy was the center on the team with the most versatility and potential that Kent saw when he initially hit the Aces. He wanted that on his line.

And it paid off. It paid off for five-plus years, until Kent's most recent center hit his next level and Kent shifted his own play style enough that he and Chazzer developed some sizzling chemistry. It was worth it.

So. Nothing to do but go forward.

Soon the translator comes over. "Sir? This way, please."

"Sure," Kent smiles. He leaves the menu on a nearby table as he turns away from the window.

The translator leads him and Vichy down a corridor before stopping in front of a shut door. He opens it and holds it for them; Vichy and Kent enter a room set up with a baccarat table.

A private gambling room. In Las Vegas. Just in case he hadn't gotten the hint about the level of money and power behind this, apparently.

The dealer behind the table finishes putting the chips in the center case, clearly rushed to set this up. He reads their appearances, doesn't blink, and says with a faint accent, "Dobryy vecher, gospoda. Good evening, gentlemen," and then some more stuff in Russian that sounds like he's apologizing for his poor Russian.

It doesn't sound like the phrase Kent knows for "Sorry, I don't speak that." But then, he pretty much just uses that line to mock Ovechkin and Malkin and Mashkov when they're cussing him out on the ice, so there's probably some kind of politeness difference.

Vichy replies to the dealer in Russian, and hands him the paper. Kent plays with his glass and deliberately doesn't look at it.

The dealer reads the note, gives Vichy a silent partial bow, and leaves the room without another
word.

Kent learned enough about the hotel business from Inez to be certain they've hit off-the-book levels now. Awesome.

"If this was a spy movie, this'd be the scene where I get interrogated or shot," Kent comments, while Vichy locks the door behind the departing dealer.

"Don't fuckin' tempt me," his teammate mutters.

"Yep, that's making it better," Kent replies.

Vichy growls something out in guttural Russian as he stalks past Kent and over to the table. He sinks down heavily onto one of the seats.

Kent makes his way over too, leaning an arm on the back of a chair and watching Vichy.

The other man drags his fingers through his hair, and then lets out a long, long breath before dropping his arms to rest on his thighs.

"Okay," he says, looking up. "How much do you like this lady, Parser?"

"I was gonna break up with her in a couple days after what happened tonight," Kent answers. "But now I guess I'll do it once I drop her off."

Vichy stares at him.

And then he folds his arms on the table and drops his head on top of them.

"Oh thank fuck," he says in exhausted relief, before breaking into half-stifled, slightly hysterical chuckles.

"...You have no goddamn idea," Vichy manages after a few moments. "I just. Worst case scenario, you were bein' like. 'I'll show you how to get in an offseason criminal investigation, I'll hook up with a woman on the Koch brothers' fake wine agenda. Step up your game, Kane.'"

"Vichy," Kent replies, looking over at the door reflexively even though he knows it's shut.

Vichy drags his fingers through his hair again. "I know, it's a shitty joke," he says wearily. "Just. Fuuuuuuuuuuck."

Kent hands him the scotch. Vichy blinks, and then snorts under his breath and takes a sip.

"Okay," Vichy says, reaching across the table to set the drink on the glass container holding the chips instead of on the felt. "All right.

"Don't even take her home," Vichy orders. "Have her take a cab."

"That's gonna be too obvious," Kent replies.

"Parser," Vichy says flatly. "Take a look around you. This, all this shit," he waves at the private room in the exclusive club on the top floor of the Strip resort that had to pay restitution on money laundering charges less than two years ago, "they didn't rent a hotel room. They pulled this fuckin' power move. I cannot over-exaggerate how goddamn fast you need to excise this woman from your life."
"To what?"

"Ditch." Vichy rubs his eyelids. "Send her home on her own."

"I get it," Kent says, folding his arms on the back of the chair, "but I'm telling you, it's too obvious after this. Look, we'll head back, I'll take her home, it's maybe one more hour tops. That can't be too--"

"Kent," Vichy interrupts, quieter. "This move was not just a message to you.

"Please." He's still digging his fingers against his eyes. "Send her home alone."

Kent's silent for a long moment.

And then he pulls off his hat and hooks out the chair he was leaning on away from the table with a foot. Kent readjusts his hat on backwards and drops down into the seat.

"Okay, man," he promises. "I got it."

Whatever blackmail the silent investors are holding on Vichy, it can't be on the man himself: Vichy's got one of the cleanest off- and on-ice records of all the Aces, once he stopped being wasted on the fourth line and having to rack up penalty minutes in fights.

So it has to be about something else--or someone--important to him.

And as soon as Kent figured that out, it wasn't hard to narrow down who it had to be.

He slumps deeper into his chair. "Okay. We'll go back, say we realized this's gonna take way too long, it's not fair to make them sit there forever," he says, trying to plan a way out. "Tell her I'll get her a taxi since I gotta head out with you."

Kent pinches the bridge of his nose. "There anybody we can pretend's nicknamed 'Jim'?" he adds. "That's the weakest link."


He rubs his face again, and then pauses. "What about 'gym'? G-y-m. That could work."

"That is the saddest fuckin' nickname ever," Kent says in disbelief.

Vichy tosses his hands in the air. "Yeah well, I guess that's why he's not makin' the team."

Kent snorts despite everything.

"Yeah, fuck it. Okay. That'll work." The whole thing's already unbelievable because of the way Vichy answered the phone, so whatever. They're just making an official alibi. That's good enough.

Kent braces his hands on his thighs and looks at the door. "Okay. So, we free to leave, or...?"

"Keh," Vichy mutters, dragging his fingers through his hair once more. "Yeah. I guess?"

"God," the other man growls. "If they hadn't fuckin' ambushed me this could've been so much easier. We coulda just said you were pissed she kept hitting on me and dumped her."

Kent chuckles once. "That wouldn't've been believable."
Vichy gives him a sidelong look. "Parser. She's been flirting with me since we met up. I know you haven't batted an eye, but it's been weird."

"You're smart-funny," Kent shrugs. "She likes that kinda thing. She wouldn't buy I cared about the flirting."

"Oh my God," Vichy mutters, before reaching over to the scotch and taking a long drink.

"Fuck it," he adds, putting the glass back and looking Kent in the eyes. "Are you okay?"

"What?" he replies.

"You've haven't been yourself lately," Vichy says. "I know the loss sucked, Parser. But you bounce back faster than this. But you're really off this time. Especially this last month."

He frowns. "What?"

"Kent," Vichy says seriously, "you've been drinking a lot lately."

Kent narrows his eyes. "I have not."

"You have for you," Vichy replies. "I can tell when you text me. Your grammar gets messed up."

"Fuck you," Kent snaps, "just because I'm not some fucking college grad--"

"No, goddammit," Vichy says. "You can get as pissed at me as you want, Parser, I'm asking because I'm worried about you. What's happening?"

"I'm good, I don't have a drinking--"

How many fucking times has Kent had this conversation, standing on the other side and arguing with Zimmermann?

And that's the breaking point.

Kent starts laughing almost before he realizes it--doubled over and arms folded across his stomach--because it's that or screaming.

Losing the Cup, breaking his arm, the conversation with Bob, the shit with Showy, having his offseason habits messed with, the hidden crap going on in the front office, learning about what Waller did, learning about what Vichy did, wasting so much time with someone he doesn't like just to keep up this fucking straight image, the raid scare earlier tonight. The blatant threat tactics by the silent investors right now.

The past couple weeks since the news broke about the rape allegations against Kane, as the media drags up Kent's own past behavioral problems--the Juniors stuff, his issues with the Aces' previous head coach, and especially that fucking party at Samwell--into the margins of debates about how clubs and the league keep giving passes to problematic players.

It's months of escalating pressure that Kent dealt with by ignoring it. And when he couldn't distract himself with his conditioning like usual, he started partying instead. Because that always used to work, too.

But this isn't Juniors. He isn't a minor. He just exacerbated the problem.

It's six fucking years of working like hell in the NHL, just to watch it all start falling apart because
he didn't keep his nose clean enough and the Aces don't have a good enough record under him to make up for it.

It's watching the club clearly start prepping itself for a full personnel overhaul, probably beginning with getting rid of Kent in favor of somebody who can put up points but wasn't stupid enough to create a bad past for himself.

He should've quit going out cold the first time the local beat reporter made a comment about his public partying this offseason, when the guy compared Kent to Seguin's rep back when Seguin was still in Boston and nearly killing his career with his off-ice shit. But he didn't.

And meanwhile the Falcs are aggressively defending signing Zimmermann, and calling his college time great for his development. While Zimmermann himself is going to be the biggest second-chance Cinderella story of the league as soon as the season opens.

Kent knows he will. He knows how good Jack is.

Providence made the right choice, and they're broadcasting that they know it and they have Zimmermann's back. And as soon as preseason hits, thirty-three other teams are gonna start learning just how screwed they are because they didn't look farther than 2009.

Including the Aces.

Who're going to start looking a lot harder at why they bothered to pick a partying, gay player who can't get along with coaches, and start wondering whether he's worth keeping. And who else would even want him.

"Ah fuck," Vichy says, on his feet and sounding freaked out again. He grips Kent's shoulder.
"Parser. Hey."

Kent bites his lip hard and tells himself to get his shit together.

He manages to stranggle down his sniggers. Kent presses his hands hard to his face, and exhales through his teeth.

"I know I have," he mutters. "I'll quit. I'll get on track with my conditioning, I'll be fine by camp."

"Kent," Vichy says. "I don't give a fuck about your conditioning. I'm worried about you."

"Bullshit," Kent snaps bitterly, shrugging off his hand. Vichy was born and raised in Vegas; if there's anybody more invested in the Aces' success than the club itself, it's him.

Vichy's silent for a long time. Eventually, Kent hears him drain the rest of the scotch.

"Okay," his teammate says evenly, setting the glass back on the chips' case. "I hope you remember this conversation, because when I rip Zimmermann's fucking head off the first time they play us, you better not say shit because he's earned it."

"Fuck you," Kent snarls, jerking his head up. "You don't know shit about him."

"I know what he's done to you," Vich replies, staring him in the eyes again. "The hell else am I supposed to care about, Kent?"

"Fuck you."
Vich just keeps looking at him.

Kent snarls out a curse and kicks away from the table, knocking over his chair. He catches it and shoves it forward again, and it cracks hard against the wood railing.

Nobody tries the door at the noise.

Nobody even knocks.

Nobody's going to interrupt. Kent and Vich are as isolated as they can get in a public building. Nobody's going to step in here.

Kent stalks over to the window.

The tension's biting into his shoulders as he glares out it. This room feels too cramped; the table and chairs take up the bulk of it, keeping Kent blocked into a cramped space, he hates locked rooms--

This isn't a roadie.

He's not sharing a hotel room with Zimmermann.

He can walk out whenever he wants.

The silent investors can pull whatever shitty scare tactics they want, but they can't actually touch Kent. He's the face of the Aces' franchise, a league record-breaker, a hockey superstar. Doing anything to him would directly, literally cut into their bottom line.

If he gets traded, fine. He'll start over. He did that before, in Switzerland during the lockout. He can do it again.

He'll do it right this time. He won't fall for the authenticity bullshit. He'll keep his game face on.


Kent presses his forehead against the glass and tries to do one of those slow-breathing anger management exercises his center uses.

For a long time it feels pointless; but eventually he realizes he's not shaking anymore.

"Kent," Vichy says quietly.

Kent looks at him in the reflection in the glass. Vichy's turned to face him, but he's still standing by the table, staying on the other side of the room. "I'm really fuckin' worried about you, man."

"Why?" Kent demands.

"Because we're friends, you son of a bitch," Vichy says after a long moment, voice cracking. "Whether you like it or not."

Kent snorts derisively. And then he swallows hard, and keeps staring out the window.

"God," Vichy mutters, bracing his elbows on the table and covering his face with his hands. "I don't know how to do this, Parser. I can't fucking do it right. Please, will you please talk to someone who can already?"
"About what?"

"I don't know," Vichy says, dropping his hands to look at him. "I don't fucking know how to help or I would've already! Does this shit have to kill you before you do something about it?"

"I'm--" if he were good he wouldn't've fucked up to the point he's having this conversation.

Kent punches the window.

"Ow, sonuva...." he mutters, shaking out his hand.

A moment later, Vichy stifles a snerk behind him. Kent glares at him in the reflection.

"I'm picturing the insurance report," Vichy says, biting down snickers. He knocks on the wooden rail. "'Offseason injury to hand.' 'Where'd it happen?' 'Nowhere, never happened. Just pay the bill.' 'Uhhhh, pretty sure that's fraud?""

Vichy exhales tiredly and rubs the bridge of his nose. "Fuck. I dunno how that'd even work. I dunno how they're gonna make any of this shit tonight work."

"I'm still waiting for the drink to be poison," Kent says. "I've seen movies. I know how this goes."

"What, so you gave it to me?"

"I dunno why anybody on this team still pretends to be surprised I'm a bastard," Kent replies, and Vichy barks out a real laugh.

"Fuck you," he retorts. "God."

Kent just shrugs again. Vichy holds up a middle finger.

"We shoulda fuckin' nicknamed you 'Michael Corleone','" Vichy mutters. "If only we'd known."

"It's not a nickname if it's longer than my name," Kent points out, and Vichy just raises the finger higher.

"Look," Vichy says, dropping his hand a breath later. "I mean it, Parser. I'm worried about you."

"I'll get my shit together," Kent says tiredly. He just wants to go home and be done with this night already. "I gotta start focusing soon anyway, I'll be fine."

"You don't have to keep dealing with this stuff on your own, Parser. Seriously."

"Yeah, 'cause I'm so great at pickin' people to trust," Kent sneers.

Vichy's fingers curl in. "Motherfucker, I'm--"

"I trusted Waller," Kent replies, turning around and looking at Vichy as he leans back against the window and folds his arms. "Look how that went."

Vichy starts to say something; and then he stops and looks away.

A long moment later, he shuts his eyes and presses a thumb against the bridge of his nose.

"... He warned me," Vichy mutters. "I had my chance. I coulda stopped then." He huffs out a breath. "It's on me that I didn't."
...Okay.

That makes it a little better. Maybe.

Vichy's phone buzzes. He checks it, and then exhales through his teeth.

"The restaurant closed, so they're goin' to Starbucks," Vichy tells him.

Kent checks his watch. After midnight; no wonder he's so damn tired. He's got a chiropractor appointment in the morning. "Geez. All right, let's go."

Vichy rubs his face again a few times, and then drags his fingers through his hair before finally dropping his arms to his sides. "No matter how many times I say this, you aren't gonna listen to me, are you?"

"No," Kent replies. "I don't need to talk to anybody. I don't have anything to say. I'll get my shit together."

"That's gonna make a great fuckin' epitaph for you, Parson," Vichy says flatly.

The part of Kent that's always ready to lash out harder when pushed wants to retort *How's Nadiya's green card going?*

Whatever blackmail the silent investors are holding on Vichy, it can't be on the man himself; so it has to be on someone important to him.

Vichy has a bunch of friends from growing up in Vegas, but most of them don't live here anymore. He's got other friends on the team and in the league, but those guys are all already protected: they've got contracts, and working visas, and they're minor public figures. People will notice if something happens to them.

Vichy's parents were Soviet refugees, but they've been naturalized Americans since before Kent met them.

So wasn't hard to narrow down who the blackmail possibility had to be: Nadiya. The woman Vichy's been living with for almost a decade. For years before Kent knew him.

If the silent investors were paying attention to Kent, they would've already seen pictures of him and Elena together, and this whole situation would've already happened. But they didn't. It wasn't until Kent tagged Vichy in that last photo he took with Elena that this went down.

Vichy's the one they're watching.

Kent can start over anywhere. Vichy's the one with something to lose.

Kent grits his teeth hard, and readjusts his hat, and takes another slow breath, and reminds himself that this wasn't just a message to him. "Let's go."

Vichy growls in the back of his throat; but he turns for the door without arguing further.

Outside, the hallway's empty. Vichy and Kent retrace their way to the lounge and then out of the club; nobody stops them. The first receptionist tells them "Do svidaniya" and "Have a good evening."

"Просьба," Vichy replies without looking over, failing pretty hard at not sounding terse. Kent just flashes the two women a smile as he passes their desk.
By the time they've reached the pedestrian walkway over the Strip, it's pushing one in the morning.

"Saying I'm heading back with you isn't believable," Kent says, tugging out his phone.

Vichy exhales through his teeth. "Yeah, but what else--"

"I got this," Kent says, opening his contacts and scrolling down to the taxi entry. "Gimme five minutes once we're there. We'll break up, I'll get her a ride out, it'll be done. I'll say this was a wake-up call, I gotta focus and get ready for camp."

Vichy glances over at him, and then looks forward again. "...Okay."

Kent's got the ride ordered by the time they reach the Starbucks. Nadiya and Elena are visible inside, standing by one of the front windows; Vichy raises a hand while they're across the road and waiting on the light. Nadiya returns the gesture with a nod of acknowledgement.

Once they're inside, Kent asks Elena if she's got a moment and tilts his head at counter. She nods.

Kent orders a coffee because he still has to get his car and drive home after all this, and asks for his receipt. He tells Elena he's gotten her a ride and that the last month was a lot of fun, but he's not gonna have any time to hang out soon.

"Pre-camp scrim's coming up," Kent smiles, leaning an arm on the side counter. "And after that it's pretty much non-stop until--well, hopefully June." He takes a sip of his coffee to see if it's cooled off enough to drink.

Nope, still scalding. "So it's not really fair to pretend I'm still gonna have time for you."

Elena nods once more, and doesn't look surprised at all. "Of course. It's a very demanding profession."

"Yeah," he shrugs, before smiling again. "Thanks though. It was a lot of fun."

"Mm-hmm," she agrees.

They're just doing this for show by now, so there's not much else to add. Pretty soon the taxi appears outside, and Kent walks Elena out to it. Vichy and Nadiya are splitting her drink and talking quietly by the window, so he just lifts a hand in their direction and doesn't interrupt.

Once Kent's given the driver five twenties in advance and Elena's in the taxi and gone, he lets out a long breath. And then he downs half his coffee even though it's still too hot. God damn, but this night has been shit.

"You okay?" Vichy asks behind him.

"Yeah, I'm good," Kent answers automatically, turning around.

He holds a hand out to Vichy's wife to start damage control. "Thank you for comin' out tonight. Sorry for ditching you with her out of nowhere."

Nadiya lifts a shoulder briefly but shakes his hand. "It was an unexpected call."

"Still," Kent says. "Thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it."
"You're welcome," she replies.

"You park at Palazzo too?" Vichy asks.

"Yeah. You good to drive?"

"Fuck no," Vichy says. "I'm ready to pass out."

Kent looks over at Nadiya.

"It will be fine," she replies. "I had a triple expresso."

Kent whistles appreciatively. "Hardcore."

She gives him a brief half-smile that isn't real but isn't irritated, either, which is pretty much the best Kent shoots for with her. He can't remember when exactly he figured out that Nadiya disliked him, but it was a few years back.

"All right," Kent says, taking another drink of coffee. "Better head back, then. You pass out here, we're gonna have to call in backup to drag you to the car."

Vichy snorts.

"Dude, what do you bench?" Kent replies. "What do I bench? C'mon. We both know I can't haul your dead weight all the way there, at least I admit it."

On the other side of Vichy, Nadiya chuckles once for real. Vichy just shakes his head tiredly.

As they're crossing the pedestrian walkway, Kent checks his phone again. Still no news about the raid.

Elena said it'd be "taken care of." So....

Must've been someone there important enough to get the whole thing paid off. If Kent's lucky.

He locks the phone and pushes it back in his pocket.

* 

That night Kent wakes up an hour before dawn when he finally remembers the info he should've latched onto a lot earlier.

He looks up "koch brothers fake wine". When the results come up, Kent recognizes a name on the first page: it's the guy Conrad mentioned a couple times when he was talking about his work, after Kent was hooked up with him in Switzerland.

Kent doesn't waste time reading any of the articles, and calls Vichy.

The other man doesn't pick up the first time. Kent hangs up instead of leaving a voicemail and calls again.

Vichy finally answers the phone, rasping out, "If you aren't in jail 'm hangin' up."

"What'd you mean, 'fake wine agenda'?"
"Oh m' God," Vichy says groggily. "'m gonna kill you. Then I'm gonna kill m'self. Yer final legacy is gonna be PR disaster, Parser. Think 'bout that. Then call me at a human hour. Don't call, because drop it."

In the background, Vichy's wife mumbles, "Not killing self."

Vichy snorts and asks something in Russian.

"Da," Nadiya agrees, and Kent assumes she's okaying killing him. He repeats, "What'd you mean, 'fake wine'? Is this a repeat of the Rudy shit?"

"Wha?"

"Rudy Kur--whasis. The guy selling fake wine," Kent says, trying to keep his voice even as he paces through the loft. "Is it that? The stuff where they hired guys to research corks and labels and shit."

"What the fuck is happenin'?" Vichy groans in confusion. "What?"

"I dated--a woman while I was in Switzerland, she worked on that investigation. I met Luiselli 'cause we started talking about wine, look, do I need to warn her I fucked up and told industry secrets or something? What'd you mean, 'fake wine'?"

"Oh my God," Vichy repeats, and then there's a thump like he's dropped the phone to the floor. A moment later, he starts swearing muffledly.

Kent waits, and keeps pacing his apartment. Kitt comes up to the bedroom doorway and starts washing her face, tail lashing.

Vichy finally picks up the phone again.

"How the fuck, Parser," he says wearily. A door shuts in the background. "You couldn't just play hockey there. How the fuck's this even happen?"

"Seriously?" Kent replies, because at least he's not the guy who crossed the maybe-mob. "I'm hearin' this from you?"

"Fuck you. How'd this even come up?"

"I don't pronounce wine right, so I talked about the business side," Kent says tersely. "When she said she worked for a distributor it seemed like a good idea. Look, just tell me what you meant," he orders. "I'll take care of the rest."

"I don't goddamn know what he meant, 'fake wine,' I didn't ask," Vichy replies. "I didn't want to know."

Kent exhales through his teeth.

But yeah. Okay. Vichy was cagey enough on the phone earlier with the silent investor that Kent believes him.

He opens a map on his phone and puts in "fribourg", trying to remember where Conrad's house was and which one of the guys on the team was his friend. The guy from Germany--Schafter? Schäffer?

Kent opens a new tab and pulls up a hockey database site to look up Fribourg-Gottéron's 2012-13
Vichy yawns hard. "Gimme her contact info," he says. "I'll pass it on, say they might wanna give'r a heads up."

"I don't have it anymore," Kent says. He deleted Conrad's info from his phone once he got on the plane back to the U.S. What story can he use to get it from Schäffer? "It's fine. I got this."

"Maybe I wasn't clear enough earlier," Vichy says flatly. "Drop it' means drop it. Gimme her name, they can do the rest."

"It's fine," Kent repeats shorter; and then he thinks Blackmail.

He exhales through his teeth.

"Look," Kent says. "... Never mind."

He hates the thought of dropping this. It's gonna make him come off as a dick, especially if it traces back far enough that Conrad figures out Luiselli picked up the info from Kent. And that's on top of how it makes Kent look stupid for falling for that scam.

But maybe nothing Kent talked about was a trade secret. Maybe it was just regular work knowledge--stuff anybody in the industry would already know.

Conrad had to know better than to talk about any real work stuff with some rando American who could leave at any moment once the lockout was resolved. They didn't even date for that long.

Kent doesn't like dropping this; but he's not gonna put a teammate's wife on the line for a guy he only hooked up with for several weeks. He knows his priorities.

"It's probably nothing," Kent says. "I'm worryin' for nothing. Never mind. Sorry for wakin' you."

Vichy's silent for a long moment, before blowing out a breath.

"All right," he says. "Give me his name, and they can handle it."

Kent pulls down his phone and stares at it.

And then he chucks it at the couch and stalks away.

Kent tries to shove his hands in his pockets, remembers that he's only in boxers, and thinks Who'd you fucking think you were kidding?

He put off hooking up with another woman for too long. He kept letting himself shrug it aside to focus on other stuff: the regular seasons, the lockout, conditioning, recoveries, the playoffs, his streak. He kept telling himself there was always something more important. He fucked up.

He fucked up a long time ago.

The Las Vegas Aces are one of the most pro-equality teams in the NHL. They're the club with the most staff and players on board with You Can Play, and the one that's meticulous about doing live and online media spots during the league's Hockey Is For Everyone month. It's always couched in community terms--as the club aligning itself with state and municipal trends--and in basic fiscal common sense. Kent wasn't lying when he told that free agent defenseman that Vegas is too tourism-centric for the club to turn away any group's money.
But it's **also** not hard to miss that the Aces only started really throwing in with the equality schtick during the last few years.

Right about when Kent's first contract was coming to an end.

Right around when the Aces decided to push out the previous head coach Kent was at odds with and hang onto Kent himself.

He snorts out a humorless laugh and rubs his face hard.

He fucked up a *long* time ago. Who'd he think he was kidding? The only thing surprising is that it took this long for someone to finally bring it up.

He saw the all the signs. He got the point. He pushed the cultural and fiscal arguments like everybody else; but he knew what was going on.

He never let himself admit that he wanted it to be real.

That maybe it wasn't just PR, or a not-that-subtle negotiating tack. That maybe the front office meant it about backing players, even if they didn't fit themselves into the standard straight mold to stay marketable.

Because if it **was** real, then maybe, if they'd signed Jack--

In the back of Kent's mind, the same thought that's been driving him since Juniors creeps forward again.

It's the same thought that's always there, underneath all the other reasons Kent didn't want to deal with this: more than the inevitable comments, more than all the ways it's going to throw things off in the dressing room, almost as much as the way it's going to erase everything he's worked his ass off to achieve and going to shorthand his legacy into "that gay player."

*If they caught me, they're gonna figure out about--*

Zimmermann can handle his own fucking image.

He doesn't want Kent's help. He didn't listen to Kent half the time even back in Juniors. He can take care of his own concerns, he's not Kent's fucking problem anymore.

On the other side of the room, he can distantly hear Vichy's voice. Kent exhales hard through his teeth, shoves his cowlick down, and heads back to the couch.

"--hung up on me after wakin' me I swear to God, Parson--six fucking years we've played, what kind of asshole d'you think I am?! I'm driving down there and kickin' your ass. You hear me? I'm puttin' on my fuckin' shoes, I'm not bluffing, I'm gonna goddamn do it!"

Kent picks up the phone. "If I hung up, the screen would've gone dead."

"Knew you couldn't resist a chance to be a pedant," Vichy mutters. "I am too fucking tired for this, Parser. Just gimme his contact info and schedule the freakout for tomorrow."

"I don't have it," Kent says. "I deleted it when I left."

Vichy makes a worn-out growling noise. "Alright. What's the name? If he worked on an investigation, they can find him."
Kent shifts the phone from one hand to another.

He doesn't want to feel indebted. Or look like an asshole because he didn't give Conrad a warning when he knew he should've.

*You weren't fooling anybody anyway. "Conrad Lehmann."

Kent thumbs back into the map, and zooms it down to the section of street he's pretty sure Conrad lived on. "He was somewhere around here," he adds, taking a screenshot and texting it to Vichy. "And I met him through a guy on Fribourg-Gottéron. Johan Schäffer. It looks like he's still with the team. He could probably find him if he's moved."

Kent copies the URL for Schäffer's page and texts that too. "Conrad got up in arms because I wasn't touring Fribourg enough between games or whatever," Kent adds evenly. "So he started dragging me places, and we hung out for a while."

He almost adds *That's all* and then thinks that's probably overkill.

"Okay," Vichy agrees. Kent can hear his keypad clicking in the background.

Kent breathes out silently through his teeth once more, and shifts on his feet for a couple moments before finally just going over to where Kitt's still sitting in the doorway. She thumps her tail when he crouches down in front of her, but she tilts her head up when he starts scratching her chin.

"...It's a real shame none of tonight ever happened," Vichy comments a few moments later. "Because I just won so much money in the bet."

Kent shifts the phone down to give it a narrow look, even though he knows he shouldn't be surprised. There's nothing the team won't bet on--except politics, since that became a fine back in 2011. "Seriously?"

"There's no chance in hell you're gonna convince me you didn't expect that," Vichy replies. "I can't believe we kept it from you."

Kent growls in the back of his throat, and wedges the phone against his shoulder to start scratching Kitt behind her ears. "Everybody on this team is an asshole."

"Behavior starts at the top, captain," Vichy responds without missing a beat.

Kent snorts out a laugh despite himself.

"That was a good one," he admits. "You really have leveled up."

"Yeah, yeah."

"All that hard work's paying off," Kent half-smirks. "All those years of putting in subpar chirps. It's all finally startin' to come together for you. Good job, man. I'd fist bump you if you were here."

"Wish you had a fuckin' off switch," Vichy grumbles.

And then he takes a long breath. "Look, Parser...."

"Whatever," Kent replies, during the pause while Vichy's trying to figure out where to go with that. Maybe when he wakes up tomorrow, all of this will actually hit Kent. But right now, when it's finally happened and over with, all he wants to do is drink some water and take another piss and go
back to sleep.

He saw what was happening. It was just that so long as he never admitted anything, none of the rumors could stick to him.

But now he has. So he'll just have to figure out where to go from this next.

"Get some sleep," Kent adds.

"Yeah," Vichy says sarcastically. "That's a great idea for five in the fuckin' mornin'. Sleep! What a concept."

Kent shakes his head. "Used up the decent chirp already, man? You only had the one?"

Vichy says several rude things as a goodbye and hangs up.

Kent rubs his face hard for a few moments. And then he forces himself back onto his feet.

"Fuck this fuckin' night," Kent tells his cat tiredly as he heads for the bathroom. At least he can get in a power nap before his alarm goes off.

*

Kent keeps an eye on the news for the rest of the week; but nothing about the raid comes up.

Definitely bought off, then. Good. One less thing to worry about.

*

He doesn't follow up with Vichy about Conrad, or about anything else from that night.

If Vichy said he'll give the silent investors Conrad's contact info, he'll do it. Vichy's the kind of guy who keeps his word. After that, it's out of both of their hands.

And for the rest of the stuff....

Vichy is the only person Kent knows who was legit outraged when somebody leaked those naked photos of Prince Harry and some woman at the Wynn a few years back, because "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, motherfuckers! You don't wanna follow that rule, go fucking work in Hollywood!!"

So if Vichy said that night didn't happen, then it didn't happen. Vichy keeps his word.

He obviously figured out Kent was gay earlier, but Kent never picked up any weirdness between them from that. He and Vichy've had their problems; but those were for other reasons.

At least now Kent knows to watch himself closer. If the team's got a bet going, then at least a few more guys have already figured him out. At least he's been warned to manage that better.

Nothing to do but keep moving forward.

*

The pre-training camp scrim gets closer on the calendar. Kent throws away what's left of the two cases of beer and bottle of scotch in his apartment, and emails the Aces' trainer with a request to meet up with him as soon as camp starts. Elliott sends back an okay.
Early in the morning on the first day of the pre-training camp scrim for players in the Las Vegas Hockey Club and its AHL feeder team in Reno, Kent arrives at the Aces' clubhouse for his meeting with the club's trainer.

He brings a large coffee from the place Elliot likes best with him. When the man arrives a few minutes later, he takes it without surprise.

"You're getting too good at this, Parse," Elliot tells him, pulling off the lid and taking a slurp as he unlocks the clubhouse doors.

Kent just shrugs. "It's early."

"You noticed, huh?" Elliot asks dryly. It's not dawn yet.

The clubhouse is in that offseason state of weirdly half-used, since the scrim technically falls outside of the official schedule--even though all the guys know the GMs and scouts drop in to see who shows up for it. Kent and Elliot shut themselves in the trainer's office so Kent can talk frankly about his concerns with his conditioning and the impact of the break to his arm during last season's playoffs.

Elliot makes notes, and tells Kent to come by again this afternoon to run through some tests. Kent nods and finally heads out.

He squints and frowns at the sky once he gets outside. The sun's already way up; he's running late.

He's running late by a lot. When he reaches the Ice Center, other cars are already outside. One just belongs to the figure skating teacher who always books the south rink in the mornings; but he recognizes a couple of the guys' too. One of the cars he doesn't know.

Kent cusses to himself as he parks. He's setting a bad example on the first day. He can't afford that, not after pissing away so much of the offseason on partying.

But he had to meet with Elliot. And the sooner, the better. So. Nothing to be done for it.

Kent enters the Ice Center's locker room and finds a couple of the Aces harassing one of the offseason trades. It's almost impressive: Mitts managed to climb up on the trade's back without getting thrown off yet.

Kent figures he should have expected this. The real surprise is that it isn't Farkas and the Aces' existing agitator going at it: Scrappy and the Houston trade have had some pretty ugly shifts against each other over the years.

"Seriously, man?" Kent asks one of the guys as he heads for an open locker.

"Talk to Mitts, things were fine 'til he and Trojan showed up," Vichy replies, watching the wrestling with his arms folded across his chest. "How'd we beat you in, Parser?"

Kent shrugs his bag down onto the bench. "Had to meet Elliot."

Vichy frowns slightly and looks over at him with that; but Mitts and Farkas are making so much
noise Kent can ignore it.

"They're fuckin' lettin' anybody in, huh?!!" Mitts says gleefully, as Farkas staggers under his weight and braces himself against the lockers. "Welcome to fuckin' Vegas! Told you it was his car!" he calls back over to one of Kent's linemates, Trojan.

Farkas manages to get turned around enough to give Trojan a look. "You gonna help?"

"Do I ever?" he replies with a smile, unzipping his duffel.

"Bastard," Farkas says resignedly, before backing up against the lockers in an effort to knock Mitts off. "Fuckin' hell, Smitty, you coming into camp overweight?"

"Hey, hey, fuck you. I am on point!" Mitts retorts, head-locking him.

Farkas bumps him hard into the lockers again; but Mitts ignores it and wrestles him down to the floor. "Hey, anybody introduce you to the carpet yet?!

"This's exactly what I expected," Farkas mutters, twisting his head to prevent Mitts from mushing it into the mats.

On the other side of Vichy, Scrappy manages to stop snickering long enough to crouch down next to Farkas. "Need some help?"

"He'll tucker himself out soon enough," Farkas grunts.

"I dunno, mate," Trojan offers. "I think you're underestimating how much he missed you."

"Missed," Farkas repeats darkly, and Mitts starts laughing more. Farkas tries to elbow him in the side.

"All right," Kent says, unzipping his bag and pulling out his gear. "Knock it off, Mitts. Before PR adds a hazing section."

"Yeah okay, but," Mitts says, "I can't let go or he's gonna get me back. I'm stuck."

"Should've thought of that sooner," Trojan points out in amusement.

Mitts shrugs as much as he's able. "Yolo, man."

Scrappy shakes his head and stands, before scrubbing Mitts and hauling him up. "Alright--"

"Shit no you gave him an opening!" is all Mitts manages before Farkas is loose and tackles him back to the floor. Scrappy lets go to keep from getting pulled down too; Vichy raises his judgmental eyebrow higher.

"Say uncle," Farkas warns, twisting Mitts' arm up behind his back.

"Fuck you!" Mitts just cackles.

"Glad to see everyone took conditioning seriously over the summer," Kent drawls. "But knock it off already."

Farkas lets go immediately, dodging when Mitts tries to slug him in the arm. He pushes to his feet before giving Mitts a hand to help him up.
Kent's mildly surprised. The rest of the guys would've taken at least one more swipe at Mitts first, especially since he clearly earned it.

As he starts putting on his gear, he makes a mental note to hash out the usual apologies for being a dick to Farkas on the ice during the past couple years sooner rather than later. If the guy's friends with two of Kent's most common linemates, he shouldn't put it off.

* 

By the time training camp starts, the Aces' trainer tells him Kent's broken arm impacted his conditioning like he feared: his legs are fine, and his core is decent, but his upper body is way off from where it should be at this point in the year.

Kent'd been hoping he was just paranoid.

He knew he did a lot of stupid stuff during offseason, and that the offseason was shorter than usual with the Aces' long playoff run. Everybody warned him that the injury was going to have long-term effects. But still. He thought he'd kept on top of it.

The relative who gave Kent his first pair of used skates when he was a kid also told him a horror story once when Kent was in junior high, about a goalie friend who conditioned his calves more than his thighs and wound up yanking his kneecap all the way around to the back of his knee on an ugly scramble for the puck.

Kent never, ever messed around with his conditioning after that day.

Even during offseason, he showed up on time for every single one of his sessions with his personal trainer. He came in hungover or tired a few times because he'd slept over at the woman he dated's place, but he worked through that. He thought.

But obviously he was wrong.

Kent throws himself into the new workout regime Elliot's designed for him. It's pretty brutal, even compared to Kent's personal trainer's systems; but he doesn't complain. It's already camp. The season's already here.

He wasted so much time fucking around. No way Zimmermann did the same.

* 

The second day of camp, Kent raises an eyebrow when one of the guys pulls into the Ice Center's lot shortly after him.

Kent shoulders his duffel out of his trunk and calls, "What bet'd you lose?" as Chazzer gets out.

"Bro," his center answers wearily, dragging his own duffel from the passenger seat, "how the fuck do you do this every day?"

"Work on your stamina, Chaz," Kent grins, and Chazzer makes a couple lazy insults in response. "You need a photo to prove you didn't welch?"

"O'Toole told me to come in early," he answers as they head for the door. "To sign sticks."

"Ahh," Kent replies. He makes a mental note that the club's kicking out the fan incidentals early. Or else they're stockpiling more than usual for the Aces' tenth anniversary. "Better hit up the
"Coffee first."

"Shit," Chazzer agrees. "Why hasn't anybody invented a way to mainline it yet?"

"Soon as they do, Vichy'll be first in line for the trial run," Kent says. Chazzer snickers.

Called it. One of the street team's guys meets them rink-side with a box of the usual fan stuff to sign: pucks, figurines, and those weird kid-sized sticks that they have to take a couple shots with so the club can call them "game-used."

"Game-used," Chazzer repeats doubtfully, as he hands O'Toole another stick after banking a puck off the glass with it.

"Close enough," the man replies, taking it and making a check on his inventory sheet.

"Uh-huh."

"Nobody buys it's really game-used," Kent replies, eyes narrowed as he lines up another shot at the water bottle in its holster behind the goal. "It just has to be close enough it's not technically a lie."

"Kent, please don't make my job harder saying that in public," O'Toole replies dryly without looking up from his clipboard.

Kent fouls his shot yet again, and tightens his jaw for a second before forcing it away.

He snorts in amusement instead and gives O'Toole a quick grin over his shoulder, since the man used to work in the Aces' PR department before taking over the street team. Kent's been in enough trouble with him before. "Sorry, Iain."

"That one's good," O'Toole replies, gesturing for Kent to bring his own stick over. "I don't want it breaking before we can raffle them."

Kent skates it over, then picks up a new one and takes it back for another shot at the water bottle.

By the time they've signed the pucks and figures, O'Toole's finished blowdrying the sticks. Kent takes the first one and braces it on the bench to scrawl out another signature. "No jerseys?"

"Shipment didn't get here," O'Toole says, giving his clipboard an annoyed expression. "We'll do them when we do the posters."

"Got it." Kent drops the stick in the box and picks up another one.

"This is so weird," Chazzer mumbles through the sharpie cap he's holding in his teeth, as he writes his name slower than usual on the small handle of his stick.

O'Toole shrugs. "Gotta keep the watch party prizes small enough the P1s can get them home."

Chazzer gives the stick another dubious look as he drops it into the box.

"Pick up the pace," Kent says with a half-smirk. "You'd think you never signed an autograph before."

"Not these," Chazzer says, before spiting out the cap and wiping his chin with the back of his wrist.
Kent shrugs a shoulder. "Career-high points last playoffs," he reminds his center, because Chazzer was on fire during the division finals like he had some personal grudge against Anaheim. "Everybody's gonna want your shit this year."

Chazzer blows out a long breath, but gets back to his autographing with a half-smile.

Kent makes it a priority to finish signing his half of the stuff before Chazzer. He ignores the other man's chirping at him for it, and grabs one of his personal sticks and a puck from the bucket behind the bench before climbing back onto the ice.

He misses his first shot again, meaning he has to skate over and collect the puck on the rebound. Kent finally connects with his second shot; the lid of the bottle cracks on impact, spraying water onto the goal.

"Damn, bro," Chazzer calls from the bench, eyebrow raised. "That bottle insult your momma or what?"

Kent makes a vague noise in the back of his throat and goes over to collect the busted container before it freezes to the net.

His center gives him another raised eyebrow when Kent drops the pieces into the bench holder. O'Toole's wheeling the box away from the rink, so Kent changes the subject before Chazzer can say anything: "How's the kid doing?"

"Boar?" Chazzer asks, climbing over the bench rail. When Kent nods, Chazzer exhales and props a leg on the rail to stretch it.

"All right. He's busting ass on his English." Chazzer gives him a considering look. "You think he's gonna make the cut?"

Kent shrugs. Borislavyshyn fast-tracked through the Aces' feeder team so quickly during the final half of the Sovereigns' last season that it took Kent by surprise. He watched the winger in a couple of the feeder team's games, and he had potential; but Kent's impression was that he needed more time to level up.

And yet. The guy Kent last saw play in January isn't the same one out on the ice here in September. "Dunno. Maybe."

He leans over the bench and grabs the bucket of pucks while Chazzer's rolling his eyes at him. "He say what his deal is with Vichy is yet?"

Chazzer blows out a way longer breath and switches legs.

Borislavyshyn's English is okay, but not interview-level yet; and since nobody in the club speaks Ukrainian, Chazzer and Vichy have been helping the guy translate his Russian into English whenever he needs to talk to the doctors or the front office staff.

Technically. Borislavyshyn prefers talking to Chazzer over Vichy, to the point that it's gotten obvious. Despite the fact that Chazzer isn't fluent in Russian, so he has to pull Vichy in anyway if the conversation's about anything serious.

Kent sets the bucket on the rail and gives Chazzer an expectant look.

The other man lifts his shoulders. "He's Russian," he replies, like that's supposed to mean something to Kent. "Boar's got sense, he knows he has to chill if he wants on the roster."
"American," Kent corrects.

Chazzer exhales hard through his teeth.

"Dude," Kent replies, because Chazzer's been on the Aces for as long as Kent. They both know how pissy Vichy gets about being considered Russian instead of American.

"Yeah, yeah," Chazzer says, dropping his leg and kneeling down on the ice. Kent climbs over the rail and settles into a stretch as well. "I get it, it's just--it's weird, you know?"

Kent raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah, 'course you don't," Chazzer snorts.

Kent raises the eyebrow higher. His center rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"I never met anybody who cuts off a whole side of himself like that," Chazzer explains. "I know his parents weren't like, 'ne russkiy yazky!' or anything. I dunno where it comes from."

The other man looks away, across the rink. "I just don't get it. Why do you want your family to be small?"

Then Chazzer huffs before shrugging heavily. "Anyway. That's all. Boar knows he has to get over it. If he just gets to know Vichy, it'll be fine."

Kent doesn't note anything significant about the subject change, because he knows Chazzer doesn't really talk about his family. Even after all these years, the majority of what Kent knows about them is that Chazzer's parents moved to the U.S. from Poland when he was a kid, and got killed by a drunk driver a couple months after he was drafted, while Chazzer was out of the country playing his final year of junior-level hockey in Belarus. Ever since he broke up with his last girlfriend, the only living relative the man talks about is his grandmother.

So Kent just says, "Alright." He shifts into a new stretch, and adds, "How's your grandma?"

"Still coughing," Chazzer frowns, looking down at the ice for a moment before shrugging again. "George said they're working on the visa stuff so she can come over longer. Maybe live in my summer place. She liked there when she visited, I think I can talk her into it."

"Cool," Kent says, smiling a little. He makes a mental note that the Aces' GM is putting some serious resources into Chazzer at the moment--probably trying to soften him up with "club culture" benefits to finagle a cheaper contract renewal than the man's stats would otherwise earn. "Closer'd be good."

"Yeah."

*

During camp, one of the guys banks on Kent's reputation for being first on the ice and keeps coming early each morning to get extra practice with him.

Kent respects Catsby's drive to secure a sophomore spot on the roster, and pushes him on practicing at center rather than wing. That's what the head coach was testing Catsby at more and more by the end of last year; and the Aces need more center depth anyway, after their former go-to third line center left during the offseason.
"Don't shoot so hard," Kent reminds Catsby, after he sends a pass too quickly for the guy whose skating Kent's imitating. "This is Slatey. It'll go past him to somebody on the other side, and then you'll get marked with a turnover."

Catsby wipes his visor clean with a finger. "He's caught 'em like that before."

"Sure," Kent agrees, "at third period. Maybe mid-second, when he's fresh. But this is like first period ice," he says, rapping the butt of his stick against the freshly-zambonied rink. "It's not chewed up enough yet to slow the puck for you. You can't hit so hard."

"But you caught it before."

"I told you, that was Nino," Kent replies.

The coach was mixing up the Aces' usual five-forwards power play unit by adding Nino as the lone defenseman last season, once Vichy was okay at Spanish and Nino had adjusted to Catsby's dialect. By that point, the three of them could usually hash out plays without being understood by the other team, and then Vichy could call a translation in Italian to Scrappy or Russian to Chazzer. Their PP did well enough that Kent figures Coach Moss will keep running it this season unless something changes.

It makes Kent the weak link: he doesn't know a lot of Spanish beyond calling someone a motherfucker and a dog-fucker, and he still can't manage much Russian or Italian beyond food names and some curses Scrappy always tells him he's butchering.

But he recognizes directions like "west," "north," "up," etc. And once the play starts, he can figure out the rest fast enough.

He knows Vichy and Chazzer and Scrappy well enough that he can predict their moves, and he's getting better at estimating Nino and Catsby's. The coaches've put in a lot of work to get their PP unit to develop chemistry.

And the upside of nobody expecting Kent to know anything but English means that at least he's not Vichy, who keeps getting chirped by Scrappy and Catsby whenever he ends up defaulting to Italian because he can't remember a Spanish word fast enough. Kent used to join in, but lately Vichy's gone from aggravatedly reminding Kent he doesn't know either language to just popping him in the arm.

"This is Slatey. He's not as fast as Nino," Kent reminds Catsby. "You can't pass the same way to both of them."

"Gaaaaaaawwwwwwww," the sophomore growls out, kicking away to do a slow loop on the ice.

Kent's trying to get better at recognizing when he's burning guys out, after one of his alternate captains talked to him during offseason and since things went to such shit between him and his former center for a while last season. So he props his stick on the ice and waits.

Plus, whenever Catsby makes that noise, pretty soon after his phone starts miraculously playing nothing but screechy techno. And then Kent has to listen to that crap for the rest of the skate, because he's not going to give in and say anything first.

Kent "accidentally" elbowed the phone off the railing once last season when Catsby pulled that stunt. But the kid just got a better protector case and then turned the sound up louder next time.

Catsby collects the puck and circles back over to him. "How do you keep all this straight?" he
demands.

Kent shifts briefly on his skates, and then pulls off a glove. "You've got a great face-off percentage."

"Okay," Catsby says.

"How do you beat guys so much?" Kent continues. "Especially later and later into the game."

"Uh," Catsby says, before shrugging. "Just--reading guys. You face 'em enough, you know what they're gonna do."

"You learn their tells," Kent says. "That's why you're so good at poker, too."

Catsby raises an eyebrow at that, even though he's smiling a little. "How much money've I lost to you?"

"I knew what you were doing," Kent replies. "I faked tells."

"Son of a--I knew it," he grumbles. Kent shrugs a shoulder, and then scratches the back of his neck and thinks *Might as well.*

Catsby's got a mix of grit and talent that'll make him useful to the Aces for a long time; and he has a ridiculously enthusiastic personality that's made him popular with fans and a nice guy to have on the plane during the exhausting slog of long roadies. And the head coach seems to be prepping him to take over center on the Aces' checking line, where he'll be put up against more top-level players. So.

Kent says, "You ever played blackjack?"

By the time they get back to the clubhouse for breakfast, Catsby's still frowning over the high-low chart Kent sketched out on a piece of scrap paper. Even though Kent drove them both back to the clubhouse so Catsby would have more time to study it.

There's nothing easier to start with: high-low's the most basic strategy Kent knows. That's what he started with in junior high, when he realized that he needed better equipment to keep competing at top levels and make the tryouts for Juniors. He wasn't willing to sacrifice the practice time and sleep that a part-time job would eat up, so he started getting people to bet on cards with him during lunch at school and at parties.

Kent eats another bite of bagel and starts shuffling two of the ex-casino card decks sitting around in the kitchen to be used as coasters. "It's not that hard once you memorize it."

"Parse, I'm pretty sure your idea of 'hard' is way skewed from most peoples'," Catsby tells him. He frowns at the chart again. "You sure this is legal?"

"Yeah," Kent answers. "Casinos just don't like it."


"Seriously?" someone says. Kent glances over long enough to see the team's fines master coming through the doorway, with Kent's usual center behind him. He nods at Chazzer and keeps shuffling.
Robber warns Catsby, "I'm raising that fine back to $300. You had your chance."

"C'mon!" he responds, injured; and Kent says, "No."

He starts cutting the deck. "This isn't playing cards with me, it's practice. No fines."

"Practice," Robber repeats disbelievingly.

"Yeah, apparently counting cards is gonna make me a better center," Catsby answers. "Which is like the most Vegas fuckin' thing I ever heard."

Kent shakes his head and cuts the deck a final time, as Chazzer leans against one of the tables and pulls out his phone. "The point's memorizing factors and making strategies for changing circumstances. Cards are just a cheap way to learn it."

"This is absolutely the most Vegas fucking thing I've heard," Chazzer drawls, still texting. Robber makes a noise under his breath and heads for the basket of bagels on the counter. "This is like, the greatest PR promo that can never be."

Kent snorts and deals out to himself and Catsby.

Catsby twists around enough in his chair to look at Robber while Kent's checking his facedown card. "Okay, but like, no fines? I can't afford three hundred dollars a game, c'mon man."

"Yeah, yeah. No fines," Robber mutters.

"Thanks, Pete," Catsby says, settling back in the chair and glancing at his face-down card. He tilts it too much as he does; Kent reflexively notes that it's a three of spades and revises his calculations now that he knows all four cards in play. Catsby adds, "I really didn't wanna get arrested going to casinos instead."

"Don't do that," Kent says automatically. "That's a whole different level. You have to learn this first." He nods at the chart.

"I was joking," Catsby says.

Kent shrugs a shoulder. "It's good practice," he agrees, because this is just one more thing where Catsby's right, but only within a certain set of parameters. "But you gotta strategize for the casino more than the game there. Don't take comps, don't vary your bets, watch how often the pit boss circles around and how close they get. Be ready to quit if the dealer starts reshuffling the deck before the cards run out, because they've caught onto you."

Kent adds, "And don't ever win more than ten thousand at once. They have to register anything above that."

Over at the table, Chazzer whistles low. "Jesus Christ, bro."

Kent glances at him as Catsby's gaze shifts to the other side, toward the second exit. "What?"

"Yeah, no, I'm gonna let him--" Chazzer says, about the same time Catsby goes, "Uhhh--"

And then someone hauls Kent out of his chair by the back of his shirt.

"You did not just say what I thought I heard," Vichy says flatly.

Kent gives his traitor of a linemate--and the phone in Chazzer's hand--an irritated look.
"Seriously?"

Vichy shakes him, which is just obnoxious since Kent's already on his tip-toes. "Parser. You did not just fuckin' say--"

"Caesar's should've built that arena," Kent retorts.

"... Oh my God," Vichy says in abject horror. "--Stop talking. Never talk again. Oh holy fuck, Parson, tell me you don't pull this shit at the Grand!"

"I can't do that and never talk aga--"

"Parson."

Kent makes a mental note further narrowing down the identity of the silent investors, given Vichy's dead seriousness about this.

And then he puts it out of his head the same as everything else about them.

"Why would I do that?" he replies. "They're actually doing the arena they promised." He adds, "I know your wife works there, I'm not gonna fuck with her place, c'mon."

Vichy exhales slowly. But bringing up Nadiya seems to've finally gotten him thinking straight again; he doesn't say anything else about MGM.

"You gonna put me down already?" Kent asks, since this is getting ridiculous.

"I oughta fuckin'..." Vichy grumbles, but he drops Kent to his feet instead of following through on that threat. "Don't ever--"

"You," he orders, pointing at Catsby. "Don't ever do anything Parser does."

"Including 'play hockey'?!" Kent asks, eyebrow raised.

"Ever," Vichy repeats, ignoring him and continuing to point at Catsby.

The younger man gives him a thumbs up with a slightly worried expression. "Got it."

"Good," Vichy growls, grabbing the chart off the table and crumpling it in a fist as he stalks over to the fridge. Robber pushes the remainder of his bagel in his mouth and moves around the other side of the counter, heading out of the room.

Kent deliberately readjusts his shirt collar and takes his seat again.

"So, I should just play you," Catsby confirms.

"Yeah," Kent agrees.

Vichy yanks a glass out of one of the cabinets and smacks the door shut. "Why would you even!?" he demands, pointing at Kent with the crumpled paper. "Why the fuck, you can't need money!"

"If they start shuffling more to stop me, that's bets they don't get," Kent replies, looking over. "Even if I don't win, I'm cutting their profits."

"Stop talking!"
Then Vichy points at Chazzer, who's got his hands braced on his thighs as he laughs. "You're not fucking helping!"

Chazzer shakes his head. "This is so fuckin'--New York goes to Vegas, I can't even," he manages. "Don't fuck with the Aces or I'll do you like Bugsy Siegel!"

"They should've built it," Kent repeats.

Vichy drops his head to the counter and covers it with his arms, making a keening noise. Chazzer laughs more.

"Hit or stand?" Kent asks Catsby.

"You're gonna get rolled in a back alley one of these days," he replies.

"They'd probably detain me in a back room and try to intimidate me," Kent says. "But counting cards isn't illegal, and I play hockey. Good luck with that."

"Why is this my life?!" Vichy snarls, before shoving back up and stalking out of the kitchen.

"You're nuts," Catsby tells Kent, not for the first time. "Hit."

Kent deals them both another card.

"Also like, why don't you play center?" Catsby adds, looking at his card.

"Because I don't need the competition," Chazzer drawls, heading for the fridge.

Kent checks his card. "I used to. Hit or stand?"

"No, keep going with that story," Catsby tells him.

Kent glances upward. "I'm bad at face-offs," he says. "Especially when I was a kid. I had the worst metabolism--no matter what I ate, I burned it off an hour later. By the time I hit Juniors, bigger guys were always beating me."

He lifts a shoulder. "I started developing some chemistry with another center on our power play, so pretty soon the coach moved me onto his line and told me to play wing. Then I just kinda stayed there."

Even when the Océanic got a new coach the next season, he wasn't crazy enough to break up Kent and Zimmermann's pairing. Coach Jodoin just assigned the biggest left-winger on the team to their line, after Jack got jumped by a kid on the opposing team early in the season and Kent got his ass handed to him while fighting the bastard over it.

"Okay," Catsby says, biting his tongue absently as he checks his cards again. "Makes sense."

"It's not that hard."

"Calling twice as much bullshit now, Parse."

They're starting a second round with Chazzer taking over as dealer when Vichy comes back into the kitchen and heads over to where his glass is still sitting on the counter.

"You ruined it, man," Kent says without looking up. "You had a perfect storming-out line, and you
blew it coming back. You gotta learn to follow through."

Vichy points at him while filling the glass at the sink and says a lot of things in flat Russian that Kent assumes are variations of "Go fuck yourself, smartass," before heading for the door.

Chazzer slaps him on the back sympathetically as he leaves. Vichy just growls.

"You're gonna get rolled in a back alley and it's gonna be by him," Catsby says, eyebrow raised.

"See, that one I can buy," Kent agrees. "You can't trust an old school Las Vegan.

"If you text that to him I swear to God, Chazzer," Kent adds when his liney pulls out his phone again.

*

The free agent defenseman that Vegas signed over the summer, Brian Brown, is a high-profile acquisition blatantly meant to reassure the Aces' fanbase--and probably also its owners, and definitely its silent investors who might be the majority owners now, and Kent quits thinking about all that--that the club's going to fix its multi-year defensive issues.

So Kent's not surprised when the GM splashes around some extra money to get him and Brown to know each other before the season starts.

Especially after Impey catches Kent by the coffee maker early one morning near the end of camp and tells him that the club's going to revise the alternate captaincies this season. Starting with assigning one to Brown.

Impey's obviously expecting Brown to take over the vacancy in the Aces' leadership group and as their top defenseman, meaning Kent's going to be sharing a lot of ice time with him. So the faster they get to know each other, the sooner they can develop chemistry, and the better the team should perform.

Though part of the effort's probably for Brown's sake. His contract's been a big cap hit to the team, and he's stepping into the shoes of a popular and high-producing player. And he's coming onto an unusually tight-knit team, because a lot of the Aces' current core is a group of guys who've been allowed to stay and grow together for over half a decade.

Nobody really still uses that old "class of 2009" nickname anymore, but that doesn't change the fact that Kent, Vichy, Chazzer, Mitts, Scrappy, and Showy all began their rookie years together on the Aces. Showy's the only one who's left since then.

Kent's knows it's rare for a club to keep so many guys together for so many years. But the Aces' consistent record as a playoff contender since that season bought the GM a lot of leeway to get away with it.

Now they just need to get another Cup again already to prove that Impey knows what he's doing.

Brown's been vocal about his enthusiasm for signing with the Aces and joining a winning team, but that's just the standard interview response. Kent knows the GM wants the man solidly worked into the dressing room before the season starts; as captain, getting that done starts with Kent.

Besides, a free helicopter ride over the Strip? Hell yeah.

That's the kind of perk of being a major-league professional athlete that Kent's always going to be
Brownie and Kent discuss the team's divisional rivals and the pairings that the head coach was favoring by the end of camp on the ride to the airport. But as the security guy drives them across the tarmac in a golf cart, Brownie cuts off mid-sentence and stares at the copter.

"Ah, hell," he says resignedly. "Where's the doors?"

"Wait." Kent looks over. "You afraid of heights?"

"I'm not...great with them," the older man hedges.

"Oh wow," Kent says, looking back at the open-sided helicopter with a raised eyebrow. "This is gonna be hell for you."

The camera guy turns around in the front seat. "You gonna be okay? I can call Becky."

Brownie shakes his head at the name of the Aces' head of PR. "Nah." He squares his shoulders. "I'll be fine."

Kent mentally gives the man a positive point and slaps him on the back. "Just don't look down."

The flight's exactly as badass as Kent expected. He spends the majority of it holding tight to his phone as he films everything; Brownie spends the majority getting chirped by the pilot.

"We're gonna bank left and head back," the pilot tells them, after they've passed the Stratosphere at the end of the Strip.

Kent cuts out of video long enough to take a picture farther up the Boulevard toward his apartment building. The pilot grins and tilts his head slightly toward the backseat. "You sure you don't wanna look, Brian?"

"My eyes are stayin' forward," Brownie replies dryly.

"How much can you bank?" Kent asks, switching back to video and twisting around in his seat to dangle his legs out the side of the copter.

"Why," Brownie says, pained. The pilot laughs.

"Oh shit," Kent says a couple seconds later, when he's suddenly a lot more horizontal to the ground than before. "I took it too far."

"Don't swear Kent, I'm gonna have to edit that," the camera guy replies. Trevor adds, "I like how you're still filming."

"Seriously?" Brownie asks.

"Yeah," Kent says, kicking his legs out over the emptiness. "Gotta stay the course, man. Finish your checks."

"This's explaining a lot, Parse," Brownie mumbles.

Kent chuckles, and then goes "whew" a moment later when the helicopter finally rights itself.
"I heard that," Brownie tells him. Kent gives him a thumbs up over the back of the seat.

After they land, Brownie spends several moments standing still with his hands braced hard on his thighs. "Whoof."

"You did great," Kent grins. "I bet the guys won't even give you much shit once that plays in the bowl."


Brownie just shakes his head. "How far can you bank," he mutters. "You suck."

"I didn't think he'd go that far," Kent protests mildly.

He looks over his shoulder at the camera guy, who's finished retrieving the extra phone they attached to the front of the helicopter with a selfie stick. "Ah, c'mon. Gotta do the final shot."

Brownie exhales and straightens up. "Alright."

Kent claps his shoulder. "Don't worry, they won't do this again. They just budgeted it this year 'cuz you're the fancy new acquisition."

"Thank fuck," Brownie replies, aiming for dry but still sounding a little genuinely relieved.

"You're not afraid of boats, though, right?" Kent adds. "We usually do a team-building thing on one."

"Nah, boats're fine," Brownie says, as they head over to the helicopter. "I can swim. I just can't fly."

Kent chuckles once more, but nods in agreement. "Fair enough."

*

Adding new guys always means fitting their habits into the team's already-established superstitions and traditions; but adding a high-profile signee is a new layer for Kent.

He's been the Aces' de facto superstar pretty much since his arrival in Vegas. And because the Aces' GM usually brings guys up through the feeder team rather than signing them laterally from other NHL teams, Kent's never really dealt with another big-name guy who wasn't either already on the roster before him or who didn't make his reputation alongside him. It's a learning experience.

At the beginning of the Aces' first preseason game, Kent and Brownie are hashing out a couple mistimed passes they had during warmups while everybody's heading out of the locker room for the ice. In the corner of his eye, Kent sees Vichy shift forward, moving ahead of Brownie instead of walking next to him and putting Brownie second-to-last in line before Kent.

Which looks so weird that it barely takes Kent a second to realize what's wrong.

He grabs a handful of Vichy's jersey. Vichy startles and glances over his shoulder.

"--Yeah, uh," Kent interrupts himself, looking back at Brownie. "Vichy goes out last before me, at games."
"Got it," Brownie replies, moving around Vichy and taking the third spot in line.

As they're heading down the hall, Vichy looks back over his shoulder again, this time with a smirky eyebrow. "Thought you weren't superstitious, Parser."

"You are," Kent retorts. "Your place in line gets messed up, I don't wanna know how you'd deal. You'd start inventing even more rituals or something."

Vichy snorts and smacks him in the calf with his stick.

*

Kent throws himself into the chaotic whirlwind that is preseason, even if it feels like he's got more balls to juggle this year: the practices with Catsby, getting to know the new guys, adjusting to the changes in the locker room after the new alternate captains are announced. Agreeing to stay on the ice longer after practices with the Aces' main goalie and the goalie coach, because Boxy's been holding Coach Ostapuik back for extra workouts as the goalie roster is shaved down to Boxy and a backup guy from the feeder team.

Working with the trainer on his conditioning.

Kent maybe throws himself into it a little too intensely. The last several evenings, the coaches and other staff have been telling him to quit watching tape, or to get out of the practice area, and to go home already. The trainer's forbidden Kent to go in the workout room unless Elliot or the strength coach are with him.

But the work's still got to get done. And there's only so much time left.

Kent knows what's expected of him. He's been in a scoring slump all month, which means he needs to get out of it already and start putting up the kind of numbers he's supposed to be producing.

This is becoming one of the longest droughts of his career. The media feels a need to mention that at this point last year Kent was on his scoring hot streak which morphed into his record-breaking regular season point streak, like Kent isn't one hundred percent fucking aware of that already.

It feels better to focus his attention on what's going on with the team. At least there, Kent sees results for his efforts.

*

By mid-preseason, the roster's pretty much nailed down. Kent and Vichy are speculating who might get the last couple open slots one afternoon during stick prep.

It's a tight race: a few unexpected guys really ramped up last season, to the point that Kent's made his peace with the GM releasing so many vets over the last two years. Impy must've known the feeder team was going to give him plenty of potential players soon to make up for it; nice.

"Must be doin' something right up in Reno," Kent adds cheerfully.

"Yeah," Vichy mutters, focused on the tape he's wrapping around his blade.

Kent gives him a sidelong look when the man doesn't take the usual bait to diss one of Vegas's rival cities. He marks the handle of another stick in preparation for cutting it shorter, and says, "What's up?"
"Nothin'."

_Bullshit_, Kent thinks. The equipment manager's been putting Vichy and Borislavysyn's stuff on opposite sides of the dressing room since the last day of camp.

Kent finishes with his last stick, re-caps the marker and lets the measuring tape snap back closed, and then turns and looks at Vichy.

Vichy exhales through his teeth and scowls at his stick. "It's not a big deal."

"You can keep stonewalling," Kent says casually, "but you're gonna hit hypocrite levels real fast here."

Vichy looks up and gives Kent a silent middle finger. Kent leans a hip against the table and keeps waiting.

Vichy finally drops his hand and looks back at his stick, jaw tight. "It's just nationalism bullshit. It's not a big deal."

Kent frowns. "Nationalism?"

Vichy jerks his shoulders. "Just. Russian-Ukrainian hardliner crap. Crimea bullshit. I'll quit having a problem with him when he stops _making_ himself a problem, Parser."

"Dude," Kent says seriously. "I'm not coming at you, Vichy. C'mon, man."

Vichy breathes out through his teeth, rolling his stick between his palms; but he relaxes his shoulders. "...Yeah. I know."

"Alright," Kent says. "Things gonna be okay if he makes the roster? 'Cause he's looking solid."

Vichy snorts bitterly. And then he closes his eyes and exhales again, slower and more tired this time.

"Yeah," he says, setting aside the taped stick and picking up another one. "He'll get over it or I'll ignore it. Whatever it takes."

Vichy's dodged the topic, which is kinda normal for him, but he's been avoiding eye contact and unnecessarily screwing around with his sticks in order to have a prop to deflect his attention even after finally talking about it, which is not normal. This could be more serious than Kent thought.

He pulls out his phone and writes a reminder to go by the library and ask for some stuff on Crimea. He'll just have to find time to read it. Maybe on a plane or something.

"Alright," Kent repeats, sliding his phone back into his hoodie pocket. He bops Vichy on the shoulder. "He'll get over it, man. We got bigger stuff to focus on. We're takin' that fuckin' Cup."

Vichy forces out a "heh" and nods once.

He starts taping his next stick. Kent gets to work on cutting his own.

* Experimenting with his stick lengths gives him a little more precision in his shots, but it doesn't help his current lack of power behind them. He's still shooting too soft.
His passes keep getting intercepted before other guys can catch them. Other teams keep blocking his shots. The Aces' goalie is getting obnoxious about making incredibly showoff catches whenever he and Kent hang back on the ice after practice.

The Aces' trainer set specific limits on how much time Kent's supposed to spend working out to get his conditioning on track, and Kent follows them; but the longer this goes on the more he hates it. His upper body strength is still out of whack. He can't go into the season like this. He wants it fixed.

"It doesn't work like that," Elliot tells him, after Kent slapped off the egg timer by the weight machine so hard that it cracked open when it hit the floor and the trainer told Kent that he better not be breaking his shit without a good reason and to spill it.

"I know!" Kent snarls back, dragging his hands through his sweaty hair as he curls forward. "Fuck."

And then Kent presses his forehead to his knees and makes himself take a deep breath.

Elliot designed these workouts to help him, and to keep Kent from damaging himself worse by overexerting himself. He knows that.

"Sorry," he says, dropping his arms. Kent slings his leg over the bench and pushes onto his feet. "I'm not pissed at you."

"You're gonna have a slow start this season, Parse," Elliot tells him. "I know what I'm about to say's never been listened to by any player ever, but don't think about it. A slow start while you get back into condition is better than a worse injury."

Kent makes himself take another long breath.

"I know," he replies. "I know. It just sucks."

"I know," Elliot tells him. "Sucks for you, for my equipment...." He gives the timer on the floor a meaningful look.

Kent pushes his hair off his forehead again and then picks it up.

He hands the timer over to Elliot, rubbing the back of his head as he does. ". . .Sorry."

Elliot gives him a wry half-smile as he takes it. "I've been doin' this a while, Parse. I don't put the fancy shit in reach of guys recovering for a reason."

Kent snorts a laugh.

"You following the media like usual?" Elliot asks.

Kent picks up a towel and starts wiping off his face, nodding once.

"Stop," Elliot orders. "They're gonna keep speculating about you and this slump, because that's their job. You're not helping yourself by listening."

Kent breathes through his teeth while the towel's still hiding his face. And then he resets his expression and pulls it away to wipe off his neck. "Okay."

"The mental part of recovery's just as important as the physical, Parse," Elliot reminds him. "You
can't do one right and sabotage yourself on the other and expect to get back to a hundred percent."

The Aces' trainer's designed all this to help him. Kent exhales again, slower, and nods once more.
"All right. I know. I'll quit."

"Good." Elliot pries the timer's face off and starts reattaching the dial. "Once you're back in form, you can start up again. But for now, focus on conditioning."

Zimmermann's already racked up four points in the Falconers' first three preseason games while Kent's still trying to get into a training camp-ready state.

And he's basically proving Elliot's point thinking about that.

Kent balls up the towel and chucks it at the laundry bin in the corner. "Okay. I got it. I will."

Elliot tilts his chin at the mats. "Go cool down. We'll start again tomorrow."

"Alright." Kent shoves his hair back again, makes a note to get a haircut soon, and goes.

*

After the preseason game against the Schooners, Kent pulls his first alternate aside while the team's heading for the postgame workout. "What'd you say to Lean earlier?"

Brownie blinks, and then looks over at the other defenseman. "There a problem?"

"No," Kent says, shifting out of the way so one of the equipment guys can steer a flatbed dolly loaded with bags past them. "This's the first time we played Seattle and he didn't take a stupid penalty on one of their guys."


Kent raises an eyebrow.

The older man shrugs a shoulder. "There was some shit going on in Rock Springs," he answers; and Kent frowns for a second before remembering that the Schooners' feeder team used to be in that city before relocating. "It carried over when he was called up."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Fernsy picked the wrong side," is all Brownie says. "Asked me after I signed here, if I saw the kid, to let him know. Tell him he was sorry 'bout it."

"Huh," Kent replies.

Must've been something really bad, if one of the Schooners' alternate captains went to that much effort for a call-up no longer in the organization.

 Might be bad enough to finally explain those rumors behind Lean's trade. He's apparently not gay, like the rumor claimed; and he hasn't been caught screwing around with any teammates' wives or girlfriends, like some of the guys suspected was the real problem the rumor was covering up.

Definitely might explain why the seven penalties Lean took against Seattle last year were all drawn by one Schooner rookie, Rahe. And why Lean probably would've had more if Coach Moss hadn't scratched him from the rest of the Seattle games.
Kent doesn't mention any of that.

So far, Brownie's kept his mouth shut about the other dressing rooms he's been in over his career. It makes him trustworthy when it comes to the Aces' own; but it also means there's no point in asking for more info.

Besides, Kent's spent over half his life on competitive, top-tier teams. He's seen what happens to guys who're too much of a pushover when it comes to hazing, or who can't figure out how to manage older players who need to prove something whenever somebody better than them shows up in the dressing room. He can make an educated guess what went down.

So instead, Kent says, "Thanks for doin' that, man."

"Sure."

*

During preseason, the Las Vegas Hockey Club announced the Aces' new alternate captains: Brownie and Trojan.

Kent congratulated them like he was supposed to, and made a mental note that Vichy was right and the club never will fully trust him.

Out of all the guys in the Aces' core, Vichy's the one with the best on-ice temperament and the longest history with Vegas. He should've earned an A by now; the fact that he's been bypassed for newer guys is gonna make people talk. Hopefully PR's got a plan to get out in front of that.

The part that wasn't addressed in the announcement meeting, and that was left out of the press release, is that Vegas has stripped the alternate captaincy from the veteran player who's been holding it ever since Kent became captain.

Sunny sat through the meeting stoically, but he also left fast once it was over.

But Brownie handled that situation like a veteran, too. Kent's not sure when exactly he and Sunny hashed things out, but by the next day the undercurrent of tension between the two of them was mostly gone. By the end of the week, the dressing room was back to normal.

Kent's pretty sure he should be bothered by the way Sunny was abruptly dumped to the side by the club, instead of being transitioned out by getting to spend a season as a rotating alternate or something. But it's not like he's dumb enough to expect anything else from a front office.

Besides, the changes to the alternate captaincies means that Kent finally has significant support when it comes to leading the team. He's finally got more people helping shoulder the load.

And anyway, half the reason the Aces' defense was such a mess last year was because Sunny and the last alternate captain--Showy, another defenseman--were always arguing with each other about what the actual problems were. If Brownie's supposed to be a veteran leader for the Aces' now-younger defense, giving Sunny's alternate captaincy to him is just removing a potential roadblock from Brownie's way.

Plus, Sunny's been getting slower over the past couple years.

And that knee injury he took in June during the last playoffs isn't helping.
Kent gets it. Taking away Sunny's A was a pragmatic decision to remove extra responsibilities from a player on the decline and transfer them to players in their prime instead.

Or it might be the GM deciding it's time to refresh the club's leadership structure, so that there's a solid group of leaders already established in the dressing room by 2017. In case Kent keeps performing the way he currently is and his contract with the Aces isn't renewed.

Or, it might could be that somebody else figured out that the Aces' oldest defenseman has a painkiller addiction problem--and then they actually went to the front office about it, instead of covering it up. Kent knows there's still a mole in the dressing room, after all.

And Waller--the retired Ace who shared the alternate captaincy with Sunny from 2010-2013--definitely suspected. He wouldn't've told Kent to keep an eye on Sunny otherwise.

And Waller's ratted out somebody on the team before. If he really is the one who alerted the silent investors to Vichy.

Or it could be a mix of all those factors. Or something else going on in the front office that Kent doesn't know about. Who knows.

Whatever. It's not like he's gonna ask about it. The GM made the decision to assign the alternate captaincy to new people; those are the guys Kent's supposed to work with more now.

He's got his own problems to focus on, anyway.

*

By the Aces' final game of the preseason, Kent has zero goals and one assist. The trainer told him not to think about it, but he can't not.

His weak, shitty passing is fucking up his entire line. Coach Moss is trying to get Chazzer to develop into a more offensive center this season, but Chazzer can't do that if he has to keep flipping back to defense whenever Kent turns over the puck to the other team. Trojan's working hard to cover for both Kent and Chazzer, but the other winger's specialty is forechecking: keeping the puck in their opponent's zone, winning battles along the boards, snagging rebounds from the goalie, and checking the other team hard enough to clear space for Kent or Chazzer to shoot. Every second that Trojan has to chase the puck back into the Aces' zone because Kent fucked up is a waste of the man's skill set.

All three of them know it. Trojan doesn't say anything; but now that the season's almost on them, Chazzer's losing his patience.

And after two straight games of Coach Moss assigning Vichy's line as first--because at least that line can reliably keep the goddamn puck in their opponents' zone--so is Kent.

"Think I'm not fuckin' tryin'?!" Kent yells back at his center in the dressing room, after the Aces' final loss of the preseason.

"Doesn't fucking look like it!" Chazzer retorts, throwing his gloves hard at his stall. The guy undressing next to it shifts further to the side, out of range. Farther away, Trojan exhales wearily as he pulls off his arm guards and drops them on his seat.

Chazzer starts struggling with one of the clips on his shoulder pads, trying to unlatch it while he's still too pissed to have good coordination. "The hell were you doing? How the fuck was I supposed to catch that, asshole!?"
Kent throws his balled up jersey at his stall and moves toward him. "By fuckin' skatin'."

"I was fucker, you--"

"Not fast enough!"

"You're the shit passer Parse, don't fucking blame me!!"

"All right," Kent's first alternate says, getting between them and pushing them apart. "Jake, Kenny, don't--"

Kent punches away Brownie's hand on his chest.

The older man breaks off and looks at him, eyebrow raised.

Kent clenches his jaw, grinding his teeth into his mouthguard; and then Vichy shoulders past him and Brownie, forcing more space between them, in a blatantly orchestrated move toward the gatorade cooler.

Kent makes himself take a deep, hard breath.

He steps back and tries to shove his hands into pockets that aren't there. Kent grits his teeth again and focuses on unclenching his fists, taking another breath as he does.

Trojan comes up behind Chazzer and squeezes his shoulder hard. "Mate, go shower."

Chazzer snarls out something in Polish; but he stalks over to the showers, dragging off the rest of his gear as he goes. One of the energy line guys, Kirbs, rolls his eyes when Chazzer's shoulder pads thump onto the ground near him and tosses them back toward Chazzer's seat.

Kent turns sharply for his own stall, and focuses on getting undressed without screwing up any of his gear.

Preseason isn't televised, so the only media to do is the papers and the radio. When everything's over, Kent catches up with Brownie on the way to the parking lot. "Hey. Sorry about earlier."

"'S alright."

"No, I shouldn't've--"

"You were worked up," Brownie interrupts. "I get it, Parse. I've been there. It sucks startin' a season still recovering. Didn't take it personal."

Kent exhales slowly. "Yeah. ...Still. Sorry. You were trying to help."

"Alright," Brownie agrees.

Kent scratches the back of his neck, and then tells himself to just get on with it. He always has to do this at least once a season; it's his own fault for losing his shit earlier and making it more awkward this time around. "And, uh. I don't go by Kenny."

"Okay," Brownie says, pretty patiently under the circumstances. Kent guesses another one of the guys already talked to him.

He shrugs a shoulder uncomfortably. "Only my family calls me that," Kent explains. "So it's--just,
kinda weird. Y'know?"

Brownie raises an amused eyebrow and gives him a sidelong glance. "Ain't it 'a team's a family' and shit?" he drawls.

Kent snorts, but shakes his head slightly. "'S just kinda weird."

"GOTCHA, Parse."

Brownie exhales slowly through his nose a moment later, and nods up the hall to where Chazzer's on his phone as he walks beside Kirbs. "So, is that normal for him?"

Usually Kent's not stupid enough to engage when Chazzer's pissed off, but otherwise, yeah. "He doesn't like losing," he answers. "Y'know, like anyone. He gets over it."

"GONNA be honest, Parse, I was kinda hopin' you'd say his girlfriend broke up with him and he didn't get his usual pregame blowjob," Brownie replies wryly.

"It just takes him longer to get his head off the ice," Kent says with a shrug. "He's a good guy. He just doesn't like to lose."

"Got it."

"...Also, that might've been disrespectful to women or something."

Brownie blows out another long breath. Kent points out, "You said you wanted to know."

"Yeah, I know," his first alt agrees, because it was only a week back when he'd been chirping Lean about the other defenseman's hipster clothing choices while everyone was changing after practice.

That wasn't anything new. Lean's been taking shit for his outfits since he hit the roster--especially from Vichy, who's apparently personally offended by the idea of a grown man wearing a kids' show t-shirt, like his own three-piece "It's called a 'vest,' Parser. Look it up, they've got Internet here" suits aren't their own kind of ridiculous. They live in a desert.

But while Brownie was dragging him, he'd tugged the brim of Lean's porkpie hat down over his eyes with a grin and added, "Shit like this is how you get called gay, kid."

Lean pushed the hat back up and rolled his eyes like usual. But farther down on Kent's own side of the dressing room, Kirbs whistled quietly in appreciation into his stall.

Which was usually Kent's warning that he needed to talk to somebody about inclusivity and the Aces' outreach programs and how "You say it in the dressing room, you're gonna get pissed someday and say it on the ice, man. And that's where the mics are. Don't fuck up our rep."

Kent made a mental note to start watching closer, now that his former alt left during offseason. Showy used to catch that stuff really early, before Kent even noticed it was a problem.

But then a couple minutes later Brownie paused in the middle of tying his sneakers, and looked back at Lean. "WAIT, was that a dick comment?"

Lean half-snorted. "It's cool, I know nobody here's got taste."

"NOBODY here," Vichy repeated with bone-dry sarcasm, sliding on his wingtips. Nearby, Scrappy sniggered.
"I mean it," Brownie said, seriously enough that Kent and a couple other guys looked over. "Was it?"

Kent knew Lean well enough to know that the other man would keep denying there was a problem in order to avoid conflict, so he tilted his head over his shoulder as he finished tying his shoes and said, "Yeah.

"We kept losing a guy to the box a few years back, 'cause he liked musicals and other guys kept callin' him a fag 'cause they knew they could draw a roughing over it," Kent added. "It was a waste. It's just clothes."

"'Just clothes,'" Vichy muttered.

"I'm not taking fashion advice from a guy still wearing a ragged college sweatshirt," Kent replied.

"It's lucky," Vichy retorted.

"It's covered in like, a whole pot of coffee, man. How do you even stain something that bad?"

Vichy made an annoyed face. Brownie said, "Sorry, Lee."

Kent managed to keep a neutral expression as he picked up his shirt.

Brownie might be figuring out a place in a new dressing room, but he was still a high-contract signee and an alternate captain. He had a guaranteed roster spot for the next couple years. Going out of his way to make sure he didn't offend somebody was kinda weird.

Maybe that's what alternates did in other clubs? But Kent's second alt didn't bother, and he's been on other teams around the league too. But then, Trojan's too level-headed to usually get guys irritated at him in the first place, so--

"It's cool," Lean replied, shifting on his feet with an uncomfortable smile. "I can take a joke."

"Nah, I know this club's big on diversity and shit," Brownie said with a shrug. "I signed up for this. I wanna get the culture right. Tell me if I'm bein' a dick."

Kent pulled his t-shirt over his head and made a mental note.

"Okay," Lean said. "...Uh, thanks. It's cool. We're cool."

Brownie nodded.

He must've meant it, because now, a week later, the other man just asks, "Why?" Not challenging, sincere. "'Cause of the sex part?"

"I think so," Kent says. "I usually figure, 'Would I say this in front of Grandma? Or PR?' Answer's 'no,' I better keep it to myself."

Brownie laughs once. "Yeah, alright." He gives Kent an amused look. "That how you're so on top of this shit? Or there a cheatsheet I should be checkin'?"

"Dude, I'm from a town in upstate," Kent snorts. "A buncha my family works at the prisons. When I hit Juniors, I wasn't in Rimouski a week before they yanked me for extra media training. I don't have an excuse to fuck up at this point. Like, five different people would come around to strangle me, startin' with Becky," he adds, pointing a thumb over his shoulder in the rough direction of PR's offices.
Brownie raises both eyebrows with a stifled noise, and then laughs out loud.

"--I don't mean--they're not bigots, or whatever," Kent adds abruptly, fumbling a step as his shoulders tense. "My family. They're just--blunt. You work at the supermax, you see some shit, y'know?"

Okay, yeah, that's not true about a couple of his uncles who're threepers, or about the one cousin and her family who won't talk to Kent's parents anymore because of some big fight about sending him to a gay conversion camp that apparently went down while he was away playing in the Océanic.

He doesn't know much about the details. Aunt Jenna was the only one who'd actually talk to him about it, and even then she blatantly left a lot out. Jack had come down to Kent's place during the end of Christmas break in their second year of Juniors, after they'd started dating; and he stayed for a couple days before driving Kent back up to Rimouski. And then when Kent returned home for the summer, his parents were going to a new church and they never got cards or phone calls from Cousin Elise's family again.

Kent's not going to pick up the phone and call Elise first. Fuck that.

But still. They're his family. Kent's not going to sell them out so other people can talk down about them just because they don't lie about being assholes. Fuck that, too.

"Supermax?" Brownie asks.

"Uh, Upstate Correctional. The supermaximum-security prison."

"Ah." Brownie nods. "Got it."

"Yeah. My family aren't bigots," Kent repeats, before telling himself to quit. He's starting to sound like he needs to convince himself. "I just had to learn how to talk to the media."

"Makes sense," he agrees. "Specially in this tourist town, yeah?"

"Yep," Kent says. "Whatever we pay PR, they deserve it for wrangling this band of dumbasses. I keep waiting for Becky to set her desk on fire and run off to join the foreign legion."

Brownie snorts hard.

"You think I'm jokin'," Kent replies. "Anyone tell you the potato gun story yet?"

"What." The other man looks over. "--Is this why the ban list is so weird?"

Kent nods, eyebrow raised. "So here this group of guys--whose hands're insured for like, fifty times the cost of the supplies," he starts, pitching his voice louder as they catch up with the rest of the team, "--decide yeah, of course, sneaking a potato gun onto a firing range is a great team bonding activity."

"Shut up Parse, you were there too!" Scrappy calls back at him.

"So you dragged an impressionable rookie along with you."

"Impressionable, bullshit," Chazzer retorts, looking over his shoulder. "Who was the mouthy bastard chirping everyone that didn't shoot as far as him? You, bro."

Kent snickers. Brownie just raises an eyebrow again.
Too soon, the 2015-16 season starts.
Chapter Notes

The final page count on this came out at 100+, meaning that this single chapter is longer than the entire fic was ever supposed to be.

If you came in reading the first couple short chapters and now are like "When did this turn into a god damn marathon," I'm sorry. I don't know what went wrong either.

~

The second week of the season, the Aeros arrive in Vegas for their first game against the Aces. The defenseman who was traded to Houston during the summer pranks the hell out of the guys. Everybody knows it was Showy, even though nobody caught him. Chazzer took a photo of his Hulk-stickers-plastered helmet before the equipment manager took it away to scrub them off and tweeted it with Smebody *cough* @zshort7 *cough* in Houston thinks he's clever and an eye-roll emoji. Scrappy had to get his wife to bring him extra underwear, because all his pairs were frozen into a block of ice inside a recycling bin behind the away team's bench.

Kent pries wrapped pieces of bubblegum out of his gloves with a cheap pen because he isn't willing to risk anything sharper, grudgingly impressed that Showy managed to get all of this done without being seen, and also insulted that the prank pulled on him was so weak. A few stalls over, Vichy's still chirping Scrappy in-between swearing as he pulls the yellow laces out of his skates so he can replace them with his normal ones.

Later, Kent discovers that all his sticks have a piece of blue painters' tape around the butt, with "Bonne chance à toi! :)" written on them.

All of them, except the three less-flexible ones that should've had the blue tape. Showy put pieces of beige masking tape with more French on those. Kent has to double-check the translation to confirm it basically says "It's not gonna help you, pal."

You're on now, Kent thinks, trying not to feel amused.

That night, Kent decides the best defense is a good offense and smarts off to Short about his wife while they're skating up to the opening face-off.

One of the officials looks over his shoulder, and Kent belatedly remembers that that's the ref with the really good hearing. Damn.

"Clock hasn't even started," Short replies dryly. "Called it. Thanks for for winning me that bet, Kenny."

Kent narrows his eyes.

"God gimme strength," Kent's center mutters, skating between the two of them and forcing Short to the side. "I knew it. Fuck off Showy, get in place."
"Comin' for your nose, Kenny!" Short says cheerfully as he heads toward his position.

"Not until you skate faster," Kent answers. Short calls "Weak chirp."

Despite their new coach and new speed-focused system, Houston in the middle of a four-game skid. Nobody's surprised when things get physical fast.

The Aeros' coach keeps sending out Short's defense pairing against Kent's line. Kent figures since the officials already caught him talking trash, there's no reason to stop. By the second period, Short's partner is taking serious offense to Kent's chirping.

After Kent takes an twelfth uncalled cross-check to the back, he finally gets fed up and slashes the Aeros' captain hard across the wrists.

Which was stupid, because that's the opening Short was waiting for. Kent sees the other man head for them while Kent and Skalski are shoving each other, and thinks, *Dammit, fell for it.*

Trojan arrives and bangs into Skalski hard, driving him away from Kent and into the net. The Aeros' goalie skates away from the kerfuffle as more guys converge around the net.

Kent tries to get free himself; but then someone headlocks him from behind.

Kent's got no leverage against the taller guy to break free. He throws himself backward and drops hard, pulling them both down.

Short grunts as they crumple onto the ice. "Shit, fuckin'--" and Kent elbows him hard in the stomach. Short coughs; Kent wrenches at the arm around his neck.

One of the linesmen gets in between them and starts forcing them apart. "Okay boys, break it up."

"You dirty shit," Short grumbles, as he lets the linesman haul him up.

Kent grins wide enough to show teeth as he shoves himself back onto his feet. "Failed in the clutch," he retorts, pointing to his still-unbroken nose.

"Still got half a game to go, Kenny," Short smirks. The linesman pushes him further back, toward the penalty box. Short starts for it, collecting his stick from another Aero as he goes.

One referee points Kent at the box while the other goes to announce a roughing minor to him and Short both. "How do you piss guys off so much, Parson?"

"Hard work," Kent answers.

"Get in the fuckin' box," the ref says, unimpressed. "Jesus."

* *

A week before their first game against Edmonton, Kent spends breakfast watching the Oilers' latest game and ignoring the rest of the table chirping him for it.

So far, the Oilers' rookie who went first in the last draft has only scored a few goals. And Edmonton's lost almost all their games. But Kent's not gonna get complacent.

"You're paranoid," Chazzer tells him. "They're last in the division every year."
"They beat Arizona once."

"Beating Phoenix, call Guinness World Records," Vichy says from a different table, interrupting himself in the middle of verbally translating some papers into Russian for one of the rookies. It comes out so salty Kent half-smirks even as he stays focused on his tablet.

A few more guys come into the kitchen. "--way outta your league. Gimme her phone number now," the energy line's center smirks.

"Fuck no, that's my sister," Catsby retorts, shoving Robber in the arm. "Try your lines with her and I'll show you what a real cup check is."

Robber pauses. "Wait, seriously?"

"Yep," the defensemen with them agrees.

Robber gives Korsy a disbelieving look. "Wait, you knew? Why didn't--?"

"Not my fault you stick your feet in your mouth," Korsy grins. Robber flips him off.

Kent's first alternate props an elbow on the table next to him, and takes another drink of coffee as Kent drags the video back to replay a turnover by the Oilers. "I know he's good," Brownie agrees. "But I gotta go with Chazzer. You can shut down skill if you grind enough."

Kent makes a vague noise in the back of his throat.

Over at Vichy's table, the Aces' primary agitator bops Robber on the arm as the new arrivals make their way to the counter. Then Scrappy slings around in his chair to ask Catsby, "Why's your family here? Skate's not for months."

Korsy scrubs Catsby's hair. "Cat here got his place taken over by his big sis 'cause he don't know how to say 'No.'"

Catsby ducks under his arm and then elbows him in the side. "You don't ditch family, Korsy, damn. What kinda jerk are you?"

"The kind that still has run of my space."

Kent readjusts the earbud he's wearing, and almost turns up the game before reminding himself not to risk his hearing. He's got enough problems at the moment as it is, with how lousy his stats still are. Catsby tells Scrappy, "She's crashing with me while she does some demos. She's trying to break into the music scene."

Vichy looks over. "What? I told you--"

"I know! I told her, 'Vegas is no place for un-established talent, Wayne Newton's an anomaly,' stay at BFR or go to L.A., yadda yadda," Catsby says, raising his hands. "But she was all 'I don't know anybody in L.A. to crash with so shut it.'"

Vichy shakes his head and turns back to the papers on the table between him and Boar.

Kent pauses; and then he puts down his tablet and pulls out his wallet.

"What's she trying to do?" he asks, riffling through it. "Can she topline?"

After a long moment, Catsby says, "Okay Parse, I know what that means 'cause I know somebody
crazy enough to try makin' it in the biz. What's your excuse?"

"I went to a lotta parties in offseason," Kent replies. He tugs out the earbud and looks over. "Can she? She any good?"

"Uh," Catsby answers. "I think so. She can improvise like crazy. She's a better rapper than me."

Robber snorts hard. Catsby jabs him in the side with an elbow.

Kent thumbs out the card for the L.A. commercial music writer he met back in August. "Tell her call this guy, ask if he's still looking for someone," he says, holding it out.

Catsby takes Chavarría's card, glances at the back briefly, and then slides it into his pocket. "-- Okay. Thanks."

Kent shrugs and pushes his wallet back in his jeans. "Vichy's right, Vegas ain't the place to break in," he says, picking up his coffee.

"I told you," Vichy agrees.

Catsby lifts his hands higher in the air. "I tried!"

Korsy slaps him on the back. "There is no try. Do or do not, Cat."

"Jeeeesus, at least quote it right, loser."

"Why don't you stick with 'Cat'?" Brownie asks, as Kent makes a face at his lukewarm coffee. He starts rewinding the game again, and forces himself to keep drinking it before it gets any colder. "Catsby's a pain in the ass to say."

"Take it up with that guy," Catsby says, jerking his chin at Robber. "You make one Penny Arcade joke, and some assholes can't get over it."

Robber bites down on the rim of the cup he's drinking from to hold it in place and gives him two thumbs up.

Catsby shakes his head and mutters in Spanish as he grabs a plate out of the cabinet.

Brownie raises an eyebrow. "What's a Penny Arcade?"

"I'm not falling for this trap again," Catsby replies.

Korsy helpfully tells Brownie, "Video game nerd shit."

Catsby gives Korsy an "I'm watching you" gesture. The other man just grins back.

Chazzer looks over to the left as Vichy and Boar's conversation in Russian goes rapidly from terse to nasty to enraged--and then Vichy's shoving out of his chair and slamming his hands on the table, leaning forward to yell at Boar: "Fuck you you immature little--!!" before he changes to Russian as the rookie pushes to his feet and swears back at him.

Kent drops his mug and scrambles out of his chair.

Chazzer gets there first and helps Scrappy as the man struggles to drag Vichy back. Vichy knocks his chair over as he tries to rip free. Mitts arrives to help. One of Borislav'yshyn's lineys grabs his shoulder, making him stumble back against his own chair. Kent kicks over the table and gets
between them.

"Shut the fuck up, both of you," he orders evenly.

Kent holds Vichy's gaze. "Whatever his problems are, it's not an issue for Americans. Quit giving a fuck unless he insults America. Got it?"

Vichy's stopped fighting Scrappy and Chazzer and Mitts, but he's still breathing hard, his fists and jaw clenched. Kent repeats, stronger, "Got it?"

"Yes, captain," Vichy says through his teeth.

Kent points at the door. "Walk it off."

Vichy twists hard to the side. The guys turn him loose; Scrappy throws an arm over Vichy's shoulders and goes with him as Vichy stalks out of the room.

Kent faces Borislavyshyn. Brownie's moved in front of the rookie with an arm against his chest, either to keep him back or to put another obstacle in front of Vichy; he steps out of the way as Kent stares Borislavyshyn down. Tommy lets go of Borislavyshyn's shoulder.

"Stop," Kent says, voice hard. "If you got a problem with Russians, take it out on Goldobin or Mashkov or somebody else. On a different team. Don't shit where you eat. Do you understand me?"

Borislavyshyn nods once tensely.

"Chazzer," Kent says, not looking away.

Chazzer repeats what he said in Russian. Kent can tell from the way Borislavyshyn's hands flex that it's pissing off the rookie more; but Borislavyshyn's English is still rocky enough that Kent isn't gonna risk any misunderstandings. So the kid can fucking cope, because this is not going to happen a second time.

Chazzer ends on a question. Borislavyshyn nods shortly.

"так," he says. "Yes."

"Good," Kent replies. He adds "Harna," even though he's not sure that works outside of the phrase for "good work." But that and "no, try this" are the only Ukrainian he's memorized.

Kent points at the second kitchen exit. "Walk it off."

Chazzer doesn't need to translate. Borislavyshyn leaves; Chazzer goes with him.

"The rest of you finish breakfast and get to video," Kent orders the room. "Review's in twenty."

By the time Kent's righted the table and salvaged the papers and started wiping up all the food and coffee that spilled on the floor, most of the team's cleared out. Somebody got a hold of the facilities guy; Jamaal came in, looked at the mess, and then left to get a mop.

Kent's in the middle of mentally cussing Vichy out for always eating oatmeal instead of eggs and sausage like a normal person because this is gross to clean up when Chazzer comes back, carrying a package of paper towels.
"What the fuck," Kent demands flatly.

Chazzer rips the package open, exhaling through his teeth. "Boar made a crack about the doping shit."

Kent pinches the bridge of his nose hard with his clean hand. "God dammit."

Vichy's never handled his extended family stuff well, but ever since the scandal about Russian athletes doping at the last Olympics began taking off in the media, he's gotten touchy as fuck about being considered Russian instead of American. A couple other teams' pests have started targeting their chirping at him to it.

Chazzer goes over to the table where they were eating, but Trojan already wiped up the coffee and iced tea that spilled when Kent and Chazzer went to break up the fight. He saved Kent's tablet, too; Kent needs to thank him soon.

Chazzer comes back over to Kent and holds out a fistful of paper towels. "Yeah."

Kent takes them. "Head to video," he says. "Tell Graves I'm coming."

Chazzer starts to say something, but then Scrappy comes back into the kitchen. Alone.

"He okay?" Kent asks.

"No," Scrappy says tiredly. "He said he'll be fine."

Kent scowls and makes a note to ride Vichy on this until he finally fucking talks for real this time.

"That's what he said before," he replies, tossing the damp wad into the trash can. Chazzer hands him more. "Bullshit."

Scrappy tightens his jaw. "He's not gonna start shit with the kid."

"Of course not," Kent says. "Vichy wants what's best for us. But that don't mean he's gotta keep fuckin' rolling over if Boar keeps takin' his shit out on him."

Scrappy eyes at him for a moment, and then he rubs his face hard with a hand. "...Yeah."

"It's not like Boar's wrong," Chazzer replies. "About Vichy, yeah, but not Russia."

"Don't you start," Kent orders.

"Talk to me when you know what zbrodnia katyńska is, Parse."

"Don't shit where you eat," Kent repeats flatly. "Jesus Christ. What the fuck is with everyone lately? Just fucking play hockey."

He already had to put a call-up on his mental radar a couple days ago for similar crap. Wilson's been doing a good job replacing Kirbs while the man's out with a shoulder injury, but there's a problem between him and Catsby. The two of them act fine with each other; but Kent can read real dislike in people's expressions when he sees it. Even if they're trying to fake otherwise.

Chazzer says something extremely sarcastic and icy at him in Polish.

But then he exhales hard through his teeth, and hands Kent another bunch of paper towels. Kent takes it.
He gets up the last major blob of oatmeal and egg and chucks the wad in the trash. The floor's finally clean enough that he won't feel like a dick leaving the rest of the work for Jamaal.

"All right," Kent says, pushing to his feet. "Video, guys."

"You could've skipped the drama queen kick," Chazzer tells him, nodding at the righted table. "We had him."

"Sometimes you gotta make a point," Kent replies. "Chirp while you walk, I'm gettin' sick of fines."

After practice, Kent decides to get out in front of one problem in advance and leaves the ice early to catch up with Nino. "What's the deal with Catsby and Willy?"

Nino makes a face and then quickly drops it, but not fast enough. "They don't get along."

"Yeah," Kent says. "Why?"

He shrugs his shoulders cagily. "Sometimes guys don't. I guess."

Nino doesn't usually dodge questions this hard. So this is worse than Kent thought. Again. Christ. Hopefully he didn't leave it for too long, like the problem between Vichy and Borislavyshyn.

Man, but he misses having Showy around sometimes. His old teammate was on top of this stuff enough that Kent could afford to slack off and focus on his own problems.

Behind them, Korsy says, "Cat don't like him 'cause Wilson keeps calling him Chicano."

Nino exhales through his teeth and bites the inside of his lip in irritation.

Kent shifts around to put Korsy in his line of sight too. "Okay. Why's...what's the problem?"


"Leave me outta this, Okori," Nino tells his defense partner, before looking back at Kent. His shoulders are a little tighter. "I'm not starting anything, Parse. A couple white guys don't like each other, it happens. Look, I gotta change. I'm getting hungry," he adds, fidgeting with a glove.

Kent nods after a second. "Yeah, go on. Sorry for keepin' ya."

Nino heads for the dressing room. Kent looks at Korsy. "You alright with Wilson?"

"There's worse guys," Korsy answers neutrally, which is the worst possible answer besides a straight-up "No."

The other man shifts on his skates, and adds, "Cat's not gonna bring it on the ice. You know he's professional."

"Yeah," Kent agrees. He makes several mental notes and a decision to talk to the GM asap.

Kent rushes through his shower and getting dressed. He wolfs down his lunch while reviewing Wilson's stats on his phone; and then he heads up to admin to catch the GM before Impey heads for
the airport for the Aces' upcoming one-game roadie. Vichy and Boar eat at opposite sides of the room.

As he heads for the GM's office, Kent tries to shake the gut-instinct feeling that he's about to go talking to the front office about something that should stay inside the dressing room, between the players only.

Catsby's been having a sluggish month goal-wise as he adjusts to the shift from wing to center. If there's a guy in the feeder team that can fill his role, then having an issue with another player could be the tipping point that makes the GM send him back to the AHL, or trade him in order to open his roster spot.

--Kent's supposed to be okay with that.

If there's a guy who can perform better than a current teammate down in the feeder team, then Kent's job is to get that new guy integrated, so that the Aces'll rise even higher in the rankings. No matter who the new guy replaces.

If Wilson's being stupid but isn't an active PR risk, then Kent's job is to live with it. As long as the call-up keeps his stats high on the ice, Kent just has to maintain the team around whatever individual problem he's bringing to the table.

Going directly to the GM is a lot different from getting the front office to think that addressing a risky player is their idea.

And anyway, Kent's own stats are a lot shittier now than they were a few years back, when he got the club to move Crosley down to the minors to make room for a better guy.

Kent stops in the hallway.

And then he breathes out slowly, and readjusts his hat.

Bob said it was okay to ask for help. If things were starting to feel overwhelming.

Kent's still underperforming on the ice. He knows it, the coaches know it, the front office knows it; but he can't figure out how to fix it. He wants to concentrate on getting better--but he can't, because apparently half the team wants to start sociopolitical bullshit lately, and Kent's time keeps getting robbed to deal with that and he can't afford it anymore.

Kent exhales harder and heads for the GM's office.

If the front office can deal with an average-but-not-exceptional call-up before he fucks up the Aces' dressing room, then Kent should let them. That's their job. Kent's job is to play. That's what he wants to do.

That's all he's ever wanted to do.

And if he doesn't start doing it better, eventually he's gonna lose the opportunity to do it at all.

. . . And if the front office has to scramble to talk to one player, then they might delay on dealing with Vichy. At least for long enough for Vichy to plan out his explanation for this morning.

The GM's packing his laptop when Kent knocks on the open door. Impey frowns slightly at him, but it's mostly confusion. "Kent?"
"Hey, uh. I know we gotta get to the airport and everything," Kent says, to let the man know he understands the inconvenient timing. "But, I think the new guy may need some extra media training."

Impey recognizes that for the code it is. He sits back down at his desk and gestures Kent at the seat across from it. "Close the door."

They fly out to Chicago that afternoon. Vichy screws up his usual superstition and sits way in the back, by a window, with headphones on as he pretends to watch something on his laptop with Scrappy.

Kent rolls his eyes mentally if not physically.

He picks a seat near the engines, pulls out his deck, and drags Catsby into the seat across from him to play cards. Kent uses the masking noise of the plane taking off to tell the sophomore not to waste his concentration on any petty crap left over from Catsby's time with the feeder team: the front office'll take care of it.

Catsby loses a record amount of games during that flight. Like, it's embarrassing for both of them.

By the time they're an hour out from O'Hare, Kent's chirping Catsby non-stop and a couple more guys have joined the game. Kent makes a mental note that the trade from Houston, Tommy, is a good cheat.

He doesn't see Vichy during the team dinner, which is normal. Kent usually goes with the steak guys, but Vichy always sticks with fish.

When he gets back to the hotel, Kent can hear the television playing quietly in Vichy's room next door. He decides to give the other man half an hour to organize the usual card games in his room, and sets the timer on his watch.

Thirty minutes later, Vichy's room is still silent except for the faint noise of some action movie. Kent thinks Alright then.

He opens the connecting door on his side and texts all the card and dice guys to come to his room tonight.

Once they're there, Kent drag a chair next to the connecting door and proceeds to deal out a round of blackjack while loudly talking about how much better Reno's casinos are compared to the junk you get stuck with if you go to Vegas's locals. The only real competition is the gaudy bullshit on the Strip. And that's not even getting into the fact that a supposed metropolis floods every time there's just a little rain. Like, seriously? Reno can handle rain. Even Manhattan has its shit together when it comes to rain. Even Carson City can handle rain. Vegas is a world-class city, Kent's ass.

Vichy starts turning the television up. Kent raises his voice over it.

Eventually, Catsby's shaking hard enough with stifled laughter that Kent knows all his cards. Scrappy drags a hand over his face as he sits next to the craps game that he's been trying to run despite everything; and then he tells Kent "Shut up before you die, Parse!" before throwing the dice at the connecting door. "Get in here already, this is stupid."

The television shuts off. Kent kicks his chair away from the door and out of immediate reach.
Vichy wrenches it open a moment later. "You," he growls, pointing threateningly at Kent, "shut your goddamn treasonous mouth."

Kent raises an eyebrow without looking up from his cards.

"Sit the fuck down, dumbass," Scrappy says wearily. "Jesus Christ."

*

The next evening, Chicago starts the game with a ceremonial puck drop for some community leader. Kent goes through the pre-game photo op with the woman and the Blackhawks' captain.

When it's done and he and Toews are shaking hands at the end, Kent comments quietly, "Great fuckin' yard you're runnin'."

"Fuck off, Parson," Toews says flat and low, dropping his hand and skating away. There's an edge under his tone.

Kent looks over his shoulder as he clears out of the way of the guys rolling the carpet up off the ice, and watches Toews' back.

One of his lineys breaks to a stop near him. "I hate that face, Parse."

"It's cool, I got this."

"You just made it worse," Trojan says.

Kent half-smirks. "Fifty bucks I get him in the box before third period."

"Don't," their center warns, coming up before Trojan can take the bet. "Get in place. Parse, I'm sending you the puck. Troy, pin your guy to the boards, that fucker's fast."

"Kill 'im," Kent calls, heading for his spot on the right. Chazzer nods as he skates to the center dot, and gets ready to face off against Toews.

There's about three minutes left in second period when Kent's incessant chirping about how a better captain wouldn't allow his team to be such a PR trash fire finally breaks Toews enough that Kent can goad him into a fight.

The game goes to a commercial pause after the refs haul them apart, so that the ice guys can start cleaning up where Kent's busted lip bled on the ice. Kent heads to the bench to get it fixed before he has to go in the box.

"Six years," Scrappy says, while the trainer's gluing Kent's lip. "How are you still shit at fighting, Parser?"

"I coulda won if I hadn't slipped," Kent mumbles.

"Don't talk," Elliot orders, reapplying a dab of glue.

Scrappy shakes his head. "Keep telling yourself that."

Kent can't talk to retort, so he rolls his eyes instead. As far as he's concerned, he won as soon as Toews swung back, because it's hard to get that fucker to drop the gloves.
Especially when Kent had less ice time than usual to get into Toews' head. Coach Moss began reducing Kent's minutes halfway through first period, sending Vichy's line out more instead, after Kent missed two separate shots at the goal and then fumbled a pass from his center.

At least he took one of the Blackhawks' best face-off guys out of the picture for five minutes. That's about the only kind of winning Kent can help with lately.

He points down the bench at Vichy and Chazzer. "Win every face-off."

"What'd I just say?" Elliot tells him.

Chazzer looks over at the penalty box where another Blackhawk is talking to Toews, and then he shrugs. "Guess we gotta. Gotta make up for having such a lousy fighter for a captain, bro. Gotta show some fuckin' pride here."

Kent flips him off beneath the railing, out of view of the cameras and most of the people in the seats behind them. Chazzer just snickers.

"Set the bar higher, Parse," Scrappy deadpans, punching him in the shoulder and jostling Kent on the bench. Elliot makes an exasperated noise as the glue smears.

*

They come back from Chicago for a couple home games before the next roadie. Kent spends a chunk of the flight going through the Vegas library's catalog, trying to find Ukrainian language learning stuff.

*

Their next game is against L.A., which works out great. Kent's been going after the Kings' captain so hard about the man's dropping stats for the last couple seasons that by now, he's in deep under Brown's skin.

A few minutes into first period, the Kings' captain wiffs a shot at the Aces' net. Chazzer grabs the puck and carries it into L.A.'s zone, before passing it to Kent. He shoots, but the Kings' goalie blocks it and then covers it up before Trojan can get off a rebound shot.

When they're skating up to the next face-off, Kent smacks the Kings' captain's stick with his own.

"On pace for another shitty season, Dusty."

Instead of slapping Kent's own blade back like he expected, Brown drops his stick and his gloves and rounds on Kent with a punch.

By the time the refs break up the scrum and drag Kent and Brown apart, Kent's lip is busted open again. He bites it open wider while pretending to be covering it so it won't drip on the ice, to make sure he draws that extra penalty.

It works. The Kings take a minor for roughing and an additional two minute penalty for the blood.

Kent gets his lip glued up again at the bench as the Aces' power play unit takes the ice. The trainer tells him to quit scowling as he works on it, Kent's making this harder than it should be.

After the game, Kent's second alt stops by his stall as he's undressing. "I keep meaning to ask, Parse. The hell is your deal with Browny?"
Kent looks over at his other alternate, Brownie, on reflex. Trojan clarifies: "Kings' Brown. Dustin."

"You don't stay captain puttin' up shit stats like he's been," Kent replies, undoing his pads. "Not with somebody like Kopitar comin' up behind ya."

Trojan unfastens his wrist guards, looking at him. "...Okay."

"That's why?" Mitts calls. "Two fuckin' years you been on him!"

"Two years he's been backslidin'," Kent replies, dumping the pads in his stall and sitting down to rip the tape off of his socks. "Everybody sees it comin'."

Chazzer whistles quietly a couple stalls over. Nearby, Vichy just shakes his head.

"It's his fault for lettin' me realize he's worried 'bout it," Kent says, as his shoulders tense. "Don't come onto my ice weak."

"Now there's a motto," Chazzer comments, peeling out of his undershirt. "Screw inspirational quotes, paint that shit in here."

Kent snorts.

*

The next morning, he comes into the clubhouse early to watch tape and finds that somebody's printed out DON'T COME ONTO OUR ICE WEAK. in big letters and taped it above the dressing room doorway. Kent's taking a peace-sign selfie beneath it when their goalie arrives.

"Fuck's sake," Boxy says, disbelieving.

"Right?" Kent grins.

"Who would bother." 

"Vichy," Kent says with certainty. "Nobody else'd waste time on that fancy curly apostrophe. Give him shit when he comes outta hiding."

Boxy shakes his head as he goes to his stall. Kent takes another selfie to replace the photo-bombed one.

That afternoon, Kent's heading for the weight room when the Aces' trainer calls him into his office.

"How you doin'?" Elliot asks, pointing at one of the chairs wedged between the door and his desk.

"I'm good," Kent says, sitting down.

"I'm good," Kent says, sitting down.

"It's not a fake 'How're you? I'm fine, how're you' question, Parse," Elliot reminds him. "How are you doing?"

Kent blows out a breath and slumps back in the chair. "...Alright, I guess," he answers. "I feel like normal. I just gotta start producing."

"Hrm," Elliot replies, which is kinda ominous. But the next thing he asks is, "You ever heard of a 'Freudian slip'?",
"Uh," Kent replies. "That's the...sex comment stuff? Like an innuendo?"

Elliot nods. "Can be," he says. "Or it can be when a guy who's having a rough start to the season starts viciously chirping another captain who's struggling too."

_Fucking mole_, Kent thinks, keeping his face straight. He's pretty sure he knows who the new spy for the coaches in the dressing room is, but he's avoided confirming it. It'll be harder to work with Chazzer if Kent knows for sure he can't talk around him.

He must not keep his face straight enough, because Elliot gives him a look.

"Parse. I'm behind the bench. Twice I've patched that up in three days," he says, pointing to Kent's cut lip. "If you're plannin' on smarting off to the whole conference, I'm gonna need more glue."

Kent shrugs jerkily. "I was just chirping," he says. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just went for easy targets."

Elliot pulls the corner of his mouth back doubtfully; but he doesn't push further. Instead, he opens a drawer and pulls out a stress ball before tossing it to Kent. "Here."

Kent catches it with a quirked eyebrow.

"When I finish what I called you in for, you're gonna want to punch me," Elliot says. "Squeeze that instead."

"Uh," Kent repeats.

"You know how the game's changing," Elliot starts. "Getting faster, getting younger, all that."

"Yeah," Kent agrees, as he thinks _Shit_ and _Already twenty-five._

Elliot nods. "It's comin', but not a lotta clubs are _really_ prepared. If you wanna win games, the way to do it is rolling out the vets instead of playing kids that're gonna make mistakes, right?"

"Yeah," Kent says noncommittally. The Aces' roster has gotten very clearly younger in the past couple years.

Meanwhile, Kent's ice time's shrunk. He's starting on the second line almost as often as he's playing on the first lately. His stats are still garbage.

He looks like just another former star aging into obscurity at this point. Fans are probably glad there's only two years left on his contract.

"I'm comin' at this wrong," Elliot says. He props his elbows on the desk, spreading his hands. "The short version is, I want you to shave down some weight."

Kent blinks, because that wasn't where he thought this was going. "...Okay."

"Soon as you arrived here we bulked you up, because--let's be real Parse, you'd've died out there."

Kent just lifts a shoulder in agreement, because he knows exactly how physical the Pacific can get. Even his current weight is really light; he always plays with a bruiser linemate for a reason.

Kent finally figures out that Elliot gave him the stress ball because he's telling Kent that now he has to bust his ass to trim off some of the weight he put on while he was busting his ass to get his upper body into condition. Which, okay, yeah. That sucks.
But it's better than any of the alternatives.

Like being handled so that he'll start getting used to the idea that he's going to be traded out soon, because he's getting too old to fit the organization's future.

"It's not gonna be a lot," Elliot tells him, as Kent relaxes a little deeper into the seat and starts absently tossing the ball between his hands. "We still gotta balance for what the league currently is. And I don't want you below 80, you got a record of taking injuries worse then."

Kent reflexively does the mental conversion from kilos to pounds, because even though the Aces have a weirdly high number of Americans on the team, most of the staff are Canadians. About 175 or 176?

He had great speed when he was younger, at 175. So--okay. The news still sucks, but once he's put the work in, he'll be closer to normal.

Maybe this'll help him stop struggling. Kent's ready to try anything at this point. "Okay."

"Good. I think this is gonna add a boost to your speed for the next few years," Elliot tells him. "You're gonna start slowing down regardless around thirty, but that's when your hockey sense'll take over. We'll start on phase three when you're closer to it."

Kent pauses in the middle of tossing the ball. "--Okay."

Talking about when he's thirty is. . . .

His contract's gonna be up before he's twenty-seven. The Aces would have to be thinking of re-signing him if they're planning that far out. "I mean, yeah. Gotcha."

Elliot gives him another long look. And then he shuts his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Swear to God," he mutters. "I'm gonna record one of these conversations and play it for George to prove this."

"Uh?" Kent says once more, at the abrupt reference to the GM.


Kent actively stops himself from raising an eyebrow again, and leans back to do so.

"Okay," Elliot says. "Between you and me only, George has--" and then he pauses for a few moments. "...Been spoken to by the league for informally talking--for seeming to have informally spoken to a player or two about contracts a little earlier than the rules technically allow."

"Ah," Kent says, because anything with that much hedging is good to be aware of but not something he wants to know. After everything he discovered during offseason, plausible deniability is more appealing than ever.

He's already gonna have to flat-out lie about anything when it comes to Vichy. Kent needs all the extra protection he can get.

"Yeah. So if he's tight-lipped 'round you about his long-term vision for the club, you should view it as excessive caution," Elliot explains. "Not anything worse. Got it?"

"Yeah. Uh, yeah, okay," Kent agrees. "I get it."
"Good.

"Actually, bear with me, Parse," Elliot adds. "You are an Art Ross trophy winner." He starts ticking off on his fingers. "First American to do that. Stanley Cup champion. You've got the third-longest point streak in league history. Youngest American to be named captain. Third youngest captain ever 'til Landeskog. Taken the team to the playoffs every year since gettin' here. Perpetually in the top of the point rankings. What am I missing?" he asks, and Kent's not sure if that's rhetorical or not. "--Obvious All-Star every year. We just plan you're gonna be playing that weekend now. Longest point streak for Americans ever." Elliot runs out of fingers and says, "I should just pull up your Wikipedia page and read it.

"You're barely twenty-five, Kent," the man tells him, dropping his hands. "Who in God's name are you comparing yourself to that you don't think this is elite, even for the NHL?"

Kent shrugs uncomfortably, fidgeting with the stress ball.

"Look, Parse," Elliot says. "They're never gonna start calling Crosby 'the greatest Canadian-born player in the world,' so you should just make your peace with bein' the greatest American one."

Kent coughs on a laugh and then starts cracking up despite himself. "Damn Ell, rude."

"It's important to be realistic," Elliot deadpans. Kent laughs more.

He gets control of himself soon after. Kent sinks back into his seat and starts tossing the ball between his hands again, still smiling faintly. "Okay. What'm I doing today?"

"Check in with Deuce for your new diet plan," Elliot tells him. "I gotta meet with Aaron. I'll see you in the workout room in thirty."

"Gotcha." Kent catches the ball a final time and starts to push out of his chair.

"I mean it, Parse," Elliot adds. Kent pauses and looks at him again.

"I can't speak officially for the GM. But everything I know about this club, I'd bet my house their plan for this era has you in it," Elliot says. "I'd bet my job. I'm doin' just that."

Kent hesitates, and then sits back down on the edge of the seat.

The door's still shut, so he makes himself say, "Yeah, but. I don't.... I mean, I make PR's job hard." Elliot snorts derisively.

"Remind me, Parse. Are you the guy that got deported after going to jail for beatin' his wife?" the man asks. "The dumbass who got caught here in his rival team's city with coke and X in his hotel? You the one currently being investigated on rape charges? You the one on this team who ODed?"

Kent whistles quietly.

"And that's just the last damn year," Elliot adds--which isn't true about Tobin's overdose, but Kent knows that's not the point. "I'm not saying you don't do dumb stuff sometimes. You were a little too on the radar this offseason. But you broke up with that woman, right?"

Kent makes a mental note to find Ivanovich as soon as he gets out of here and punch that traitor asshole in the mouth. Even if he's going to lose the fight immediately afterward. "She--that wasn't--"
"Parse," the trainer interrupts. "I get your bloodwork. You want me to show you what your liver levels looked like last offseason, compared to the usual? Because I called Andy and made him confirm they sent me the right file."

Kent grits his teeth and looks away.

"I'm not tryin' to bust your balls, Parse," Elliot tells him honestly. "But if someone's bad for you physically, they're bad for you mentally. Don't do that to yourself again, datin' someone awful while you're recovering. I don't care how good the sex was, it's not worth sabotaging yourself."

Kent almost snorts out loud at that, but he manages to stifle it in time. ". . . Okay."

"The mental part of recovery's just as important as the physical," Elliot reminds him. "You gotta put the work in on both."

Kent makes himself take a long breath.

"Yeah," he agrees. "I know. ...It was stupid. I'm not doin' it again."


Kent's jaw tightens again, because he knows that's an insinuation about his Juniors years, and Zimmermann.

But the trainer isn't trying to be an asshole. He just wants Kent to be in top form. That's the same thing Kent wants.

And Zimmermann can look after his own reputation. He didn't want Kent's help. "...Okay." He nods. "I will, Ell."

"You're part of the Aces' plan for the long-term," Elliot repeats. "I know the shit with Dan screwed up your trust in this club, but have I ever lied to you?"

Kent blinks. "I don't--I didn't have a problem with--"

"Parse."

Okay, yeah, Kent had a huge problem with the Aces' last head coach. He scratches the back of his neck, and decides to just dodge that part of the question. "Nah, you don't lie."

"So trust me," Elliot replies. "Everybody's on the same page now about where the club's going. You're a factor in the future. All right?"

Kent hesitates for a lot longer, and reminds himself that plausible deniability is in his best interest.

But if Vichy doesn't have info on what's going on up in the front office anymore, and if most of the older guys in the club've left or are disconnected from whatever's going on in the back end, then....

"On the same page, now?"

Elliot makes a face for several silent moments; and Kent guesses he overstepped.

But then the man blows out a breath. "One of the stakeholders felt the club was goin' overboard with some of the social outreach," Elliot says neutrally. "Like the You Can Play stuff."

"He had some conversations with the GMs and the rest've the owners, and decided to sell his
"stake," he continues. "The other owners did some restructuring for the new financials, or somethin' like that. They didn't go into a whole lotta detail at the staff meeting. It was mostly about the new guys and the five-year plan."

"...Got it," Kent says.

Elliot shrugs a shoulder. "World's changing. Game's gotta do the same to stay viable. Anyway. Go find Deuce," he repeats, and Kent takes the hint. "See you in thirty."

"See ya." Kent sets the stress ball on the man's desk, and leaves to go track down the Aces' conditioning coach.

Kent passes most of that info over to Vichy later, because it feels like he should.

The other man whistles quietly for a couple long seconds. And then he apparently remembers himself, and tells Kent to quit asking about stuff he's not supposed to know already. Kent shrugs, and then dodges Vichy's annoyed attempt to pop him in the shoulder.

"How're you doin'?" he adds.

Vichy purses his mouth. "This about Boar?"

"Noooooo," Kent drawls. "This's about the other fuckin' rookie you flipped out on."

Vichy gives him a middle finger. Kent ignores it and repeats, "You alright?"

He huffs. "Yeah. I'm fine. It was a dumb mistake, I won't do it again."

Kent gives him a disbelieving look.

"Go find a mirror, Parser," Vichy retorts, "because that face you're making? That's how everybody else feels every fuckin' time you say I'm good."

"So you're saying two wrongs make a right?" Kent replies.

"I'm saying fuck off, hypocrite," Vichy grumbles. "If he's too fuckin' dumb to realize his issues are the same reason Mom and Dad left, fine. It's not my goddamn problem."

"Is this how I sound when I'm being a dumbass?" Kent asks, eyebrow raised. "'Cause shit. I gotta look at my life and my choices."

Vichy snorts out a laugh. "Dick."

He doesn't mention Elliot's comment about You Can Play to Vichy. Kent's not sure how to read that one.

The obvious part is that one of the Las Vegas Hockey Club owners decided to cut his losses and sell his stake in the organization before Kent was potentially outed and ended up tanking the club's finances. He got that part.

But the rest of it, he's not so sure about.

That the Aces' trainer has figured out he's gay, but doesn't care?
Okay, maybe. Elliot's been with the club for years, and at this point Kent figures most of the long-term staff have their suspicions. Just like some of the long-term players, given Vichy's comment about a bet a couple months ago. So--whatever. As long as Kent doesn't make a big deal about it, it's not affecting anyone's jobs.

But that the club's decided that Kent being gay is a PR risk they're willing to take on?

That feels like wishful thinking.

Anyway. He and Vichy haven't talked about that side of Kent since that night back in offseason; and Kent prefers to keep it that way. So he doesn't mention that it.

He's got enough on his plate right now.

*

The next morning, Kent checks in with the trainer on whether he can start following the media again.

Elliot gives him a long look, and then says, "Keep holdin' off."

Their first game against Providence is in a month.

Even obeying Elliot's restriction, Kent knows that the Falconers have been climbing up the Atlantic division's rankings at a fast pace. He finally turned off all his notifications on the NHL app, because Zimmermann's been lighting it up out of the gate and the league's news department is paying attention.

Kent already knew that all of that was going to happen. He doesn't need to hear how Zimmermann's doing it for someone else's team.

He tells the trainer "Okay" and goes to stretch.

*

One morning after another Aces' loss, Kent's watching tape of last night's game with the video coach.

"You're still flinching," Graves tells him, pointing at the spot on the screen where Kent's fumbling with the puck as he twists away from the boards. In another second, he's going to turn it over to the Ducks' player coming in from the right.

Kent exhales slowly through his teeth. "I'm not trying to," he says.

The coaches have been on him about it for weeks: for playing scared, avoiding the boards on his left side, getting too fancy with the puck in an effort to avoid hits. Both Graves and the assistant coach, Kurlansky, have told Kent that he's clearly playing like he's afraid of injuring his arm again. Elliot's told him that there's no physical conditioning for that, but the club's vetted a psychologist he could work with.

Kent's managed to get out of committing to the shrink so far, but he's still been working hard to get over the bad playing. It's a flaw he needs to fix, before the Aces get any deeper into the season.

And it pisses Kent off that his brain's subconsciously fucking him up. He's not trying to do any of this.
He really didn't think he was still flinching. But watching the tape, there's no missing it.

"You've gotten better," Graves says. "You addressed a lot of it. But," he gestures to the screen, where Kent's now chasing after the Ducks player who's swiped the puck from him and started carrying it toward the Aces' goal.


"There anywhere else?" he adds.

Graves checks his notes. "One more spot. Third period." He starts dragging the video forward.

Kent's phone buzzes with a text. He checks it while the coach is finding the right spot, and sees that Showy's sent a group text to several guys on the Aces: *i regret 2 inform u zimmermann is not th asshole we hoped & i feel kinda bad bout punchin him n th face last night*

*but apparently he's friends w/ tater so have fun w/ that*

"Of course he is," Kent mutters at his phone. He *would* be.

Showy adds, *Also parse how th fuk do u chirp so much & still think up plays, that shit is hard*

*Only if you're bad at both* Kent replies.

Showy sends a photo of himself rolling his eyes, because apparently he's still too good for emojis.

*How much is "kinda bad"?* Vichy asks.

*7%*

*That's it?*

*pal i was there 4 boston '14* Showy answers. *it wouldn't even b 7 if that fuker weren't classy*

Kent's in the middle of telling Showy and Vichy to quit blowing up his phone with this crap when down the hall Mitts wails, *"Fuck me, Mashkov?!"

Kent exhales through his teeth and hits send.

Graves has the video paused. He looks away from the windows onto the hallway, back at Kent.

Kent puts on his best charming smile, and picks up his cup as he asks hopefully, "Coffee break?"

"You are awful at this," Graves replies with a straight face. He pushes over his thermos. "Bring me one too."

"Will do."

*Nice work*, Kent thinks grudgingly at Showy, as he leaves to deal with this.

"Stop falling for his psych outs," Kent orders as he turns the corner to the equipment area.

"YOU," Mitts says as soon as he sees him. "This is your fault!"

"How is that--" and then Mitts tackles him.

His former linemate has the advantage of surprise, but Kent has the advantage of being tired of
getting his ass handed to him lately. And of being the only one taking this seriously.

Unfortunately, Mitts also has the advantage of size and weight. Kent manages to get the man pinned to the floor with an arm behind his back; but the hold's flaw is obvious to the guys who've come over to watch and hoot at Mitts for losing.

"You're stuck," Scrappy says from where he's leaning against the equipment shelves, arms folded.

"Maybe," Kent grunts.

Scrappy's grin widens. "Gonna have to let go eventually. You're screwed."

"You dunno that."

"That you're screwed? Or you have to let go?"

"Both."

Scrappy snorts.

"What is happenin'!?" Mitts cackles, trying to buck Kent off again. Kent shifts to stabilize his position.

Boxy shoulders past one of the guys and heads down the row of shelves toward his spare skates. "You know he's trained by a marine."

"What?!"

"Box," Kent says tersely.

"What the hell!!" Mitts says in disbelief. "How'd you not tell me this?"

"I was waiting for the right time," Boxy replies, leaning back out of the shelves to smirk at Mitts. "This looked like it."

"What the fuck is this bizzaro world!" Mitts manages, laughing harder. "What the fuuuuck, holy shit. Someone help."

"Seriously?" Kent demands, as a couple guys move to grab him.

"He actually asked," Chazzer replies with a smartass grin, filming everything on his phone as Scrappy and Trojan haul Kent off of Mitts.

"You all suck," Kent retorts, trying to shrug loose. Mitts rolls onto his side on the floor, still cackling.

"What the hell," the equipment manager says behind everyone.

"No idea what's going on, I just got here," Boxy replies innocently, and three different guys call bullshit on him immediately. Kent says it in French with the thickest New York accent he can manage, just to make their Quebecois goalie give him that disgusted face.

Nick tells everybody who isn't there for a legitimate equipment reason to scram.

Kent takes off, but not fast enough. A minute later, he's pincered in the kitchen by a couple of the guys.
"So, a marine," Chazzer says.

Kent finishes pouring coffee into his cup. "My cousin gave me some fighting lessons."

"Your cousin the marine!" Mitts calls from out in the hall.

Kent sighs dramatically as he snaps on the cup's lid.

"You know, bro," Chazzer deadpans, "when we said you were a shit fighter, we didn't mean you had to go this far."

"It was a while back," Kent replies, picking up the refilled thermos before starting out of the kitchen. "After I lost that fight to Tommy."

"Wait," Scrappy says. "The--three years ago?" He braces a hand against the doorframe, blocking the exit. "Three years ago you trained with a marine?"

"I didn't train with a--"

"How are you still so shit at fighting?" Scrappy demands. "How."

"Embarrassment to the armed forces here, Parse," Chazzer grins.

Kent lifts his shoulders in exasperation. "He wouldn't let me rent a rink to practice. You need a physics lesson on the difference between wearing shoes on a floor and wearing knives on ice?"

"Oh my God in Heaven you're serious," Chazzer says, breaking into snickers.

Out in the hallway, Mitts starts laughing even harder, clutching the arm guards he's carrying against his stomach as he keeps walking toward the dressing room. Trojan grabs the back of Mitts' collar, steering him away from the wall. Tommy keeps walking past the two of them, shaking his head like he doesn't know what to do with this entire dumbass team.

Scrappy drops his arm and gives Kent a long look that's half puzzled, half "you hopeless idiot."


Kent drops out from under it. "Beat it guys, I've got video."

"Just giving us more time to think up chirps!" Chazzer calls after him.

"I know," Kent replies dryly.

He heads to the video room and pushes the door shut behind him with a foot. Outside, Chazzer and Scrappy walk past, still loudly talking shit.

Kent hands Graves his thermos before sitting back down at the monitor. He silences his phone before nodding to the coach that he's focused again.

*

Dropping a few pounds off his weight sucks just as much as Kent expected. It changes up his workout regime, again. And the new diet plan leaves him feeling like he's starving after every game.
Vichy gives him shit for scarfing energy bars in the showers before postgame interviews, until Kent finally socks him in the side for it. That gets him head-locked and chucked soaking wet onto his ass into the dressing room, giving the rest of the guys new chirping material for a week.

But he's been shaving a few fractions of a second off his skating time. So it's all worth it.

Kent starts factoring the change into his plays, reshuffling the way he thinks out on the ice.

He also starts actively driving into guys when they try to force him into the boards on his left, because he can't subconsciously flinch if he's plowing through someone else.

At 175 pounds, that works about as well as you'd think.

Kent manages to fake out and deke a couple guys; but most of the time he just gets knocked back and has to pass to keep from turning over the puck. Coach Kurlansky tells him dryly that attempting suicide hits wasn't the way they wanted Kent to get over that hump, and to for the love of God stop it already.

Chazzer pulls his groin during a practice and has to go on the injured roster. The head coach reunites Kent with Vichy and Mitts' line for their next game.

Kent cools it with the hits. And then the next game, at last, he finally snaps his goal drought.

Coach Moss keeps their line together. Kent starts successfully making more assists, finally starting to tally some decent points again.

*  

The night before a game in Calgary, Moss asks Kent to drop by his room after they're checked in. Kent does, stifling a yawn as he knocks.

Moss lets him in and tells him to take a seat. The table has a laptop and whiteboards and scouting report sheets scattered over it; Kent pulls a chair away carefully to avoid jostling anything, in case the haphazardness is in some kind of order to the man. "What's up?"

"I know it's late," Moss replies, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I kept meaning to do this earlier, but it didn't seem like--" He breaks off on a yawn.

"Okay," Kent says, shifting in the chair.

He hasn't talked with the coach much during the last couple months. Kent wasn't avoiding him or anything; it was just....

He understands why his average ice time dropped. He wasn't playing well enough to earn more minutes. Coach Moss had other players who were performing better, and they deserved more time over him. Kent gets it.

And he knows it could've been worse. He was still pulling a lot of minutes, even before he broke out of his slump. Moss still trusted him enough to keep him on the power play and the penalty kill. Kent was given plenty of ice time to prove himself; he just failed to do anything with it, for months. That was on him.

It was still frustrating, though.

Kent wasn't avoiding the man. He was just trying to be careful, to keep his mouth shut while he
was aggravated so he didn't wind up wrecking things with yet another coach.

Moss lets out a long, slow breath, and pinches the bridge of his nose hard before dropping his hand. "All right.

"In the time I've known you, you've always seemed to prefer being told the truth, even if it's ugly, than feeling lied to, even by omission," he says. "Is that right?"

It takes Kent a couple seconds to work out that sentence. He stifles another yawn. "I guess? Yeah."

"Should've done this sooner," Moss mutters, before pulling off his glasses and rubbing his face.

"All right," he repeats, sliding them back on and adjusting the earpieces. "First. George didn't feel this was necessary information. But in case it comes up in an interview, I thought you'd rather be prepared than feel like this was kept from you." Moss looks at him straight. "I recognize this puts you in an untenable position. If you'd rather leave, I understand."

"Uh," Kent says.

So...the head coach called him in to tell Kent he wants to tell him something that the GM doesn't think he needs to know?

Kent guesses "untenable" means something like "really fucking awkward," because that's what this situation is.

Moss keeps sitting on the edge of the bed, apparently waiting for a real answer.

Okay, then. Kent shoves down his cowlick absently, trying to think.

On the obvious hand, the GM controls his contract. Doing something Impey doesn't want Kent to do is pretty stupid.

...But Moss isn't the kind of person to do something like this, unless he genuinely thinks it's necessary. The front office and the coaches do a pretty good job of presenting a unified front to the team. This is really, really unusual.

The Aces' trainer told Kent that if Impey doesn't talk about stuff to him, it's probably an excess of caution. So. Maybe Impey thinking that Kent didn't need to know whatever this is about is just more of that?

And yeah, if something's as big a deal as whatever this apparently is, and it's got a risk of coming up in an interview, then of course Kent doesn't want to be blindsided by it. He made enough trouble for himself during offseason. Of course he wants advance warning.

"Uh," Kent repeats, squashing his cowlick again. "I mean, if you think I should know, there's a good reason for it, yeah?"

"I feel so," Moss replies. Hedging.

Screw it. Kent's not interested in messing up another interview again, like when that dick reporter Yerby tried to pull a gotcha on him about You Can Play. If he needs to know, then he just needs to know. "Okay. Tell me."

The coach says, "Did you know that Jack Zimmermann was never offered a contract by the Aces?"

"... No," Kent answers, after several long, silent heartbeats. "I didn't."
Moss doesn't look surprised. He nods once.

"It was a business decision," he says. "The scouting reports were impressive, but the club--we. We felt the potential impact on the team would be too negative to be worth the cost of what his contract'd have to be."

Moss folds his hands between his knees, still watching Kent. "The decision was already made before you broke curfew to go to his party. But that was confirmation that this was the right choice."

Kent's toes are curled tight in his shoes. He has to consciously flex his hands to unclench them.

He folds them together a second later, because the last thing he needs right now is to look angry or threatening. He's already in even more trouble than he ever thought. "Okay."

Of course he's in trouble. Of course the GM wasn't going to forget about that party. Kent's gonna have to keep putting up record stats for years, to make up for all his fuck ups.

And he hasn't been doing that so far this season.

And now he's not just the PR risk of a gay guy. Now he's also the reason the Aces had to pass on signing an elite player, because Kent couldn't be trusted to work with him. *Fuck.*

"Kent," Coach Moss says quieter; and Kent makes himself swallow hard and focus.

"Sometimes two people can be bad for each other, without being bad people themselves," Moss tells him. "Or they change, and they're not who they used to be when they were friends."

Kent swallows again, and then actively forces himself to try and uncurl his toes and just. Get through this.

"If no one ever changed, you'd still be like that impression you made in Juniors: talented, argumentative with coaches, too much negative behavior off the ice," Moss says, and Kent hunches deeper into his seat. "But that's not the man I've worked with these past years."

Kent looks up from the carpet.

"The man I've worked with, I'd say his most negative trait is too much focus on work and not enough on your home life," Moss tells him. "Which isn't something I expected to say in competitive hockey, but here we are."

Kent forces a chuckle, because that's clearly an attempt to lighten the situation. But he can tell it doesn't sound real.

"I mean it," Moss says. "I know you've been putting a lot of pressure on yourself this season, and--have you been to that therapist Ell was talking about yet?"

Kent shifts in the chair. "Uh. Not yet. ...We're working out an appointment time."

The excuse sounds even lamer out loud. Moss gives him a long look.

"There's some things you're doing lately that I don't like," the coach tells him. "You've been playing a lot more like a rat lately. You're better than that. Your play should be better than that."

"But it wasn't," Kent replies; and when Moss's expression shifts slightly, he realizes he said that out loud instead of just in his head. "Shit. I mean--"
"I know you've been frustrated," Moss interrupts. "Slumps are a part of life, Kent. I understand this was a long, brutal one. And the timing couldn't've been worse. I know you worked hard to get out of it. But you have to bring that same self-control out onto the ice."

Kent swallows again, but then makes himself nod.

The man's not wrong. Kent knows what the Aces pay him for. "Yes, sir. I will. I'll start."

"Good," Moss tells him. "You're better than that, Kent."

Kent thinks of all the shit he tore into Zimmermann with before he left that bad-choice party at Samwell: "You think you're too fucked up to care about? That you're not good enough?" and "You're scared everyone else is going to find out you're worthless, right?" and "I'm sure that'll make your dad proud" because he knew that that was the one thing that would definitely fuck up Zimmermann just as bad as Kent felt himself.

Kent clenches his jaw tight to keep himself from saying, *No I'm not.*

"Chirping is one thing," Moss tells him; and then he pauses, watching as Kent struggles to stop gritting his teeth and make his face go neutral again.

"...If you've done things in the past that you aren't proud of, you can still be better than them," the coach says after a moment. "You can always become better than your past."

Kent nods, because that's the expected response.

"I don't know which of these to say first," Moss mutters almost inaudibly. He stifles another yawn.

"All right."

"I talked with Zimmermann's college coach before, and Hall was proud of his work. I'm glad for him, too," Moss says; and Kent looks up again.

"You always hear about the kids who screw up," the former NCAA coach tells him. "It gets to the point if anyone wants to give a kid a second chance, people seem to want it to go wrong. And sometimes that's fair," he acknowledges, looking to the side for a few moments like he's remembering something. "Sometimes you have to decide whether an action was a misunderstanding, or an act of genuinely regretted stupidity. Or if it was too harmful for you to risk exposing the rest of the kids you're responsible for to that person.

"But you don't hear about the successful second chances," Moss continues, looking back at Kent. "Because those kids took advantage of them, and turned themselves around. A teenage boy who made bad choices kicked his drug and alcohol habit, and worked to get back into the career he wanted. Another teenage boy left behind his bad reputation and proved himself a responsible, hard worker who deserves the C on his jersey."

Kent can't handle meeting Moss's eyes any longer. He looks away.

"Nobody should be defined by their past forever," Moss tells him, and Kent can't read anything but sincerity in his voice. "I'm glad that Zimmermann took his second chance and turned his life around. The same way I'm proud of the man you've worked to become since coming to Vegas. That's why I'm telling you that you are better than your behavior, Kent, lately on the ice or back in your past. I know you are, because I know you want to be. Otherwise, hearing that it's disappointing wouldn't mean anything. You wouldn't care."

Moss falls silent again after that, and readjusts his glasses once more. Kent rubs a hand over his
mouth and tries to figure out what to say.

After a long moment, Moss drops his hand and looks at Kent steadily.

"Having said all that, when George and Chris asked my thoughts, I recommended not offering Zimmermann a contract," he continues.

Moss folds his hands back between his knees. "Your behavior with that party did not match the Kent Parson I know. And if I made a choice that's potentially that harmful to one of my players just because I was thinking about winning, that would be a moral failing by me. As a coach, and a human being.

"I'm glad that Jack turned his life around," Moss tells him. "We need more stories of guys who did good with their second chances. I'm proud of the work you've done since coming here. I think it's for the best, for both of you, that you're on different teams."

Kent doesn't reply. Moss considers him for another long moment.

"Sometimes people can be bad for each other. Even if they've changed," he says, even kinder than before. "It can be very hard to move on from a past that was so important to you, especially in such a small world as ours."

Kent nods once, jerkily. He still doesn't trust himself to talk.

". . . It's late," the man tells him. "You should head off and get some sleep."

"Yeah," Kent agrees with another nod. "--Thanks. I. Just. Thanks, coach."

Moss leans forward and squeezes his shoulder.

"I know it's hard," he says honestly. "It's always hard when friends drift apart. And I'm sure everything around this made it even harder. But hard work never stopped you before, Kent."

Kent tries to half-smile in response; but it feels wrong and fake. So he wipes a wrist over his mouth again and just nods instead.

Moss squeezes his shoulder again. "It gets better," he says, letting go. "Sometimes later instead of sooner. But it does. One of the good things about getting old, you learn that's not actually bullshit," he adds with a half-smile.

Kent snorts a low laugh at that, and nods once more. "Okay."

He starts to lean out of his chair, looking at Moss again. The man nods. "Head on out. Get some sleep."

"Okay." He pushes up from the chair. "See you at breakfast."

"See you then."

Kent shuts the door quietly behind him and starts toward his room.

"Some clubs I haven't heard anything from," Jack told him at the party, bitterly. More bitterly than Kent understood.

Until now.
He almost punches the wall. Kent catches himself in time before he makes a scene in public, and shoves his fists deep into his suit pockets as he stalks down the hall.

*

After Thanksgiving, the Aces head east for a long road trip, going from Boston to Providence and then to New York City and Newark before closing out in Philadelphia.

Kent knows he should be concentrating on New York. Playing back-to-back games in the middle of the roadie means they're gonna be tired when they face the Islanders on the second night. And then they've only got a one day break afterward before they're up against New Jersey.

That's gonna be the crunch point of the trip. He needs to be prepared for it. And he needs to plan a good team dinner with his alternate captains for the break in Newark, to help carry the guys' spirits through the last chunk of the roadie.

Plus, he's got a couple family members that live downstate who usually ask for tickets to New York City games. Kent wants to look good in front of them, too.

But it's hard to focus when every interview in the last week wants to ask about the Falconers, and Zimmermann.

*

They lose Mitts halfway through the Boston game when he sprains his wrist breaking up a shoving match between Kent and another Bruins player. Kent was chirping Marchand hard because the man's an easy way to get Boston to take a penalty or two; but after Mitts goes down the hall to get his wrist wrapped, Coach Moss tells Kent to stop the trash talk and focus on playing. Kent does.

Catsby gets a goal late in the third period, which is cool for him. Most of his family and neighbors from Boston came to the game, and it's always great to score like that.

But the Aces lose. And now Kent's down a linemate. The Falcs game is in two days.

He stays in the showers until postgame wraps up. He knows somebody'll probably comment on it--Kent doesn't usually take the coward's way out of interviews, unless the front office explicitly tells him to skip one--but he doesn't care.

He's sick of talking about Zimmermann.

He was supposed to be answering these questions when he was a rookie. When their new teams played their first game against each other, after they were both drafted. When he and Jack were supposed to test each other out now that they'd gotten sharper with professional NHL experience, so they could find out how much better they'd become.

Kent always wanted to be the first pick of the draft, sure. He wanted that recognition of his skill, of his potential. But going second wouldn't've been the end of the world. The idea of being second pick was never as bad as Zimmermann acted like it was. Kent's the first ever member of his family to play major league professional hockey--if he was first or second pick, who fucking cared in the end? It was still the top.

The idea of going second was never worth overdosing on the morning of the draft.

Kent curls his hands into fists.
And then he leans forward and rests his forehead against the shower wall, and tries doing those stupid de-stressing breathing exercises of Chazzer's.

The story with Zimmermann never happened. Instead, Kent spent a brief part of his rookie year talking about facing off against the Isles' Tavares, who ended up being second pick. But that wasn't the story everyone wanted: Kent and Tavares were in different juniors leagues, and their teams never even faced each other in any Memorial Cup games. Nobody was interested in that story; they'd wanted a "best friends turned rivals" one.

They're still trying to write it now, six-plus years later. Even though that story doesn't exist.

The story where he and Zimmermann eventually became free agents and signed to the same team won't happen.

None of their stories that were supposed to happen ever will.

One of the guys comes back to let him know that the media's gone. Kent mechanically tells him thanks and shuts the water off.

* 

The next morning, the new guy replacing Mitts drives straight to the arena for practice after landing at the airport. Coach Moss moves Trojan into Mitts' place on Kent and Vichy's line.

The assistant coach holds Trojan and Vichy back after practice, running them through passing drills so they develop more familiarity as lineys. Kent's used to working with them both, so Coach Kurlansky soon dismisses him from the drills. Kent heads to the other side of the rink to work on his shots.

Most of the goals scored this week on Providence's netminder succeeded in the upper corner on Snow's glove side--maybe because of a lingering injury, or just ordinary soreness. Kent concentrates on making the tightest possible shots into that spot, until Kurlansky calls his name loud enough that Kent finally registers it.

The man tells him to head back to the hotel. Kent goes.

* 

His new line spends morning skate together in Providence. Kent eventually leaves to join the penalty kill drills, while Vichy and Trojan hang back on the far side of the rink to practice more passes.

They go through the rest of the day's reviews and meetings and interviews. Kent doesn't get much sleep during his afternoon nap, even though he knows he needs to.

And then it's evening, and time for the game against the Falcs.

* 

Providence is doing some pregame community event tonight. They wanted to dress their players in their white away jerseys for it, so they worked things out with Vegas to bring the Aces' home ones on the roadie and do a reversal.

It's weird to see his home jersey hanging in someone else's locker room, and to wear it out on someone else's ice; but Kent puts it out of his head. Some of the guys really don't like it, but Kent
tells them to quit being superstitious and focus.

"'Don't be superstitious,'" one of the sophomores retorts. "Parse, you understand you play hockey?"

"Focus," Kent repeats, taping his socks.

Catsby starts to reply; but Scrappy leans around the guy between them and bops his shoulder.

"He's concentrating," he says. "Save it for after the game, when he'll hear it."

He forgets to engage with the scattered Aces fans watching them warm up, until his first alt breaks by him while Kent's stretching on the ice. Brownie drops to a knee to start stretching himself, and says, "If I had a dollar for every double entendre sign you get."

"It a good one?"

Brownie nods at the glass further down. "I like the way you handle your stick, Parse," he quotes.

Kent looks over, finds the woman holding the glittery sign, and then snickers like he's supposed to. "Nice."

He tosses a puck to that area later before skating off the ice, because what the hell, why not.

When the game starts, Falcs' 33 says something in a disapproving tone as he and Kent pass each other to take their places at center ice.

Kent doesn't waste effort listening or replying. He assumes it's 33's typical "Do a clean game tonight, eh?" comment that he usually says to Kent if their lines open against each other.

At the face-off dot, Vichy says something in icy French to Zimmermann. Zimmermann doesn't blink.

Vichy apparently takes that as a challenge, because from that point on he starts escalating way above his normal level. He hits abnormally hard against the Falcs, and keeps on hassling both Zimmermann and 33 in French.

Kent doesn't bother mentally translating any of it. But he assumes the chirps're vicious: when play's stopped at one point around the Aces' net, their Quebecois goalie breaks off in the middle of getting a drink to whistle lowly at one of Vichy's comments at Zimmermann.

Vichy also smarts off in Russian enough to Falcs' 7 that halfway through the first period the refs throw them both in the box for roughing.

When Vichy returns to the bench afterward, Coach Moss tells him to shut up and stop targeting Zimmermann and Mashkov.

It saves Kent from having to do the same thing. Vichy's fucking up their line, distracting himself with all his yapping.

In second period, Kent and Brownie assist Vichy on his goal. The Aces pull ahead 2-1.

Vichy just raises his stick in the air afterward, staring down the Falcs' goalie. It's the dickish celly
he usually only does when he's pissed off about Scrappy taking too many uncalled illegal hits during a game.

During a commercial break, Kent warns their own goalie that the Falcs are targeting him on his stick side and he needs to be less shaky.

Boxy says that he knows, he's fucking there, and tells Kent to get the hell out of his crease and go hydrate.

Kent heads back to the bench and checks in with Scrappy. He didn't see the man take any bad hits tonight; but while Vichy's dropped the chirping, he's still being weirdly hard with his hits. He's obviously pissed at something.

Scrappy says he's fine and tosses him a bottle before telling him to fuck off, Kent creeps him out like this.

The first part's all that matters. Kent downs some gatorade before starting to climb over the railing.

He immediately re-registers the bruise on his ribs from the Boston game, and goes through the gate instead.

In third period, Zimmermann ties the game.

No, Kent thinks, watching the Jumbotron while the Falconers are celebrating. He studies the replay--the deke, his bad prediction, his inability to recover and catch up before Zimmermann got to the net--trying to pinpoint how he was faked out bad enough that he let that happen.

This isn't going to overtime. He's not letting Providence gain the point an overtime loss is worth and go up even higher in the rankings.

He's not letting the Aces take a second-place single point because Kent fucked up a play. They're winning this in regulation and taking everything.

Brownie breaks near him. "Deked your left."

"Yeah," Kent says. It's obvious in the replay: Kent fell for Zimmermann's fake to his right, moved to put pressure on him there so Zimmermann couldn't keep tearing forward up the center, and consequently opened space on his left that Zimmermann went through. After that, Zimmermann was free to break for their goal because the Aces' defense weren't there. "Quit getting clogged in their center."

Brownie makes a frustrated noise. "There's only a couple minutes left, we'll hold 'em back. When it's over--"

"No OT," Kent interrupts as Trojan skates up.

"Jesus," Brownie mutters, as Vichy joins them.

"If we keep crashin' their net, Snow can't be everywhere," Trojan says pragmatically.

"Don't--" Vichy starts.

"Yeah," Kent agrees. "Twenty-four's weaker on upper glove. Focus there."
"What?" Trojan replies.

"Fuck," Vichy says wearily. "Snow. Go after Snow top-side glove-side. Parser, shut up before you're caught on mic like this."

The Jumbotron switches from video replay to a fan engagement spot. Kent drops his gaze.

The linesman at the center circle calls the four of them over for the face-off. The Aces' sophomore defenseman is the only one currently there; the rest of the Falcs are in place.

"C'mon," Kent says to the rest of the guys, as he skates over to join Lean.

Vichy wins the face-off and gets the puck out to Brownie. Brownie banks it off the glass, sending it sailing into the Falconers' zone. Kent gets away from the Falc on him and goes for it.

He gets it on his stick before he's too far into the corner. There's an opening to the net, if he can get past Falcs' 1 coming at him.

The coaches told him to quit the suicidal hits, but everything else will take too long. If he tries to go around he'll get pinned into the corner and lose the good shot at the net.

Kent drives in hard against 1 when he comes up on Kent's left.

1 has to take a half-second to right his balance. Kent tears past him for the goal.

24's ready for him. His footwork's excellent. Has to be top-shelf. 24'll have a glove there, Kent lost too much time getting around 1. 24's prepared, he knows Kent's been shooting upward all night.

Kent holds the puck longer than normal, until there's no way to break his momentum before hitting the net.

24 realizes what he's doing and braces himself for the impact--splitting his attention. Kent snaps off his shot. Someone behind him tries to grab his jersey.

Kent throws his feet out to the side to keep his skate blades away from the goalie. The puck pings off the corner and disappears behind 24. Kent smashes his leg into the pole and then his head into 24, hard.

For few moments, the dizzy ache in his temple is worse than the pain in his thigh.

Someone else falls over him. People are yelling. Scrappy's out here? More yelling. 24 struggles off of him, and punches Kent in the side as he goes. Kent barely feels it; shit, but his leg hurts. His head's clearing.

And then somebody hauls Kent up off the ice, swearing in Russian.

After the clock's reset, Coach Moss finishes their line change, calling Kent and Trojan back to the bench and sending the rest of Scrappy's line out for the face-off.

Vichy's already on the bench. He calls Kent an idiot as Kent scoots into a seat next to him, but then he thumps him on the back. Kent cleans his visor.

"Stop smirking before they kill you," Vichy adds.

Kent drags an arm against his mouth and puts his helmet back on.
"Fuuuuuuck," Trojan says in exhaustion. He pulls a water bottle out of the holders and takes a slug of it. "Cunts."

Kent punches him in the leg. "No."

"Fuck is your autopilot," Vichy grumbles. Out on the ice, the linesman pauses to break up Scrappy and Falcs' 19's elbowing match before turning back to the dot.

The official drops the puck. Kent tunes out his lineys and focuses on what's left of the game.

"Told you he was targetin' your blocker," Kent says to Boxy when he reaches him in the congratulatory line. Zimmermann scored there after Kent warned their goalie.

"I will kill you on this ice and they will cheer," Boxy growls at him. "Fuck off and reset, Parse."

"Great game," Kent says sincerely, because Boxy stopped twenty-seven shots by a good team. He taps their goalie's mask before turning aside; Boxy smacks him on the ass with his stick.

Mitts is cackling wheezily in the hall to the dressing room, which is weird. Kent thought he was was up in the press box with the other guys who weren't playing.

Mitts points at him with his good hand and says, "Did you see your face!"

"How could I see my--did you book it down here to laugh at me," Kent replies. Halfway through saying it, he realizes that yeah, of course that's what Mitts did.

Mitts braces his arm against his stomach, trying to talk through his laughter. "They had it on camera. When Mashkov. Like he scruffed a kitten!"

"Piss off," Kent grins, because it doesn't matter whatever Mashkov said to him. It was a good goal. The Aces won tonight. They won.

"Kitten," Mitts repeats, before collapsing against the wall, cackling.

Kent rolls his eyes and headlocks him. He starts hauling Mitts down the hall, careful to avoid the man's injured wrist; Mitts elbows him in the side, still laughing.

"Why," a guy says behind them. Somebody else yells, "Move your asses, dipshits!"

"It was so great!" Mitts manages. "Your face!"

"Kill me," Vichy groans behind them. Kent glances over his shoulder and sees the man staggering next to Scrappy. "Fuuuuuuuck."


"Fuck you, Jeff," Vichy scowls. Behind him, Trojan snorts.

"Can't top being scruffed!" Mitts says gleefully.

Scrappy nods as he pulls off his helmet. "That was fuckin' pathetic. Way to embarrass Vegas. Both you fuckers."
"Fuck you, Jeff."

"You're all jackasses," Kent says, still smiling as he shoves Mitts at the dressing room's open door. "Siddown 'fore you collapse."

"Make way for Captain Kitten!" Mitts yells into the room as he goes in. Kent makes a face and says, "That's the best you got?"

Everybody's stripping off their gear when the Aces' trainer comes into the dressing room and pauses the phone that's blasting their victory song. "Quiet room, Parse."

Kent blinks. "Why?"

"You were at the bottom of a dog pile without a helmet," Elliot replies, giving him a flat look. "Why do you think? You're doing the protocol."

Sure, he got banged around on the last goal, but not that much. "I don't need to, I'm good--"

Kent remembers what his former alternate captain, Showy, told him during offseason: how Kent needed to start setting the right example in the dressing room.

He'd be telling anybody else who lost his helmet literally crashing the net and then had a bunch of guys fall over him to quit arguing with the trainer and go get checked for a concussion. So--yeah, alright. Fine. Whatever.

Kent pulls off his remaining skate and stands up. "Okay."

Elliot looks surprised.

And then he shakes his head as Kent starts across the room. "Most guys don't make 'you're gonna have to kill me to stop me' a career motto, Parson."

"That's why they lose."

Elliot pinches the bridge of his nose.

"You are why I ask for a team psychologist every year," he mutters. "Quiet room, Parse. Now."

Kent raises his hands in the air as he heads out the door. "I'm goin'."

"And don't be a smartass," Elliot orders. Kent drops his arms.

He passes the protocol.

He's still sitting in the chair when the head coach comes into the room and says he wants to talk to Kent. Alone.

"I know it was a dick move," Kent says as soon as the doctor leaves. Coach Moss shuts the door behind the man. "But I wanted to win."

Moss folds his arms. "Did you want to win? Or did you want to not lose?"

Kent pauses, because this feels like a trap. "...What's the difference?"
"Winning' is wanting to help the team succeed and get two points," Moss tells him. "Not losing' is making selfish and unsportsmanlike decisions on the ice."

Kent tightens his jaw and looks away.

"I asked a question, Parson. I expect an answer. Think hard about it," Moss says. "Which one was it?"

Kent shuts his eyes and lets out a long breath, and then shoves his still-damp hair away from his face. ". . . I didn't wanna lose."

"Mm," the coach says.

"I want you to understand things from my position, Kent," Moss continues. "The behavior of my players directly reflects how I run my bench. If the captain of my team acts like a rat, the implication's that I'm encouraging that behavior. And that's not the legacy of the Las Vegas Aces I want.

"You are better than that crap," Moss says flatly. "The team is better than that. The men've worked hard these last years to make it clear the Aces win because of skill and work ethic, not by pulling dirty shit. Behavior like tonight directly undercuts that effort. You know damn well that people'll latch on to any misstep and claim that nothing's ever changed."

"Yes, sir," Kent says, shifting in his seat and folding his hands together. "I wasn't--I wasn't tryin' to do that."

The coach studies him for another moment.

And then Moss drags a chair closer and sits down. Kent makes himself look over at him again.

"Some of this is on me," Moss says. "I should've cut this off a lot sooner. You understand, if any of the other men played the way you have the last couple months, I would've scratched them from a game for misconduct by now."

Kent looks back down at the floor. "...Yeah."

There's a lot of guys who play heavy on the team, but their coach doesn't rely on that to win. He'll scratch guys to make a point if they take too many penalties for their behavior. Even if the penalty didn't cost the team a goal.

It was a talking point in the media during last season's division finals: one of their fourth-line guys hacked at an opponent's hands, and the Duck had to leave the ice for stitches. Kirbs took a penalty for the slash, and then got scratched from the next game by Coach Moss.

It fucked over Kirbs' line, forcing Scrappy and Robber to play with an unfamiliar winger. Anaheim won the next game by forcing five mistakes between the fourth line and turning those mistakes into two separate garbage goals.

Kent tore into Kirbs for it after practice the next day, because the man knew they had to play cleaner. Kirbs knew better than to take himself out of the game with a stupid penalty on an unimportant player--it hadn't even been one of Anaheim's threat guys, where Kirbs would've at least been buying the team more space on the ice. He'd just let a guy's chirping get into his head.

Scrappy and Trojan and Mitts broke things up pretty fast, dragging Kent away from the corner where he'd hemmed Kirby in and hauling Kirby to the other side of the room while Kirby
threatened to throw down on Kent. Showy shut the doors to the dressing room and then strongarmed Kent out of there and made him stay in the kitchen until he calmed down.

They might could've swept the Ducks in four games, if they'd had Kirbs for all of them. But instead they lost that fourth game, and had to take the series out to five, wearing everyone out that extra amount. All because Kirbs made a dirty play he knew the coach would punish him for.

They all knew the coach would do it. Vegas' hockey is way cleaner now than what it was before, but Coach Moss is right. As soon as any guy fucks up, everybody talks like they're the same old team they used to be.

Kent knew better.

...He just. Didn't want to lose. Not in the city Zimmermann picked over Vegas; not to the team Zimmermann chose over his.

He didn't want to be second-best to Zimmermann right from the start.

"I've made a lot of exceptions for you," Moss says, and Kent focuses. "More than I should've, because I justified it to myself that it was just chirping, that emotions are high out there. But this is the last time.

"I know how high a level you think at, Kent," Moss tells him. "So I know damn well you knew you'd get the puck in before you hit Snow, and you chose to hit him to score. That's not temper getting the better of you. That's behavior I won't accept from any of the men on this team. Especially not from you, their captain. That letter on your jersey holds you to a higher standard."

"Yes, sir," Kent repeats. "I understand."

"Good," the coach tells him. "Clean up your game, Kent. You've got too much talent to be dragging yourself into the mud like this. I expect you to play better from here on out."

"I will," Kent says with another nod. "I promise, Coach. --For real this time," he adds, as he belatedly realizes that he lied before. He told the coach he'd show more self-control on the ice, and then he did this.

"Good," Moss says again.

The man pushes out of his chair and pulls it back to the wall. Kent shifts on his seat once more, and then asks, "Is Snow ok?"

Moss looks over. "There haven't been any injury updates from the Falcs."

That's better than nothing. Kent says "Good," because yeah, it was an asshole move he pulled. He and Snow've cussed each other out plenty in past games, but it's not like Kent has anything personal against the guy. He's just a goalie on someone else's team. Kent's job is to beat him.

"Mm," Moss says again; but it's not as hard as before. Kent guesses that was the right question.

Moss heads for the door. "The presser's done. You should finish changing."

"Got it," Kent says, getting to his feet.

*  

Chazzer returns from his injury during the end of the road trip.
The head coach assigns the man to the third line for their last game in Philly; but once they're back in Vegas, Chazzer returns to centering Kent and Trojan.

Their line finally clicks the way it was supposed to do at the start of the season. Kent goes on a five-game goal-scoring streak, and then remakes that into a nine-game point run as he feeds assists to Chazzer and Trojan for their seven- and three-game goal streaks. In the middle of December, the Aces win six games straight until Anaheim shuts them down 4-1.

They bounce back two days later, beating Edmonton 3-1.

Kent balls up his empty energy bar wrapper and lobbs it at Mitts' head in response to the man's chirping as he leaves the showers to dress for postgame. He's finally feeling normal again.

*  

By December, Catsby's settled into his new role as a center. But one of his linemates is Boar, the rookie that Vichy's still in a cold war with.

So Kent keeps hanging back on the ice with Catsby after practices, half to work with the sophomore and half to keep an eye on that situation from Boar's end. Kent's sure the rookie's talking with his lineys more than he's willing to talk to Kent, the captain who's friends with the same guy Boar's got a problem with.

But today, Catsby looks over at the clock early. "I gotta go soon. I promised Laia I'd take her to buy boxes."

"Who?"

"My sis," Catsby explains. "You remember Eulàlia. She's moving to L.A., they made her full-time."

"Cool," Kent replies, making a mental note of the nickname. "Why are you buying boxes?"

"I can't, like, materialize 'em, Parse."

"Go to a grocery store and ask for some," he replies, leaning on his stick. "Or a liquor place. Don't waste money."

Catsby frowns. "You can do that?"

"Yeah," Kent says. "Everybody does."

"Huh," he muses. "...Okay. Didn't know that was a thing."

"Rich kid," Kent says dryly.

Catsby makes a stifled choking noise before cracking up. "Ass."

*  

Kent looks up Houston's football team, and sends his former teammate's daughter a Texans jersey for Christmas.

Showy texts him a picture of Emiri on Christmas morning, swamped in the jersey. u suk @ measurements parse
also and then Kent gets a close-up photo of Showy's middle finger.

He snickers and sends back a picture of a thumbs up. *It's room to grow into*

don't steal my bit Showy retorts. He adds *if Kitt hasn't wrecked that santa costume yet Emiri wants u 2 put a vid on Instagram*

Kent laughs. *She follows my cat's insta?*

*she's n a cat phase* Showy replies. *but she's got allergies, so it's all internet cats*

*Aw, that sucks* Kent pushes up off the couch and goes to look for wherever Kitt dragged her chewed up Santa hat. *Ok, if it's not up in 30 min Kitt killed me.*

*I feel like I should b stoppin this but u kinda brought it on urself*

*Yup* Kent agrees. "Heeeeeeere, ki-ki-kitty!"

Several long seconds later, Kitt comes to the threshold of Kent's bedroom in his parents' house. She sits down and stares at him distrustfully.

"Come on, it's not that bad," Kent tells her. "Thirty more seconds, tops."

Kitt lashes her tail and doesn't move.

"You invaded my place, man," Kent replies as he rolls down his sleeves, because he learned his lesson this morning. He needs to cut her claws again soon. "C'mon, you're gonna make a kid happy."

Kitt lashes her tail once more and narrows her eyes as Kent goes to pick her up. "Seriously, where'd you hide the hat? Tell me you didn't eat it, Mom's gonna be so pissed if you barf on the carpet."

*

The Aces never play on New Year's Eve--trying to compete with Vegas's other entertainment options would be a financial wreck. And nobody in the league plays on January 1st, except the two teams in the annual NHL Winter Classic game. Vichy throws his usual New Years' party.

Kent's chatting with one of Vichy's friends when he spots a half-familiar face. It takes him a second to place Chavarría, but once he does, he lifts his glass in a half-salute.

"Hey, Antwone!" Kent smiles, when Chavarría comes up to them. He tilts his head at Chavarría and tells Johnston, "Antwone does commercial music out in L.A." before telling Chavarría, "Robbie here works for Micron."

"Cool, man," Chavarría says pleasantly. "The solid state drives?"

"Yeah!" Johnston agrees, a little surprised. "You use Crucial?"

"Yeah, they're great tech."

Kent spots Vichy's wife heading into the kitchen alone and excuses himself.
Nadiya gives him a polite nod as he comes into the kitchen. Kent returns it with a smile, and asks, "Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Mm?" she replies.

"I wanted to ask some stuff about Russia and Ukraine."

"Ah," Nadiya says, capping a decanter of that homemade liquor that at least one new guy every year learns not to touch because it tastes like spice and imminent fiery death. "... Yes. That's fine."

People keep drifting in and out of the kitchen as Nadiya talks; Chazzer pauses in the middle of grabbing a glass of water, and then hangs around. Kent leans against the fridge and takes notes on his phone.

When she stops for a sip of her drink, Chazzer says, "You really shouldn't be asking a nationalist about this stuff, Parse."

"If this is again about that Armenian general's individual decision at Katyn, Jakub--" Nadiya begins evenly, and Chazzer interrupts with something in Russian.

Kent thumbs out of his notes and into his messages, and texts Vichy to get over here ASAP.

Chazzer and Nadiya's conversation in Russian is starting to get terser when, off to the side, Vichy booms, "Hey, guess what."

Chazzer has just enough time to look over before Vichy picks him up and starts hauling him out of the kitchen, toward the balcony. "Seriously, bro?" he calls back at Kent.

"Live by the sword, die by the sword, Chaz," Kent grins, openly thumbing out of his messages.

"Ass!"

Vichy calls, "You can walk out there, Parser, or I can come back for you."

Kent looks up. "Seriously?"

"You know the rules," Vichy retorts, struggling to open the balcony door while Chazzer tries to squirm loose and several guys catcall them both. "No goddamn politics at my parties!"

Kent, scowling, picks the lesser of two evils and heads for the balcony under his own power.

Vichy takes their shirts and leaves them out there. Kent writes down more notes about Russia-Ukrainian relations from Chazzer's point of view; and then his center wimps out and goes back inside, leaving him alone and bored.

He's replying to the latest comments on Kitt's Instagram when the door opens. Chavarría looks out. "So... just chillin' out here?" he asks, eyebrow raised.

Kent snorts.

"This isn't winter," he says derisively, because it's not even below 40. "I'm from upstate. I'm not goin' back in like I can't handle this."
"...I'm startin' to get the whole 'band kids versus jocks' thing," Chavarría comments, shutting the door behind him and setting a half-empty six-pack of beer on the balcony floor. He shrugs out of his windbreaker and drops it over Kent's bare shoulders. "Y'all are crazy."

"It's the principle," Kent says resolutely.

It's also marginally chilly, so he pulls the windbreaker closer around his chest. He won't hear the end of it from the guys if he comes into practice tomorrow with a cold. "Thanks, man."

"No prob." Chavarría settles into the other seat on the balcony. "Soooo. This what happens if you cross that police tape on the stairs?"

"Nah, that's just to keep everybody outta the upstairs bathroom," Kent says, sliding his phone into his back pocket.

Chavarría raises an eyebrow. "I saw some guy head up there."

"He have a scar on his face?" Kent asks, pointing at his cheek.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, Scrappy and his wife can go up there," Kent explains. "Everybody else gets chased out."

Chavarría makes an amused noise. "Arath didn't warn me about the one bathroom."

"Apartment parties," Kent says wryly.

Chavarría chuckles. Then he reaches down and picks up the six-pack by its empty plastic rings. "Want one?"

Kent's original drink is lost somewhere in the kitchen, so he says, "Sure."

Chavarría pries a can loose and hands it over, and then pulls one free for himself. "How you been? Still punking people?" he adds, a grin twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't think I forgot you never proved what you were claimin' 'bout that song," Kent rejoins, popping open the can. "Still callin' BS."

Chavarría whistles faintly. "Good memory."

Kent shrugs a shoulder. "It was cool stuff."

The party inside keeps going.

***

Vichy's condo is too small for the size of the NYE parties he throws at this point; if he owned one more piece of furniture, he'd have to invite two less people. So when two members of the Aces—a defenseman in his third year, Saul Okori, and a sophomore forward, Arath Catalano, who've been friends since they were both playing for the Aces' feeder team--staked out their seats on the sofa, they knew that if they got up for a half-second, they'd probably be standing for the rest of the night.

So they don't see much of Vichy tossing Chazzer and Parse out. Too many other people are milling around in front of them.
Well, Arath didn't see any of it, because he was too busy being a melodramatic loser to Saul about Parse. He still is, almost a half-hour later.

"M bein' paranoid," Arath mutters, face in his hand.

"That's what I been sayin' this whole time," Saul agrees, because Arath's been intermittently freaking out about Parse maybe hitting on him for months now.

"Buuuuuuuuuh." Arath slumps back deep into the sofa. "God. I don't wanna be weird if it's not weird, but how do I know it's not weird?!


"Zimmermann's younger than 'im," Arath mutters into his can.

"Gatito," Saul says dryly. "If you're comparing yourself to Jack Zimmermann, we need to talk about your ego. Your scrawny butt ain't that great."

Arath cracks up. "Screw you, my butt's awesome!"

"If you don't wanna seem gay, you're doin' it wrong," Saul points out in amusement. Arath just giggles more.

Saul shakes his head and takes a sip of his beer. "Seriously, don't worry about it. Zimmermann's white, yeah? And that guy's Black. Like, nilotic," he adds, nodding at the windows out onto the balcony, where Antwone went after retrieving his jacket from the closet. Somebody's shut the blinds since then. "So he don't just date Latinx."

"Ant's Brazilian," Arath replies.

Saul blinks. "For real?" Well, that explains the last name. "He doesn't have an accent."

"I think his parents came here," Arath says, shrugging. "Or grandparents? Whatever. Zimmermann's the exception. Right?"

"You're paranoid," Saul repeats patiently. "He's only interested in your skills."

"Buuuuuuuuuuuuuh," Arath whines again, dropping his head onto the back of the sofa.

Saul rolls his eyes. "Look, talk to Miguel."

Arath--predictably--just grunts at that. Saul shakes his head, but drops it. "Fine, say you talked to Miguel, then ask Parse about his uncle."

Arath makes a confused face and rolls his head over to look at him. "Who?"

"I don't remember his name," Saul answers. "But after Miguel had that real bad skid with the crap with Tobin, Parse worked with him a lot. They talked about fam in the military and stuff." Saul shifts his legs out of the way of someone passing by. "He said Parse mentioned an uncle who got discharged over some sex abuse inquiry."

"Whoa." Arath sits up. "What?"

"He wouldn't tell me much," Saul says. "I don't know if Parse said much. It wasn't on his uncle," he adds. "But the guy kept pushing his superiors to investigate it, and I guess they discharged him for
insubordination or something."

Arath whistles.

"Yeah. Musta turned out to be real, 'cause Parse said they made it an honorable discharge later."
Saul stretches his legs back out. "But Miguel said you can't get changed to 'honorable' unless you were somethin' worse first. And I guess that messes up your benefits and stuff?"

Arath, who isn't from a military family anymore than him, just shrugs.

Saul does too. "Point is, abuse of subordinates ain't cool. And Miguel swears that's how Parse thinks. He's the captain, so we're his subordinates. He's not interested in you," he says. "Quit worrying 'bout it. Promise. It's all in your head."

Arath blows out a long breath and sinks back into the couch. ". . . Okay."

Saul bops him on the shoulder. "Relax, Gatito. You wanna be worried 'bout anything, you oughta worry 'bout Pete going home with Laia."

Arath narrows his eyes. "What."

"Cat," Saul replies, "he hates this guy." He nods in the vague direction of wherever Vichy is. "The only reason he came is 'cause you brought her."

Arath scowls and sits up.

"For real?" Saul asks. "I thought you knew and you were just being tsundere."

"Hold my beer," Arath tells him, shoving the can into Saul's hand.

"Did you seriously just--" but Arath's already shoved off the couch and started across the room, yelling, "Hey, ginger!"

"Hey, fuck you," Pete calls around the corner. "Wait. Troy?"

"Weren't me," Trojan says in amusement, looking over from where he and Mitts and Tommy are grouped around the balcony door.

"Who--gah! Dammit, Catsby!"

Saul puts his and Arath's beers on the crowded side table and pushes off the sofa, shaking his head. "Why."

He starts threading through the crowd toward the noise. To his right, Vichy cuts off in the middle of talking to Boxy's wife and heads for the same spot with an exasperated expression.

Saul loses sight of him when he has to break abruptly to avoid crashing into the goalies. Arno keeps going past him without comment, strong-arming a swearing Boxy toward the balcony door.

***

"Miley Cyrus is the best," Kent says with finality, slapping his palm on the arm of the chair. "The end. Taylor Swift wishes she's as good as Cyrus."

"Bangerz was awful, man."
Kent shakes his head. "Bangerz was perfect. She gave everybody exactly what they wanted, and they didn't want that either, and that's the point."

"You're losing me," Chavarría says, but not meanly. He's leaning over, looking like he's honestly trying to figure out what Kent's saying.

Kent clarifies. "Okay. Cyrus has the best PR of anybody. Anybody. She's perfect."

"Uh," Chavarría says, raising an eyebrow. "Are we thinkin' of the same Miley Cyrus? The one that twerked Thicke?"

"The fucking VMAs," Kent says in annoyance, before remembering that Chavarría isn't a teammate and he shouldn't sweat around him like one. "What'd she do? She danced, at an event, where she was paid to dance, and everybody flipped out 'cause that's what they wanted to do in the first place. If it hadn't been that, they woulda found something else."

"Still not great PR, though," Chavarría points out. "Especially after the divorce."

"What'd she really do?" Kent replies. "She danced. The end. Nothin' backstage, nothin' before or after, she wasn't sleepin' with him, nothing. They would've dug it up if it'd happened, but it didn't, so they just yelled about the dancing."

Chavarría chuckles. "Big fan, huh?"

"Miley Cyrus is the best," Kent repeats strongly. He jerks his chin in the direction of the Strip a few blocks away, trying to indicate Spears' residency. "She saw what they did to Britney and she dodged that bullet. Swift didn't. She tried to be even more perfect, and she didn't get, what, two albums? Before she was a 'crazy ex-girlfriend.'"

"Cyrus was smarter than that," Kent insists. "She knew you can't win. Everybody else's crashed and burned, and she's still here and nothin' can stick to her. No DUls, no rehab, no paparazzi meltdowns, no jail. Nothin'. They got nothing. They tried to make her the next Spears and she won."

"They told her not to screw up like Britney did, and she saw it for the trap it is," Kent sneers. "'Keep bein' a good girl, be perfect, and you'll be okay.' No you won't, nobody wants that. They want you to screw up so they can feel better than you 'cause they'll never actually be better'n you."

Kent shifts closer in his chair, accidentally kicking over his mostly-full beer. He leans down to set it upright. "Cyrus knew you can't do perfect, so she told 'em all 'Alright, I'll give you exactly what you really want until you choke on it.' And then she did, without makin' any mistake anybody could actually come at her for. And everybody hates her just as much as they wanted to.

"Swift'll never beat that," Kent says adamantly. "She tried to be perfect and that went exactly how it was always gonna. Spears barely got out alive. Cyrus was smart enough not to try. Nobody'll ever be better'n her."

Chavarría whistles lowly.

"Miley is the best," Kent repeats. "The end."

Past Chavarría, the door rattles and bangs open. And then the Aces' backup goalie, Arno, shoves their main one out onto the balcony.

"Knock it off already," Arno tells Boxy, as he stumbles up against the railing. "You're freakin'
everybody out."

Boxy turns around and snaps at him in genuinely pissed off French. Arno ignores it and yanks the door shut.

Boxy looks over at the two of them. And then he lets out a short breath, eyes narrowing.

"Ah," he mutters. "This scene."

With a third person out here, Kent abruptly registers just how close together he and Chavarría've dragged their chairs. He's still wearing the other man's jacket.

Kent pushes up out of his seat, shifting his expression to a slight smile. "Hey--"

"You wrap up your subconscious metaphor yet?" Boxy interrupts.

"--Huh?"

"Never mind." Boxy starts rolling down his shirt sleeves. "Let's get this over with. I've got shit to do off this page."

Kent raises an eyebrow and shifts between Boxy and Chavarría. "Alright, let's get you a water--"

"The military's repealed Don't Ask, Don't Tell," Boxy says, voice hard. "So what's your fuckin' excuse still, Parse?"

Kent freezes.

"Find your fucking balls and start trusting us already," Box continues. "It's gonna fuck you over again. You won't die this time, either."

The balcony door re-opens.

"Ookay, Alex," Trojan says, grabbing a hold of Box and starting to drag him back inside. "C'mon, your wife's looking for you."

"She knows exactly where I am," Box retorts. "Do you know how much arranging it took to make this pacing work? A POV break and then skipping back in time--do you know how fuckin' disorienting that is?!!"

"You are some kinda drunk," Trojan remarks, steering him through the door. Tommy shifts out of the way to make room.

"You don't even have your real name, chimera. There's a fucking void where Swoops should be!"

Mitts leans out to grab the doorknob, mouthing "What the fuck?" through his laughter.

And then he pulls the door shut, leaving Kent and Chavarría alone again.

Kent glances over and sees that somebody's shut the blinds onto the balcony. They were open when he came out here. They were still open when Chavarría joined him.

How long were Trojan and Mitts and Tommy standing by the door? Were they already there when Arno shoved Box out here? Kent didn't notice them, but he wasn't looking.

The party's pretty loud inside--but they were obviously close enough to hear Box.
Or they were deliberately listening, and standing by the door. To try and cut off any trouble.

Kent swallows hard.

And then he fixes his expression to his PR smile and turns back to Chavarría. "Hey, sorry about that."

Chavarría's still in his chair--but he's a lot tenser now, and his smile's clearly fake. Goddammit. **Fucking** Box.

"You do one rant about Miley Cyrus, and guys make assumptions," Kent continues, still smiling, still trying to salvage this. "Anyway--"

"You got outta that party before the cops showed up, right?" Chavarría says.

Kent pauses. "...Yeah."

"So I'd say you owe me one," Chavarría continues. "So tell me, were you in on Catalano setting me up like this?"

"--Huh?"

"This," Chavarría says, with a short, sharp gesture over his shoulder at the windows.

"Uh," Kent replies. "I dunno what's up, man, but Arath's not the kinda guy who'd do something mean."

Chavarría studies him for several long moments.

"If this is about what Box said, he's drunk," Kent tells him. "He's not really like this. It's an open bar, nobody's actin' like themselves."

Chavarría exhales through his teeth.

"Alright," he says at last. "Alright. So, can I leave without anybody givin' me shit?"

"Yeah," Kent says sincerely. He's not sure why Chavarría's more on edge about the guys inside than about learning he's been hanging around a gay guy, but it means Kent has to get out of this with the team's reputation intact. "Of course. Nobody'll give you any shit. It's just a party."


"Why--"

And finally, an embarrassing period of time late, Kent adds up several things to their obvious conclusion.

"Wait, are you gay?" he asks. "--Wait, have you been flirting with me?"

"I can't tell if you're fucking with me or not," Chavarría replies. But he's starting to look more frustrated than tense-bordering-on-panicked. Like the "flight" reaction is fading. "I'm gonna head out."

Kent rubs his face hard. And then he drags a hand back over his hair to flatten his cowlick, and adds a couple more names to his mental list of who on the team suspects he's gay. Catsby was
apparently trying to hook him up with this dude; and Trojan and Mitts were clearly outside that door for a reason.

"Okay." He shrugs out of Chavarría's jacket and holds it out. "Look, the guy this place is, Anatoly, he's solid. I swear, nobody's gonna give you shit here. He...he knows I'm gay," Kent says, quieter. "And he's cool. None of the guys here are dicks."

That's not a hundred percent true, but saying that won't make this situation any better. "I promise, Antwone. If you still wanna leave, that's cool. But you're fine here. I swear."

Chavarría takes the jacket from him slowly. "...So you are gay?"

Kent glances at the blinded windows before he can help himself, because he still doesn't know how audible they are to everybody inside.

Then he forces himself to look back at Chavarría. "Uh. Yeah."

Chavarría glances at the windows himself; and then he looks back at Kent. When he speaks again, he's dropped his voice lower. "Not out?"

Kent shrugs uncomfortably. "Some've the guys know, I guess. The ones that've been around a while. We just...don't talk about it."

"Gotcha," Chavarría says.

He drapes the jacket over his shoulder a moment later. "...You wanna go talk somewhere else, then?" he asks, lifting the corner of his mouth slightly. "Still owe you that chord explanation, since you kinda derailed on Katy versus Miley."

"There's no versus, Perry's all shallow surface pop," Kent grumbles. It's a great PR persona, too; it just doesn't match Cyrus's perpetual idgaf middle finger to the media. It's still keeping safe and playing the game, instead of rejecting the whole thing as rigged and telling everyone as much.

"But yeah," Kent adds. "Yeah. That'd be cool. Can uh--" he glances at the door, and then at the balcony railing. "Meet me down there?"

Antwone scratches the back of his neck. "If you don't want to--" and then he breaks off as Kent grabs the railing and slings a leg over it. "--What're you doing?"

"It took me this long to figure out you were flirting," Kent replies, eying the wall and trying to remember where Hens' foot slipped when he climbed down it on a dare a couple years back. "I'm not walking through that gauntlet of chirps. They can harass me tomorrow."

Antwone rests his arms on the railing and watches as Kent starts to scale down the wall until he's low enough that he can just drop. Good thing Vichy's condo is only two floors up. "You're really doin' this."

"I know how long those guys are gonna drag me," Kent huffs. "Not tonight."

"Wow."

After Kent hits the ground with an "wumph," Antwone drops his jacket down to him. Kent catches it. "Thanks, man."

"You guys are crazy," Antwone repeats with a raised eyebrow; but he's half-smiling. "See ya in a
couple."
"Yep."

They meet in the parking lot, and end up taking Antwone's car because it's closer and also because some dick's boxed in Kent's own. Frickin' holidays.

Kent technically lives eleven minutes away from Vichy, but that's in good traffic on back roads. Not driving up the Strip on New Year's Eve, like an L.A. tourist. That adds a lot more time.

Antwone's a pretty good driver, though. He doesn't let talking distract him from the road.

"Elvin'?" Kent repeats, over the sound of his phone ringing.

"Yeah, like the jazz drummer," Antwone replies. "They named my sister after Fitzgerald. The singer?"

"They sent you to school with that name."

"And that's why I go by Antwone," he agrees.

Kent snickers. His phone times out, but it doesn't go over to voicemail. A couple seconds later, it starts ringing again. For the sixth time.

Antwone shakes his head. "Sure was incentive to learn guitar," he adds, tapping the breaks when a car cuts in front of them. "Like, well, you gave me and Ella matching names, and I got the worse one. I guess I'm gonna learn to thrash, so I can get outta high school without my ass being totally kicked."

"Fair enough," Kent agrees with a grin.

They get stuck at another stop light. Kent's phone fades out, and then starts ringing once more.

Antwone looks over. "I like Walk The Moon as much as the next guy, but do you need to answer that?"

"Nah," Kent replies, because he made Vichy's ringtone "Work This Body" the first time he heard it--half because it was perfect, and half because it made Mitts double over laughing when he figured out the joke.

It made Vichy dump a thermos of ice water down Kent's back when he figured out the joke, but that just confirmed that it was perfect.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's Ivanovich. He probably finally went out on the balcony to try and make me come in," Kent says. "He always flinches first."


The next time his phone starts ringing, Kent rolls his eyes but finally pulls it out of his pocket and puts it to speaker.

"Kent fucking Parson," Vichy says flatly, and Kent mouths "Told you." Antwone chuckles
silently. "Why am I standing on an empty balcony."

"I guess you broke your rule about talkin' politics," Kent says cheerfully. "Did you remember to take your shirt off?"

"How the hell did you get back in?" Vichy demands. "Where are you?"

"Your place ain't that big man, you oughta be able to find me."

"Do you understand phones at all," Vichy retorts. "I'd hear if you were here, you're not--are you in a car? --Did you run away?"

"I mean, if you're asking if I left a boring party for something better...."

"Goddammit," Vichy mutters. "Look. Box said you'd get over what he said, or--'shift scenes and not deal with it until later,' fucking...don't take whatever he said personal. Okay, Parser? I don't know what his deal was tonight."

"Yeah you do," Kent replies, because Boxy's deal was obviously the same expansion draft stress that's been eating at everybody, ever since the new thirty-fifth team in Quebec City became a certainty. "Don't invite Arno again."

--No, that won't work. They can't just cut their backup goalie out of the loop, that's a bad way to run the dressing room. Dammit. "Or no, just...." He blows out a breath through his teeth.

"I didn't think he'd come!" Vichy says defensively. "He never does shit with us."

"Yeah, I know. Just...it's fine. They'll do the expansion and things'll get back to normal," Kent says. "It'll be fine."

Vichy just grunts.

Then he exhales slowly. "...Alright. You know where that other guy went? Catsby's sister's guy. Nobody's seen him since he was with you, she's looking for him."

"Shit," Antwone says abruptly. "We were supposed to go over the new project."

"You wanna head back?" Kent asks, looking at him. "You turn right up here, it'll be faster."

"...No, I can text her," he replies. "All else fails, we can go over it at the airport."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It's nothing big, the vocals are just a little out've her usual range."

"Are you with--" Vichy starts, and then he breaks off before going, "Did you Romeo and Juliet off my goddamn balcony--" and then he hangs up.

Antwone glances over. "Uh...."

"Give 'im a minute," Kent says, not bothering to put his phone away. "He's cool. He's probably just going 'Why is this my liiiiiiiiife.'"

"Are y'all friends?" Antwone asks dubiously. Kent snickers.

"Oh, we're getting closer," he adds, as the Stratosphere starts looming higher. "You wanna get over
"Got it." Antwone starts looking for an opening. "So you meant it? That was weird for that guy? Box."

"Yeah," Kent says. "He doesn't drink like that. It's just--they're adding a team in the league. And that team's gonna get to pick players from all the other teams. And every team only gets to protect so many guys. And only one goalie," he explains. "Box and Arnolds are our goalies, so they're both trying to be the one we hang onto. It's a lotta stress."

It's been a problem for a while.

It's why Boxy's joined Kent during his early morning skates so much this season, even back during training camp. And it's why Kent's never ragged on him for that, even when he was in the middle of that endless slump and cussing out Boxy for real whenever the guy made obnoxious catches to remind him of it.

Boxy's a solid netminder, and he's weirdly sociable for a goalie: he joins the non-mandatory team bonding events, and goes to both the penalty kill and the power play teams' meetings. He's willing to spend extra time at the clubhouse and to hang out with the rest of the guys.

Arno's a lot more like what Kent's used to in a goalie. He only sits in on the PK meeting, mostly talks with the defensemen, and doesn't really interact with any of the guys outside of the clubhouse. He gets on the ice with a game face that looks like he's ready to eat the puck and maybe the skin of the guy who shot it at him. He and Kent don't really know each other.

Kent likes Boxy more than Arno; but he's the captain, so he's not supposed to show favoritism.

Especially since, under pressure, Arno can make catches he shouldn't be able to see through the crowd around his net. Boxy doesn't.

You can teach a guy positioning. You can't teach instinct.

Kent's pretty sure the GM put Arno on the roster to get him major league experience and to make him start working with the Aces' goalie coach, as part of the first step toward eventually transitioning him into the team's starting goalie. Which makes sense as a long-term plan for the club.

And Kent's supposed to want what's best for the Aces.

Antwone whistles lowly. "Gotcha."

"Yeah. Boxy's a good guy," Kent adds. "It's just this friggin' expansion."

Antwone nods. "Okay."

Vichy calls back before they reach the next light. When Kent answers, he orders, "Put me on speaker."

"Word of advice, Vich," Kent drawls. "If you're tryin' to cockblock a guy, don't tell him to put you on speaker first."

Antwone laughs at that, which Kent takes as a good sign of where the evening's going. Vichy makes an aggravated noise. "I mean it, I gotta ask about the parking."
Kent makes a doubtful face, but hits speaker again. Antwone shakes his head in bemusement.

"Hey, did you park in the visitors' area?" Vichy asks.

"Yeah," Antwone agrees.

"You sure? It was definitely under the signs? They've been serious about towing lately."

"Pretty sure. It was right by the gate. But I'm not--" and Kent makes a rapid cutoff motion.

". . . So is Parson's car the one still here?" Vichy asks, ominously.

"...No," Antwone answers.

"Uh-huh," Vichy replies. "See you at practice, Parser."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Kent calls at his phone, but Vichy just hangs up.

Antwone glances over. "You need to go back?"

"Nah, he sucks at pranks."

Kent's screwed if Kirbs decides to help, though. But that's not likely.

Kirbs might be the best prunker of the current guys on the team, but Vichy'd have to explain too much to him. And there's no way Vichy would do that. Kent's certain that Kirbs is one of the guys who assume he's straight.

That last thought reminds Kent that there's no condoms in his apartment. The previous woman he dated was allergic to cats, so Kent just left the box at Luiselli's place. He never had a reason to buy more after they broke up.

"Crap," Kent says, looking back at the stoplight. "Hey uh, can you make a u-turn up here? There's a convenience store a couple blocks west, I gotta pick up something."

"Yeah," Antwone agrees, putting on his blinker.

"Cool, thanks," Kent tells him. "Are you allergic to cats?"

"Yeah. I'm allergic to a bunch of stuff, I take meds for it," Antwone answers. "How many do you have?"

"Just one," Kent says. "But she's a Maine coon. She's like...seventy percent fur. Twenty-five percent attitude, five percent purr like an outboard motor."

Antwone chuckles. "One's fine."

Antwone sleeps over afterward, since the man's got an early enough flight that Kent would've felt like a dick kicking him out so late. It's breaking the ban list rules, but it's not like Vichy's gonna rat on him to the front office.

Kent makes breakfast while Antwone tries to lint roller his pants clean, since the cat slept on them during the night. "I think seventy percent fur's an understatement, Kent. I'm pretty sure Purrs is a hundred percent fur."
"She's--what'd you call her?" he asks, looking up from the eggs.

Antwone half-grins wider. "Purrs. That's why they kept calling you last night, right?"

"Dude."

"Dude, you named your cat Kitt Purrson," Antwone replies. "There is no way 'Purrs' is any worse."

Kent tells him, "You can't rename my cat."

"It's a nickname."

"Sheeeeeze." Kent looks over at Kitt, who's currently curled up on Antwone's laptop bag. "Kitt, you wanna be 'Purrs'?"

She yawns wide enough to show all her teeth, which has never stopped being creepy.

"There you go." Kent turns back to scrambling the eggs. "Nickname rejected."

"Hey Purrs, you wanna keep being a Katy Perry ripoff?" Antwone calls over. "Or you want your very own new nickname?"

Kitt thumps her tail against the bag.

"Uh-oh, sounds like maybe that's 'name rejected,' too," Antwone grins. "Now what?"

"It's a Katy Perry tribute," Kent insists. "You can't rename my cat."

Antwone drops him off at Vichy's condo before heading to the airport. Kent gets to his car and finds that his t-shirt and flannel have been tied to the antenna like flags.

He takes a photo and texts it to Vichy with That's really all you got?

But he waits to hit send until he's driven off the property.

When he arrives at the Ice Center, Boxy's already in his gear and stretching in the dressing room. Kent drops his duffel by one of the lockers and asks, "You okay?"

"No," Boxy replies, sounding drained. "I wanna take the blue pill and forget how this chapter ends."

Kent eyes him as he pulls off his shirt. "Are you still drunk?"

"Va jouer dans le traffic," Boxy grunts. "Pretend I'm an All-Star goalie."

Kent lifts an eyebrow as he keeps changing. "Which kind? The ones that show up hungover too? Or the ones that show up to mock the hell outta everybody else?"

"Both."

"Tall order," Kent replies with a small smirk. "You sure you can live up to it?"

Boxy says several way ruder things in French, and shifts in his stretch enough to flip Kent off.

Kent snickers quietly.
The league selects Kent for the 2016 All-Star Game.

It's a surprise, even though Kent can't say that out loud without sounding like he's fishing for compliments, since he's been sent to the All-Star weekend every year that the game's been held.

But still. He had a real bad start to the season. Crosby's been a mess these first few months too, and he wasn't selected. Kent knew there was a risk the NHL wouldn't want another possibly-declining player like him there, either.

Mashkov is the Falconers' sole representative.

Kent scowls at Providence's section of the list--what, the league seriously thought the other rookies it picked are better than Jack?--but he also sinks back into his seat in relief.

Kent keeps scrolling through the list, absently making a note of names, as the tension in his shoulders finally starts to ease.

He's gonna see Zimmermann at the weekend eventually. Kent knows that; it's inevitable. The only way it won't happen is if he fucks up so badly he's never sent to another All-Stars after this one.

But at least he doesn't have to deal with it just yet.

For the first time in years, the NHL selects a second player to rep Vegas alongside Kent. Chazzer's career-high season's gotten him tapped too.

The first day of the All-Star weekend, Kent and Chazzer dump their bags in their room and head down the hall to begin media day. When Kent turns the corner, he spots Showy by the elevators.

He throws out an arm and hauls Chazzer back behind the corner.

"What the--?"

"One sec," Kent says, pulling out his phone.

As soon as he saw that Showy was Houston's rep, he bought a copy of the Star Wars' Imperial March that Dallas's been using lately in its home games. Kent already queued it up during the ride from the airport; he hits play and then turns up his phone as loud as it can go.

Chazzer gives him a confused look. And then he catches on and starts laughing silently.

A moment later, Showy yells, "I know that's you, Parse!"

"How's that inter-state rivalry working out for you?" Kent calls back.

Showy rounds the corner, elbows Chazzer out of the way, and puts Kent into a headlock. "You lost to them too!"

Kent holds his phone out to the side so the other man can't reach it. "How's Emiri liking that Houston football jersey I got her for Christmas?" he asks.

"You didn't," Chazzer cackles, pulling out his phone.
"Of course he did, don't you know this fucker?" Showy retorts.

Then he tells Kent sourly, "She loves it. She wants to go to football games now. She drew you an adorable thank you card, I refuse to put it in the mail until after playoffs."

"So, I'll see it the start of April?" Kent grins. "What day's regular season end for the Aeros?"

"You goddamn little--where's Seguin!" Showy demands, hauling Kent down the hall toward the elevators. "Pretty sure I remember some shit about Playgirl he needs to hear."

"So we're just gonna do this the whole way?" Kent asks, still trying to break out of the headlock.

"Looks like!"

Kent twists around enough to scowl at Chazzer, who's following behind them, still filming. "Thanks for the help, Chaz."

"Gotta learn to stop picking fights you can't win, Parse," the traitor grins.


"This is so great," Kent says dryly, trying to pry free once more. "I'm so glad we fostered such a great team culture you guys are still friends."

"Listen to that fuckin' rhetorical masterpiece," Showy snorts, slapping the down button. "Go on Parse, keep conveniently omitting yourself from these comments like we ain't friends too. How long do you think you can pull that off?"

"You're not makin' a good argument for friendship," Kent retorts, before finally just punching Showy in the armpit.

"Augh! Dick," Showy says, letting go with a hiss. "Tryin' to take the competition out before the game, you little shit?"

"'Competition,'" Kent drawls, readjusting his suit jacket as the elevator opens.

"Ass," Showy snorts. "What'd you guys get assigned to for skills?"

"Relay," Chazzer answers.

"Passing for accuracy shooting," Kent adds.


Kent chuckles. "You?"

"They put me on the breakaway."

"What?" Kent demands. That's the best of all the skills tests--the fans always eat it up. "How'd you get that? I never get to do breakaway."

"Of course not," Showy smirks, as the elevator opens into the lobby. "They look at you and think 'Oh, Parson, he's too cool for this. He probably wouldn't even come in with a gimmick. But Short. Now there's a man who'll commit to his bit.' --Hey! Segs."

Dallas's Seguin looks over from across the lobby. Kent gives Showy a flat stare. "Seriously?"
"Don't start what you can't finish, Parse," Showy grins. Kent pops him in the side. "Ow! Shit, what's this new punchy streak?"

"I never sent you that video of him wrestling down Mitts a while back, did I?" Chazzer asks.

"Oh, what the fuck?" Showy laughs in disbelief. "I am definitely comin' back for that, but first--"

Kent tries to dodge the grab at his jacket; but Showy's arms are long.

"Seriously? I liked it better when I was the only one coming here," Kent grumbles, as Showy starts dragging him across the room toward Seguin, who's already laughing at them. Chazzer whistles low.

"I bet you did," Showy snickers. "You know he's texting that to the team. I don't even have to look."

"Yeah, probably," Kent has to agree. "Still true. You ass."

"You started it, pal!" Showy replies cheerily. Kent blows out a long breath.

When they finally get back to the hotel room that night, Chazzer throws himself across his bed. "Fuck, bro. I didn't know how much I'd miss the break. I can't feel my hand."

"Wuss," Kent grins, heading into the bathroom to wash off his sunscreen. They didn't have to autograph that much stuff.

"Fuck you," Chazzer mumbles into the bedspread. "Can't believe you do this every year."

Chazzer's still lying facedown when Kent comes out of the bathroom. Kent rolls his eyes, and texts Showy to come to their room if he wants to hang out with the Western conference's good division again for a couple hours. And then he breaks open the minibar.

"Oh, hell no," Chazzer says, lifting his head at the noise and looking over. "Johnny warned me about you. 'Don't drink with Parse, you'll be fucked up tomorrow and he'll walk in all 'Top 'o the mornin', gents!' like a bastard.'"

Kent laughs. "I'm Scottish, not Irish," he points out. "Why would he warn you, we're teammates. Which Johnny?"

"Gaudreau." Chazzer sits up and catches the mini-bottle of bourbon Kent tosses to him.

"Oh, yeah," Kent smirks, making a mental note of the sensor warning on the fridge door as he shuts it. He cracks open a whiskey. "Calgary should've warned their rookie better."

"You're the worst."

Kent shrugs a shoulder as he goes to answer the knock at the door.

Showy's on the phone when Kent opens it. He switches to speaker once he's inside; Vichy's voice comes out while Kent pushes the door shut. "--went to Ferraro's because he won't drink wine anywhere else, right?"

"Uh-huh," Showy agrees with a half-grin, dropping into the chair by the window and tilting the phone out at the two of them. Chazzer climbs off his bed and over onto Kent's to sit closer.
Kent elbows Showy in the arm and mouths, "Gimme your key."

Showy gives him an odd look; but he's distracted by Vichy's rant. "And apparently they got a new chef, because the recipes are different. Even though it's all the same goddamn pasta. And he's sitting there haranguing the waiter until finally the chef comes out, and now they're arguing, except it's just fuckin' yelling in Italian and I'm like thank God this is the fully private room, you are being every kind of shit tourist right now, Jeff."

Showy, shaking with silent laughter, pulls out his wallet as Vichy goes on.

"And I'm sittin' here thinking oh my God, I'm gonna die in this restaurant. By the goddamn university, just full circle. Because Goffredo fucking Scalfano can't handle a Sicilian in the kitchen. Oh my God," Vichy repeats, with the verbal equivalent of a thousand-yard stare. "What the fuck is my life."

Showy manages to hold down his laughter for a couple breaths. "Wow."

"All pasta tastes the same."

"Who're you trying to pick a fight with?" Showy grins as he hands Kent his keycard.

Distantly, Scrappy answers, "Me."

"Wait, wait." Chazzer leans forward as Kent picks up his league-assigned tracksuit jacket. "Vichy. Are you talking all this shit while he's right by you?"

"Yes," Scrappy says dryly.

Chazzer cracks up. Vichy says, "Am I on speakerphone?"

"Yup," Showy says cheerfully. "Scrappy, you're a saint."

"I know," the other man replies, over Vichy telling Showy he's a motherfucker. Kent snickers as he unlocks the door.

"You're gonna die," Chazzer laughs.

"He knows I can't punch him, I'm driving," Scrappy says; and Kent pauses at that.

He thought Vichy was just buzzed. But if he was going hard enough that he's letting someone else drive him home....

But Kent's already opened the door. So he just keeps heading out, and makes his way to Showy's room.

It's empty. Whoever Showy's rooming with, they must be out too; it's not curfew yet. Kent snags one of the glasses sitting on the counter.

It doesn't take him long to clear out Showy's minibar, wrap it all and the glass up into his jacket, and then cart everything back to his own room.

Chazzer's grabbed the deck of cards from Kent's suitcase and started shuffling them. Showy's still on speaker with Vichy: "Pal, I still haven't forgotten the time we were on the Sovereigns and you were drunk-explaining to me why the rest of the U.S. is a cheap lie compared to Vegas," he points out. "And you forgot the word for 'tourist' so you called them 'hoi polloi.' Don't even pretend you don't get verbose as fuck when drunk."
"I still don't remember that," Vichy sulks. "I don't get 'verbose,' fucker, I get. Sepqui. Sesquipedalian."

"Uffa!" Scrappy says in exasperation, as Showy laughs. "/Enough./ You're making shit up now."

"It's a goddamn real word!"

"The hell's a hoi polloi?" Kent asks, dumping everything out on the counter. Chazzer starts cutting the deck, head still down.

"It's a word you use for 'unwashed masses' when you want people to think you're being pretentious instead of a complete dick," Showy tells him.

"Fuck you, Zach!"

"Jesus Christ," Kent says dryly. "We got a couple embarrassments to this real man's sport right here."

Chazzer snickers for real and looks up again. Showy snorts in amusement even as he gives Kent a middle finger. Vichy yells, "You too, Parser!"

"You have a semi-colon tattoo," Kent calls back, because Vichy may've thought he hid that well enough in his sleeve tat, but he did not. "You branded yourself a nerd."

"He's got a point, pal," Showy grins. "Do the rant again about Tom Wolfe and the New Journalists exploiting Vegas for their own egos."

"Fuck you still," Vichy retorts, as Kent makes a face and says, "What?"

"Vich, I will crash your precious car if you don't calm your ass down," Scrappy warns.

"You're gonna die," Chazzer tells Kent, as he starts restocking the minibar with new bourbon and whiskey bottles to replace the ones he and Chazzer took.

"Excellent," Showy says. "It's gonna be super helpful in the standings when you kill Parse. Make sure it's fast, Vichy, any PR on him lingering'll be distracting."

"Fuck you all," Vichy grumbles. "Fuck you, Parson, I'm not weird just 'cause I have a fuckin' vocabulary."

"Whatever you gotta tell yourself," Kent smiles.

Vichy's response is mostly a lot of guttural Italian. Scrappy sniggers in the background.

Kent picks up one of the glasses and pours his whiskey into it. "Happy birthday, Jeff!" he calls over at the phone.

"Thanks," Scrappy deadpans.

By the time Showy wraps up chirping Vichy, Chazzer's dealt out a hand of Snarps. Kent drags the desk chair over to the bed and picks up his cards.

Once Showy ends the call, he gives his phone a considering look. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah," Kent replies, taking a sip of whiskey. "'S been a rough first half."
Chazzer side-eyes him. "Really, bro?"

His center's been quiet for a while now; and Kent's pretty sure what this is about.

"He's not mad at you," he tells Chazzer. "He's mad at himself for not being better than you, so he'd be here instead."

"Thanks, Parse," Chazzer says flatly. "That really helps."

"You can't do anything about it if somebody's jealous of you," Kent replies. He palms his cards into the band of his watch and sets his cup on the floor in order to pull out Showy's keycard. "Don't let it get under your skin. He'll get over it. You're still friends."

Kent flips the keycard over to Showy. He catches it and puts it back in his wallet.

Chazzer starts to say something; and then he stops and takes a drink of bourbon instead.

Kent kicks back to the desk and grabs the second glass before tossing it onto the bed. "I know you're from the south, Chazzer, but you don't need to drink like a hillbilly. Sheeze."

Chazzer whips a pillow at his head. Kent ducks with a snicker; it bounces off the mirror behind him and then hits the back of his head before falling onto the floor.

"Nice shot," Kent whistles, "if you planned that."

Chazzer makes a weary noise and downs the rest of his bourbon. He stretches back across the bed to set the empty bottle on the nightstand with a cough.

"So," Showy says, leaning back in the chair and giving a Kent a look, "did you rob my minibar to make it look like you didn't open yours?"

"This isn't my first rodeo," Kent grins. "You shouldn't've given me your key."

"Victim-blaming, nice," Showy says, eyebrow raised. "That contagious? You pick that up from 88 after that interview?"

"I tried avoiding him," Kent replies. He knew it'd be impossible: everybody wanted to talk about the Blackhawks' Kane taking a run at Kent's point streak record with that 26-game streak he had earlier this season, so sooner or later someone was gonna manage to shove them both in front of a camera. But he also knew Showy would give him crap for it later. "Chaz sent me straight to that room. Ass," he adds to the other man.

"You told me I needed to be in eight different places I didn't today," Chazzer drawls. "Sorry not sorry, Parse."

Kent flashes him a bright smile. "You deserved the full All-Star rookie experience."

"And you deserved to give everybody that 'best American players' interview they wanted."

"Fair enough," Kent shrugs. He leans over and snags the vodka bottle off the counter, holding it up so Showy can see it. "You still drink this? Or something else?"

"I'll take the one in you guys's bar," Showy says dryly.

"You might as well drink this one," Kent answers with a slow smirk. "These are the fridges with sensors. So all that's--" he waves a hand at the minibar contents strewn across the countertop "--
already been charged to your room."

Showy stares at him.

Kent smirks wider. "Really shouldn't've given me your key, Aero."

Chazzer cracks up. "You fucker!"

Showy pinches the bridge of his nose.

And then he makes a "gimme" gesture. Kent tosses the vodka in his lap.

"And a Red Bull," Showy adds.

Kent tosses a can of that over too, before picking up the third glass. "I can't believe you still drink that crap, man. Does college kill your tastebuds permanently or what?"

"You just gonna hold onto that, or...?" Showy replies, nodding at the glass as he cracks open the vodka.

"I'm not gettin' in reach of you, you're gonna sock me soon as I do."

"Yep," Showy grins. He sets the vodka on the side table and holds up his hands. "Toss it."

Kent does. Showy catches the glass, setting it on the table before popping open the can. "This's why Skals warned me not to drink with you, isn't it."

Kent snorts, and wonders if that means the Aeros' captain was fine with Showy being the only Houston representative this year. That'd be good--adjusting to a new team has to be hard enough without the captain getting jealous of you. "I bet he did."

Chazzer shakes his head as he shoves off the bed.

He goes to the counter and starts riffling through the bottles, ignoring Showy's "hey" as he does. "This another All-Star tradition? Warning guys away from drinking with Kent Parson?" Chazzer asks. "How d'you still get anyone to do it?"

"The tough guys look at me and think 'This shrimp? I could drink him under the table,' and fall for it every time. No matter who warns them." Kent raises an eyebrow as he pulls his cards loose from his watchband. "Like sure, you could, man. That's why I'm cheating."

Chazzer sputters out a laugh and then braces his hands on the counter, cracking up again.

"Why the fuck did I not have my phone on then," Showy says, as he finishes making his drink.

"Skalski knows," Kent answers. "He wouldn't let me pour any of my own drinks last time."

He makes a face as he remembers the unspoken drinking contest he and Skalski got into during last year's All-Star weekend. "Worst hangover I've had in years."

Showy takes a sip of his drink, looking at Kent over the rim of glass. "So, if you knew that he knew...."

"He was still pissed at me for checking Tommy in the head," Kent says with another shrug. "I figured, fine. I'm not tappin' out on that dick, so might as well let him feel like he avenged his teammate. Then maybe next game I won't get slashed so damn much."
Chazzer whistles lowly as he drops back onto the bed with another bourbon.

"If they hadn't put me skating on accuracy I mighta quit sooner," Kent admits. He makes another, more irritated face. "Bet I could've beaten Foglino and Kane if I'd been sober."

"I can't believe you came in third that fucked up," Chazzer says.

Kent lifts his shoulder again, waiting for a beat until Chazzer tips back the bourbon. "Of course I did, I'm Kent fucking Parson."

Chazzer chokes on his drink and spits part of it on the bedspread.

"That's your bed now," Kent adds dryly.

"What the fuck," Chazzer cackles, wiping off his chin. "What the fuck! Who the fuck is this All-Star Parse version!?"

"Is the Swiss doppelgänger joke still a thing?" Showy asks, grinning. "Because I'm pretty sure that's what we're lookin' at."

"'S like the rookie smartass is back," Chazzer snickers. "Shit, Parse, what's with you this year? You remembered how to have fun again?"

"Just sayin'," Kent drawls, picking up his whiskey.

"So are we ignoring that whole 'cards in the watchband like a fuckin' cardsharp' move?" Showy asks, waving a hand at Kent's watch.

"Got too used to it," Kent interrupts.

"Tell him in offseason," Showy grins, "because I am absolutely gonna use it against him at our next game. Same way he's been mentally stockpiling shit to chirp me with," he adds, tilting his chin at Kent.

"Yep," Kent agrees, since it's true.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuck." Chazzer braces a hand on his knee, laughing harder. "What the hell, you two."

A while later, Showy's phone alarm goes off. Before leaving, he looks down at the remaining food and bottles scattered on the counter and says, "I'm gonna assume you're not such a raging dick that there isn't a way around this, Parse."

Chazzer, inside the bathroom, makes a theatrically loud and disbelieving laugh.

"You could do that," Kent grins. Showy elbows him in the side.

Kent snickers. "Nah, just tell them you were going through it and didn't see the sign until too late."

He tilts his head at the room's minibar and the little warning label along the top of the door. "That's what I'm gonna do: Chazzer and I thought about having a drink, but then we decided to be responsible representatives of Las Vegas and put the bottles back. And then we saw the sign."
"Didn't know you were the Ace of base now," Showy drawls. He scoops up the mess. "Alright. Thanks. You little dick."

"You know me," Kent replies, half-smiling. "You shoulda known better."

"If I had a hand free to facepalm I'd be doin' that right now," Showy replies, giving him a sidelong look.

Kent just smiles wider and goes to open the door.

"Thanks," Showy says again, as he heads out. "See you tomorrow."

"Have fun explaining the charge to your roommate," Kent tells him cheerfully.

"The Property Brothers wear plaid better than you," Showy sing-songs. Kent snorts and shuts the door.

After the skills competitions are over and they're back in the hotel for the night, Showy catches up with him in the lobby. "Hey, come with me a minute."

"Yeah, that sounds trustworthy," Kent replies dryly.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, did I just hear Kent Parson question my trustworthiness?" Showy asks. "Kent Parson."

"This how they ask favors down in Texas?" he answers, eyebrow raised. "Doesn't seem real effective."

"No, in Texas they just lasso you and drag you where they wantcha," Showy replies, jabbing him in the back toward the escalators. "It's that whole rodeo fever schtick. Move your butt, Parse."

Kent deliberately takes another drink of his gatorade before recapping it and heading for the escalators. Showy rolls his eyes.

Kent falls back after they hit the second floor, since he's not sure where Showy's going. Literally; the other man's just wandering the hall.

They pass an open door. Showy doubles back to check inside, almost banging into Kent as he does, and then he heads into the empty room. "Sweet, c'mon."

"What the hell," Kent asks, raising an eyebrow higher as he follows him inside.

"Your face is gonna get stuck like that one day," Showy says, shutting the door. "It's gonna make it real hard to sell posters."

"I could work it," Kent replies. "So we're just breaking into a meeting room, now?"

"I dunno how to kick Devan outta my room," Showy tells him. "Look, improv is not my strong suite, Parse. Work with me here."

"Bullshit," Kent replies. "Improv's in your wheelhouse. That show proved it."

"What?"

"That...whatever show we watched," Kent waves, heading for a group of chairs around a tiny table
by the windows. "With the comedians talkin' about improv and stand-up, and improv's the one where you make the guys out with you look good no matter how bad they fuck up. That's you."

It went something like that. Kent doesn't remember anything around it--they were on a plane, so he was probably dozing off--but he remembered that bit. It was a lot like how Showy plays defense.

The other man gives him a bemused look as he drops down into one of the chairs. Kent raises an eyebrow as he hooks out the one beside it and settles in. "What?"

"Shit like this," Showy says, shaking his head. "This is why I get guys askin' 'How can you say Parse's a good guy, he's a fuckin' rat asshole chirper who doesn't respect other players,' and I'm like 'I literally can't argue with a word of that, but still. He's a good captain, good teammate' and then Skals looks at me like I got Stockholm syndrome."

Kent snorts hard on a laugh.

"Yeah, it's funny for you, fucko," Showy drawls. "You know at family skate, Emiri was buggin' him like 'Don't you have cookies? Parse does. I like Parse.'"

"No!" Kent grins, laughing harder.

"Yeeeeep. I'm just standing there in horror, tryin' not to laugh because I would die, thinkin' 'Emi. Sweetie. I have to work with this man. Please don't tell him you like his nega-self more, fuuuuuuuck." Showy braces his elbow on the back of the chair and rubs a thumb against his temple. "They cut that bit outta the video. His face."

Kent braces his forearms on his thighs, cracking up.

"Fucker," Showy grumbles at him, except it doesn't work because he's half-grinning.

"Awesome," Kent snickers. He shakes his head a moment later, and then takes another slug of gatorade before adding, "What's up?"

Showy drops his smile and says, "You know Robber's not gonna renew his contract when it ends, right?"

Kent pauses in the middle of re-capping his bottle. He gives Showy a side-long look, eyes slightly narrowed.

"Oooookay," Showy replies.

"Alright, we've been going after each other pretty good all season, so let me promise, this is nothing to do with that." Showy holds out a hand. "Truce."

Kent quirks an eyebrow again, and then drops it and shakes the man's hand. "Okay."

"Good." Showy settles back in the chair. "You do know that, though, right? They could offer him a contract saying 'We're gonna pay you in nothing but gold, all upfront, here this contract itself is gold'--" He pauses and makes a considering face. "...Okay, maybe that'd do it. I dunno his life."

"What's this about, Showy," Kent says evenly.

"I called Scrappy the other night to make sure he and Vichy got back okay," he answers. "He mentioned it."

Kent pauses.
...He should've done that. Vichy doesn't really drink, not as much as he'd obviously had last night. He should've at least texted or something.

But he'd been too focused on falling asleep. He hasn't had to share a room since he became captain, but he and Chazzer were roommates a few times back when they were rookies. The other man still snores as bad as Kent remembered. "Thanks for that."

Showy just shrugs. "You haven't answered the question. Did you know that? Or at least figure it was gonna happen?"

Kent lifts his shoulders. "If he wants to try playing somewhere else, let him," he says bluntly. "We've got more centers in the feeder team."

"Whuff," Showy says quietly. "All right. Lemme ask another question, and let me state in advance that it is very relevant to the point I'm trying to get at."

Kent refrains from rolling his eyes only because he likes the man. "What?"

"Is it the drinking that's made you give up on Robinson?" Showy asks. "Or is it because he told you he'd stop, and then didn't?"

Kent narrows his eyes again. "What's the difference?"

"Let me ask one final question," Showy says. "Did Zimmermann ever tell you that he'd quit drinking, and then he kept doing it, but he just hid it more?"

Kent glares at him.

"You're one of the smartest guys I know, Parse," Showy tells him. "I know you can put these two together."

"Do you dislike Robber because you don't like the drinking?" he repeats. "Or are you harder on him than other guys because you feel like you were lied to?"

"He did lie," Kent bites off. "Him and Tobin both. Robber just fucked up less."

"...Not gettin' into that part," Showy after a pause, resting his forearms on the chair arms. "So, it's the second one. It's not the drinking, it's the lying about stopping drinking."

"Why's it matter?"

"Because I've never seen you give up on talent, except for the way you wrote off Robber and Toby," Showy answers. "Literally never."

"Let him do what he wants, his life innit my problem." Kent starts to push out of his chair. "I gotta get to bed."

"Kent," Showy says seriously. "I'm not attacking you. Can you trust me that I'm saying this because I think it's important? Not just for him, but also you?"

Kent exhales hard through his teeth; but he drops back into the seat. "Alright. So why does this matter, Showy?"

"Because you have a scary good eye for talent," Showy tells him. "Like, you know that, right?"

Kent makes a face at him.
"God damn, kill me," Showy says wearily. "Okay. Let's do a real small sample, alright? Aces defensemen, the past few years. Rookie year, Nino had the kind of shit slump that kills careers, and--"

"That wasn't his fault," Kent interrupts. Nino went on his skid after finding Tobin when he ODed; that shit was on Tobin. Nino worked his way back from it.

"Yeah, I know. PTSD's no joke," Showy agrees. "But how often do extenuating circumstances matter around here? Most guys don't get to recover from tanking their stats like that. But you kept workin' with him," he adds. "Right up 'til they shipped him back to the minors. He came back, you welcomed him right back."

"I'm the captain," Kent replies. "That's my job."

"That's not what I'm getting--okay. Look at Lee. First day of camp, he looked like a godawful trade. Couldn't play our system. Wasn't learning it fast enough. I half-expected him to get assigned to the minors and traded out to somebody that could use him right. But you, you kept working with him. And now look. He's out playin' the top pairing with Brown."

"Like, shit," Showy adds, leaning back deeper in his chair. "Even when I know to trust your instincts, I still didn't predict that. How do you do that, Parse? Johnny, Boxy--Vichy kept getting shit minutes until you hung around him so much the coaches stuck him on your line." He shakes his head. "I like Mitts, but when we were in the AHL I figured him for a career minor leaguer. Good enough to be trusted to fill in on injuries, but not friggin' top six level. Troy hardly ever cracked second line before, and now he's a goddamn nightmare with you and Chaz. Shit.

"Basically what I'm saying here Parse is that you have fucked up every single prediction I've ever made," Showy tells him. "Fuckin' spotting talent other people don't. How the hell."

Kent shrugs. "Some guys just have the ability. They just gotta figure out how to show it."

"Okay, one, if you start as a scout on your inevitable climb to GM, you're gonna have to learn to verbalize your impressions better," Showy deadpans.

Kent rolls his eyes and picks up his gatorade. "Uh-huh."

Showy waits for him to finish taking a swig before going on. "And two, despite all this, you've written Robber off. He's got talent, Parse. But you refuse to work with him, even though you'll do that with people a lot less obvious."

Kent jerks his shoulders in irritation. "He doesn't wanna work with me either, man."

"Yeah, it's wild how people don't like to be around people who don't like 'em," Showy replies. "Humans are weird."

"Get to your point, Zach."

"All of this is my point," Showy says. "You have a, I'm not reeeally exaggerating when I say 'preternatural,' ability to spot raw talent. But you're letting your hangup about feeling lied to about alcohol or drugs blind you to it in Robinson," he tells Kent. "You gotta start recognizing when you're doing that, so you can correct for it."

Kent exhales slowly.

It's not like he doesn't believe that Showy thinks this is real. The man wouldn't be doing all this
otherwise. But that doesn't make it actually real.

"I'll prove it," Showy continues, when Kent doesn't answer. "Five hundred bucks. When Robber leaves, he's gonna be a second-line center wherever he goes, within three years. No, you know what, fuck it. Two years. Within two years, Parse. You wanna take that bet?"

"Fine."

"No, Kent," Showy says in mild annoyance. "Don't just knee-jerk double down on me. Seriously think about it. Do you honestly want to bet that Robber isn't gonna do better somewhere else?"


"Ten thousand."

"Jesus Christ," Kent replies in exasperation. "I double down?"

"I learned from a fuckin' master," Showy says. "Think about it, Parse. Are you honestly going to throw away ten grand on a bet you're not a hundred percent sure of?"

"Christ," Kent repeats. He slumps back into his chair and takes a long drink of his gatorade.

Showy waits.

Kent finishes the bottle and recaps it before scanning the room for a trash can.

He can't find one--they're probably all hidden to keep the room "classy" or some shit--so finally he just thumps it down on the table.

"This is a stupid bet," he says. "What about all the variables you can't control? Where's he going? Who else is there, who's new, what's their system? How's the coach gonna play him? To his strengths, or just pluggin' holes for bigger names? What division?" He spreads his hands in aggravation, because Showy's smart. All this should be obvious. "You don't know for sure he's gonna succeed wherever he goes."

"You don't know for sure he won't," Showy points out, just like Kent knew he would. He was clearly trying to make Kent circle back around to his original claim.


"No, Parse. It's not a competition," Showy tells him patiently. "I'm not trying to top you. I just want you to recognize that this, this whole thing between you and Robber, is a thing you've done, so you'll think about why."

Showy asks again: "Do you think you been harder on Robber and Toby because of the alcohol and the drugs, than you would've been if it'd been something else? You don't have to answer me if you don't want to," he adds. "But think about it. Do you think that affected your reaction to the situation?"

Kent exhales hard through his teeth; but he slumps back in his seat and thinks about it.

Tobin fucked up, in public, in a situation that put the rest of the team at risk by ODing while they were all out celebrating after a game. Kent's judgment is fine there. He might've been a dumbass himself by partying and drinking too much last offseason, but he did it in offseason, on his own time. He didn't put anyone else on the team at risk.
--Except Vichy.

Kent blows out another breath. And then he pulls off his hat and drags a hand over his hair.

Robber's wasting his talent by fucking up his body with drinking too much. ...But it's not like he's ever pulled a Kane and gotten shit-faced in public. He's never been in the media for his drinking at all.

And the last couple seasons, Kent's seen Robber doing the same thing that Kent did himself in his rookie year: hanging around Chazzer if the guys go out somewhere, because Chazzer usually just nurses one beer the whole night and nobody gives him shit about it because they know how his parents died.

Chazzer's told him that Robber's gotten a lot better. That he's really sincere about being responsible about his alcohol intake. Kent just--

...He just doesn't believe it's going to stick, because why would he? Anybody can say anything, and then keep doing whatever they're already doing.

Zimmermann did, after all.

Kent was stupid once, believing Zimmermann when he said he had everything under control and he'd stop soon. He doesn't want to fall for that lie again.

"Christ," Kent mutters, because Showy's probably right about this. It pisses Kent off that he missed it; he oughta be able to trust his own damn head, at least. "Yeah. ...I guess. Maybe."

"So it was a blindspot," Showy says. "But now you know about it. So keep it in mind. Ask yourself why you're doing something or feeling a certain way in the future."

"Jesus," Kent grumbles, stretching out his legs and crossing them. "You sound like a shrink. You get together with Elliot before this?"

"Wait, did he finally get the team psychologist?" Showy asks, sitting up. "Finally. Fuck. I wanted one years ago."

Kent's started to roll his eyes; but he pauses at that last part. "You wanted one?"

Showy falls surprisingly quiet.

Kent reflexively raises an eyebrow. But when Showy makes a face like he's debating something, he realizes this might be serious and drops it.

"...Okay, I'm gonna tell you," Showy finally says, "but if you come chirping at me with this later, I will leave your teeth on the ice. I'm serious. I'll fight Scrappy when he comes at me for it, I will do it."

Kent raises the eyebrow again, higher.

"I mean it," Showy says seriously. "You're not toxic, Kent, but sometimes you wanna win so bad you'll do anything without thinkin' about the consequences. Don't fuck me over with this. I'm trusting you."

"...Okay," Kent says. "You don't hafta--"

"Do you know what postpartum syndrome is?" Showy asks.
"Uh," Kent replies. "The--that thing where moms kill their kids?" and a second too late he connects the links between the question and Showy, who has a wife and young daughter. Kent jerks up in his seat. "Shit! Shit no, I didn't mean--"

"It's okay," Showy interrupts, but he has to swallow hard after saying it.

"I'm sorry man, I didn't--"

"It's okay." Showy spreads his hands slightly. "It--yeah. That's the worst case, we didn't--"

He stops and takes a long breath.

Kent, still leaning forward in his chair, makes himself wait. He starts rubbing a thumb along the seam of his pants' leg, to have something to do with his hands.

"Yeah," Showy eventually says again. "That. Rie had it pretty bad. --Really bad. She. . . . It took us a while to work through it. --You remember the year before the lockout, when I got sick before a roadie?"

Kent thinks for moment: was it mid-season? A little while after Emiri was born? Something like that. "Yeah."

"I wasn't," Showy replies. "I mean, I was. I was puking, I couldn't sleep, but it was all psychosomatic." He waves at his head. "I was terrified to go on the road trip and leave Rie alone with Emi. I went to Dan and George and begged them to scratch me. I didn't care if it ruined my career, I couldn't go."

"Jesus," Kent says quietly. "Zach."

"Yeah," is all Showy replies. "My parents took her in the rest of the season after that, that helped. But.... Okay, so, in Japan there's this big cultural stigma against therapy, against admitting any mental health problems. And it's not like hockey's any better, right?"

"Yeah," Kent agrees.

Showy nods. "Yeah. But after that--you ever heard of sleep paralysis?"

It's starting to get really hard to track where Showy's going with all these interruptions. But they're so weird for the man that Kent figures he should just let him go at his own pace. "Uh-uh."

"It's like...you wake up, but your brain isn't online with your body yet," Showy says. "I dunno the details. Like you're awake, but you can't move. You're conscious and thinking 'I wanna open my eyes,' 'I wanna move my arms,' 'I want to get up,' but you just--can't. You can't physically do any of the shit you're telling yourself to."

"Damn."

"Yeah. It happened to me once, when I was a teenager. It was so fuckin' scary, man," Showy tells him. "I dunno how to describe how terrifying it was. I was just...literally helpless. It ended eventually, my synapses woke up or somethin', but until that. . . ."

Showy slumps deeper into his seat. "That's how I felt then, too. Rie just kept feeling worse, and I couldn't be there, but I couldn't handle being away. Vichy started drivin' me to the clubhouse 'cause I couldn't get in the car without feeling sick. He had to pull over to a gas station one time so I could barf in their garbage can and he has never once given me shit about it, that's how bad it was."
"Jesus, man," Kent mumbles. He reaches over and grips Showy's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Showy says, patting Kent's forearm with a faint, brief half-smile. And then he lets out another long breath.

"Anyway. That's when I broke down and went to Ell for help," Showy continues, looking at him. "I knew Emi was safe. I knew I had to help Rie. But I had to get myself stable first, 'cause our fights were getting real bad. He found a therapist and got me in, and it started gettin' better."

"Good."

"Yeah. I've gotten real off-base, okay," Showy says, huffing a breath and dropping his hand from Kent's forearm. Kent gives his shoulder a hard squeeze before pulling back. "Okay. So like, the cultural stigma thing."

"She didn't want to see anybody?" Kent asks, since that seems to be the connection.

"Yeah. And I got it, you know?" Showy says, propping his feet against the edge of the table. "She moved here alone, held down a good job, married a gaijin, raised a kid, did all that with no support back home. So she oughta be able to overcome this on her own, too, right?"

That sounds right; but it's pretty obvious from Showy's tone and expression that that's the wrong answer. So Kent just nods.

"It was the same thing I was doin' to myself," Showy says, making a tired, regretful face. "I was a fucking hockey player, I make a goddamn living controlling my body. What the fuck's it think it's doing, betraying me like this? I should be able to push through it.

"You're tryin' not to make that face that says you agree but you don't want to say it out loud, but I can see it," Showy adds wryly.

Kent rubs a hand over his mouth. "I'm not--I don't think less of you or anything, man. That's some bad shit."

"Yeah," Showy agrees, quieter. "Yeah, it was. It was more'n I could do alone. I was trying to half-ass my way to better instead of finding a professional who was trained in this to work with me. Which--I'm a fuckin' hockey player, I should know better, right? I'm not gonna tell Ell 'Hey, I know your entire career is working with guys like me to make me better, but I think I'm just gonna skip that and do some workouts based on these Internet articles I read, cool?'"

Kent snorts, because Showy's obviously trying to lighten the mood. "He'd kill ya."

"No shit, I'd deserve it," Showy agrees.

Then he looks away again for a moment, back out the windows. "...Long story short, she agreed to go to a family guy with me for a couple sessions. And then she started seeing someone to work through the depression. It got better. We're good now. But gettin' over those first steps...."

He looks down at his hands, and starts absently twisting his wedding ring. "...I pretty much had to tell her 'I'm not fuckin' Richard, I'm here for this. I said forever and meant it. But I don't know who I'm married to anymore. We gotta both work for this to succeed.'"

Showy drops his hands to his lap and looks back at Kent.

"Gettin' past that stigma is fuckin' hard, Kent. Believe me, I know," he says. "But if Ell's trying to
get you to see someone, then--if the stuff you been dealin' with is anything like how I was feeling, or what Rie went through, I don't want you to have to keep doing that alone anymore. Okay? I could pop off all this shit about settin' a good example for the guys, making yourself a better player, whatever. But straight up, as a friend, I just want you to feel better."

Kent shifts uncomfortably on the seat. "I'm alright, man--"

"You know the couple hours between when the GM told me I was comin' here and when the league announced the full roster, I spent the whole time thinking 'Please God, do not let Zimmermann be the Falcs' rep,'" Showy drawls. "'I know Parse is going if he's alive, fucking God please do not make that my weekend.'"

Kent makes a face and looks out the window.

"I guess prayer does work?" Showy continues. "I think I have to build a church now, just in case."

"Ha ha," Kent replies in annoyance.

"Uh-huh," Showy says with another brief half-smile, before he goes serious again. "I don't know everything you're goin' through, Kent. But I'm pretty sure you got some reasonable trust issues. And I know those suck, man. They leech in everywhere, even where you don't realize," Showy says sincerely. "When Mom and Dad married, it took me years to quit expectin' him to take off like Richard. Still might, if one of my teachers hadn't helped me figure out how I was actin' out that shit."

Kent finally, belatedly realizes who the "Richard" is that he didn't want to interrupt to ask about earlier: Showy's biological father.

He's only heard Showy use the man's name once before, in all the years they've known each other. Showy disowned him when the guy divorced his mom.

The man showed up at one of their fan events once, the annual preseason party they throw in an off-Strip amusement park for all the season ticket holders, so they can get their money's worth mingling with the team at an exclusive event. Showy greeted the man like any other fan.

Eventually, one of the former alternate captains, Sunny, had to get between the two of them before security finally led the guy off after he started getting angrier and angrier that Showy was refusing to acknowledge that he was his dad.

Showy was jumpy for the rest of the night, until one of the sales guys confirmed that the park had criminally trespassed the man and that he'd bought his entry ticket off a season-ticket holder and wasn't one himself. A couple extra handlers escorted Showy to his car after the event was over, but the guy didn't come around again.

So Kent guesses Showy means what he's saying.

Showy and his real dad always got along great, back when Showy was on the Aces and Jim came on the team's annual dads' trips. But if Showy disliked his biological father as much as he seemed to, then yeah, Kent guesses that could've carried over when his mom remarried.

So he says, "Okay."

Showy starts to reply. The door opens.

A woman pulling a cleaning cart pauses and stares at them. "Ahhhh...?"
"Hey, sorry," Kent says smoothly, pushing out of his seat with an automatic smile. Showy gets up as well, with his own PR grin on. "We saw the door was open and thought it'd be a good place to chat for a couple minutes. We'll get outta your way," he adds, heading for the door.

She steps aside so they can leave. "Okay."

As they loop back around to the elevators, Showy says, "Think about talking to someone, okay? I think it'll help."

Kent blows out a slow breath, and then lifts his shoulders. "Pretty sure Elliot's gonna shove me in a car and drive me there himself if I don't agree to a time soon, so. Yeah. Alright."

Showy snickers slightly at that. "Betcha he will."

Kent hesitates.

And then he squeezes Showy's shoulder again. "Sorry you had to deal with that shit, man. Was there...there I could've done? Or do now?"

If one of his teammates went through that bad a time and Kent missed it completely, what kind of a shit captain is he?

If he's supposed to be learning from mistakes he made, then this is definitely one he doesn't want to make again.

"Nah." Showy shakes his head. "I didn't talk to anybody if I could help it. I was too angry. I don't think most of the guys knew."

"Alright," Kent says. He pats the man's shoulder before letting his hand drop.

Showy punches him lightly in the arm. "There's no way you coulda known, Parse," he promises. "I went outta my way to avoid you findin' out. By the time it was really bad, you were already in the shit with Dan. You were strung out enough."

Kent subconsciously revises his mental timeline now that he knows this was happening at the same time he was having the worst of his problems with the former coach.

"Still," he says. "I shoulda tried to help. We're friends."

Showy smiles at that.

"I had to get stable myself before I could help Rie," he reminds Kent. "You had work to through your own stuff before you had the mental energy for other guys' shit. That's just how it is, Parse. There's nothin' wrong with it." He thumps Kent on the back once before draping an arm over his shoulders. "Thanks, though. For real."

"Yeah," Kent nods.

"Seriously though, don't make Ell actually shove you in a car for an appointment," Showy adds, tilting the corner of his mouth up. "Pretty sure that's kidnapping."

Kent rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"Hey. Parse. Just think of it like this," Showy says, tilting his head forward to catch his gaze. "It's just time to quit resisting personal growth. What, you didn't really wanna go the distance?"
It sounds like Showy's quoting something familiar, but he can't place it. Kent narrows his eyes at him.

"Too late," Showy smirks. "You can't unhear it. Now it's gonna nag at ya until you just do it."

"Ass," Kent replies, rolling his shoulder to shrug his arm off.

"Toooo~ late~" Showy sing-songs. "Unless you gotta write it down to remember it."

"I won't," Kent replies dryly. "So I'll forget it soon enough."

"--Oh shit," Showy says abruptly, his grin starting to spread wider he stares at him. Kent arches an eyebrow. "Oh shit. I didn't think that would work. Oh holy fuck Parse, you just won me so much money."

Kent shakes his head and punches the elevator button. "Now what?"

"That you remember stuff if you see it," Showy says, still grinning wide. "Everybody, every single fucker on that team, bet against me. I went to Boxy like 'You know it, you seen him write up shit on the plane!' but he abstained. From easy money!" He shakes his head. "I think they just couldn't bring themselves to admit it."

Showy slaps him hard on the back as the doors open, making Kent stumble into the elevator. "Also, if any of the guys kill you afterward 'cause it's not fair you exist, sorry."

"Uh-huh," Kent says dryly, hitting the button for their floor. "Sure y'are, Short."

"So much goddamn money," Showy says gleefully. "Our last game against's gonna be great. I'm gonna collect that morning, you're screwed."

"Aces' bets are only for Aces, Aero," Kent answers.

"Don't you start with me," Showy retorts. "I can't bet in Houston, I'm taking these winnings."

"What?" Kent replies, making a face. "Why can't you bet there?"

"No, pal, I got inured to how used to this we were in Vegas. When I got to Houston, I figured 'Alright, new team, I'll be low-key. Won't bet more than fivers.' Halfway through camp, Skals pulls me aside, all 'Do you have a gambling problem, Short,'" Showy says, making his expression super-serious and dropping his voice to imitate Skalski's gravel. "'We'll get you help."

Kent cracks up hard.

"So that's a great way to start with your new captain," Showy finishes.

"No!" Kent cackles, bracing a hand against the wall. "Holy shit. That's great."

"That is the opposite of great, asshole," Showy tells him, snickering himself.

Kent just laughs more. Showy elbows him in the ribs.

When the elevator arrives at their floor, Kent slaps Showy even harder on the back as they start for their rooms; but Showy doesn't stumble. 210 pound jerk. "You're goin' down tomorrow."

"You wish, pal," Showy says cheerily, flipping him off over his shoulder.
He comes back from the All-Star weekend to learn some jackass's dredged up an old video clip of an Italian show with a teenaged Scrappy making a racist comment on it.

Because life.

Kent's driving himself and Boxy from their one-on-one practice at the rink over to the clubhouse for breakfast, when Boxy's grip tightens on his phone. "Shit."

"What?"

"...Wait'll we park," he replies.

Kent glances over, because that sure don't sound great. Boxy just keeps scrolling through something on his phone.

Kent watches the video silently in the clubhouse parking lot, standing next to his open car door in the same spot where he fell still when he saw the first angry comment below it. On the other side, Boxy taps his fingers on the roof.

Vichy's car is parked right by the door, instead of in its usual spot further out in the lot and under the shade. Kent hands Boxy's phone back and heads into the clubhouse.

He starts for the kitchen, because that's where guys usually gather. But as he passes the hall to the dressing room, in the corner of his eye Kent sees its doors are shut. They should be open.

He jerks around, crashing into Boxy, and strides down the hall before yanking a door open.

"Fuck off, get--!" Vichy snarls, whipping around to glare at them; but he cuts off and falls silent when he sees who it is. Behind him, Scrappy's sitting in his stall, his hands curled tight around his elbows and his shoulders hunched in.

Boxy pulls the door shut behind them. Kent asks, "How bad is it?"

He didn't see what the issue was. According to the translation, Scrappy said something about football and Romani, which Kent guesses meant European soccer and some player. He didn't see anything to make the internet get up in arms about racism.

Scrappy swallows and then clenches his jaw, gripping his elbows tighter.

"Pretty bad," Boxy says.

Kent glances back at him. "How bad?"

Boxy asks, "Do you know who the Nazis rounded up for concentration camps?"

--Was there some kinda slang in there Kent didn't know? **F**uck. "Jews."

"And?"

Kent narrows his eyes slightly, not sure if this is a trap.

Whatever. Boxy apparently knows he's gay, and Vichy for sure does; and Vichy and Scrappy are
good enough friends that Scrappy must too. There's bigger shit to deal with. "Gay people."

"And?"

Kent spreads his hands in irritation, because Boxy should've done this back in the car.

"American school system at work," Boxy mutters.

"Disabled people and gypsies," Vichy says, sounding exhausted now. He sits down in the stall next to Scrappy, propping his elbows on his thighs and resting his forehead on his clenched hands. "In Europe, they call gypsies 'Romani.'"

Kent pulls off his hat and drags a hand over his hair. "...Fuck."

"It was joke," Scrappy says, almost inaudibly. "Gozzi was talking about last game in--back room, green room, and he.... I looked up to him. He was cool. I just...." He swallows again. "It was just joke."

Do they not fucking have media training in Italy, Kent thinks in frustration. "How old were you?"

"I know is bad," Scrappy says harshly. And then he closes his eyes and exhales hard through his teeth, dropping his head.

"I know," he mumbles. "I say it was wrong. I did not mean it. It doesn't represent my values as a person or the values of club."

"No!" Kent says in disbelief. "You can't fucking do that, that's just gonna make it worse! Who told you that--your agent? Get a new one."

Scrappy looks up, frowning. "What?"

"If you follow the script, you're just gonna dig yourself in deeper. Everyone knows it's a script," Kent tells him. Why do people always screw up something so obvious? "You've gotta...."

He drags a hand over his hair again, and starts pacing the room.

"--Own it," Kent says. "You were younger. You did something stupid. It fucking happens. And then spin it."

He turns back to face Scrappy. "Talk about how then you came here and you grew up. Matured. You came here and matured. You understand that you've let down a lot of people by--fuckin'--by failing our values of inclusivity and--something about the harm of your words, Adams'll get it laid out," he says with a sharp gesture at the ceiling, to PR's office on the second floor. "But you understand because of your time here. Spin it back to how your time here in the league, on the Aces, allowed you to develop as a person. So now you understand why that statement was harmful and inappropriate."

Kent thumps his hat distractedly against his thigh. "You can't not be that kid, but you can keep becomin' a better person than you were. Own it, and then make it into a story about how far you've come.

"--Talk to, look, talk to Moss, he had a lotta good points about that," he tells Scrappy, even though he can't remember most of them clearly. Why the fuck did he get so distracted thinking about Zimmermann that night? Why didn't he listen closer? He needs all that now. "Don't let 'em define you by your past. Make the story about the future. Make it about how you learned, and changed.
"And then just keep your head down and your mouth shut, and wait for somebody else to fuck up worse," Kent finishes. "Then everyone'll move on to the new clickbait. You'll be fine."

"You are the actual devil," Boxy remarks, arms crossed as he leans a shoulder against one of the stalls.

"If you want morality talk to a priest," Kent snaps. "I'm just tryin' to keep this team from bein' the next L.A. and Chicago."

Boxy makes a "fair enough" shrug, and doesn't push it.

Kent looks back at Scrappy. "Don't follow the script," he stresses. "It's not gonna work. Own the mistake so you can control the story. We'll get through this. It's not like you've said any shit since you been here," he points out. "You changed. You're gonna have to be perfect for years or people're gonna claim it's not true, but. We can get through this. You'll be okay."

Scrappy keeps staring, studying him with an expression Kent can't place and doesn't want to expend the concentration trying to right now. There are bigger problems.

He realizes he's probably talking way too fast. Scrappy's English is great, but this is a high-stress situation. The man was already messing up his sentences earlier.

"Okay." Kent sits down on the carpet to get closer to eye level with Scrappy. "Okay. First thing, don't do that handwaving, 'That wasn't the real me' shit everybody does. Okay? That doesn't work anymore. Everybody sees through it. Don't do that. If PR tries to go that angle, tell them 'no.'"

The door opens again. Kent glowers at it.

His first alternate leans into the dressing room. Brownie points a thumb over his shoulder and tells them, "Becky said if Jeff's in here, she needs to talk to him. Pretty immediately."

Scrappy swallows hard again, before taking a deep breath.

Then he scratches his forearm and looks over at Vichy, asking something in quiet Italian. He makes a vague gesture at Kent.

After a long moment, Vichy nods.

He drops his hands away from his face, and then slaps Scrappy on the back once before gripping his shoulder.


Scrappy stands up as well. The two of them leave to meet with the Aces' head of PR.

After they're gone, Kent scrubs his hands over his face. "Fuuuuuuuuuck."

"Don't ever go into politics, Parse," Boxy tells him. "Everybody who knows you'll be morally obligated to assassinate you before you go Manchurian Candidate on someone."

Brownie, still in the doorway and watching Vichy and Scrappy leave, looks back at them with a raised eyebrow.

"Fuck off," Kent grumbles, rocking up onto his feet.

He pulls his hat back on as he heads for the doors. "Somebody better've fuckin' made coffee."
PR gets out in front of things well. They do the right kind of official announcement, and Scrappy does the right talking points in a couple interviews.

Kent and the team put out their own official statement about Scrappy's good character. The guys keep their answers in line with it if something comes up in interviews.

The media team coordinates with the newspapers and radio to do some follow-up stories over the next couple days, non-explicitly re-emphasizing the club's commitment to diversity and its belief in Scrappy's sincere remorse.

Their social media person has to deal with a lot of negative comments in her posts for a few more weeks, but you don't sign up to do social for a major league team without expecting to see people claiming that they'll never support the club again, or wishing physical harm on its players at one point or another. That's just sports.

The Aces go on a five-game winning streak, pulling the team's media narrative away from Scrappy and back onto their place in the standings.

Kent fucks up his shoulder during last few minutes of the fifth game, but it's worth it. His center caught the saucer pass Kent sent right before he was slammed into the boards, and Chazzer managed to turn it into a goal, breaking their tie and winning the game in regulation.

It was worth it. A five-game streak is always better than a four-game one. They needed it.

* 

He's scratched from two games while his shoulder heals.

The Providence Falconers continue their roadie through Texas and into Arizona, before turning north for their final stop on the trip: Nevada.

* 

The Aces' trainer clears his shoulder the day before they play the Falcs, so Kent's back in a full-contact jersey for morning's practice. Afterward, the head coach tells him to come to his office.

Once Kent settles down in the chair across from Coach Moss's desk, the man tells him, "I'm going to scratch you from tomorrow's game. I want to make sure your shoulder's healed."

Kent pauses.

". . . Ell said I was good," he says carefully.

"Elliot said you were cleared," Moss replies. "That means something different in February than it does earlier in the season."

"Okay, but--I feel good, coach. I'm ready."

"I believe you," Moss tells him. "But I want you to take the extra game off. We've got a tough run coming up, and I want to be sure you're in top shape for it."

". . . Okay," Kent says at last, because he can't argue with that logic.

Moss nods at him. Kent starts to push out of his seat; and then he stops, and looks at the coach
"Is this because of my shoulder?" Kent asks. "Or because it's Providence?"

"Both," Moss answers. "I'd do the same if we were playing Edmonton, or L.A., or another team you have a bad history with. I don't want you taking a bad hit before you're fully healed."

"I've been playing cleaner," Kent says, because he has. The coach told him to, and he did. He cleaned up his act even before the team's brand took a hit with the shit around Scrappy.

"I know," Moss says seriously. He folds his hands on top of the desk. "I know you have, Kent. You don't even chirp much anymore, unless it serves a good purpose. But guys aren't going to forget the past that fast," he points out. "I don't want you on the ice with Lucic or Skalski or Mashkov until I know you're a hundred percent. I don't want to risk a technically legal but extremely hard hit exacerbating a lingering injury."

"...Okay."

"Providence is going to the playoffs unless every single one of them breaks an ankle before April," Moss says. "I want you in the press box, where you've got vantage to see their systems. There's never enough opportunities to really study the eastern teams."

Kent can't argue with that logic, either. "Got it."

"Good. This isn't a punishment, Kent," the coach tells him. "I know you've been playing cleaner."

"But I'm choosing to avoid a probable incident," Moss says, "and sacrificing one game to know for sure I'll have you healthy for the coming roadie."

Kent nods, a little slowly. "Okay."

Moss loosens his hands and sits back in his chair. "All right. Head on back for lunch."

Kent nods again and pushes to his feet.

*

During the national anthem, Antwone sends him a text: Why're the announcers making a big deal about you not playing another guy?

& how's the shoulder? he adds.

Its alright, the team's just being careful Kent replies, typing awkwardly onto his phone that's still sitting on the press box table so it's not too obvious that he's not paying attention to the singer. He's at the far end from the announcers, but still. Optics. Is the guy Zimmermann?

Sounds right Antwone confirms.

We were on the same juniors team in high school Kent answers. He's good. That's probably why

A few moments later, Antwone sends back Is this like when you said the Crosby guy was "good," and then I looked him up & apparently either you or him are the greatest player in the world?

Kent chuckles for real for the first time in hours.

He sends They're both good.
You know I don't know enough hockey to catch all the shade I'm sure you're throwing, dude. Antwone replies. Should I just be assuming anything you say is shade?

Can't go wrong with that Kent agrees with a grin. As long as I'm not talking about Aces.

Amazing Antwone answers. At this point, Kent can hear the drawl even without them being on Skype.

Out on the ice, the anthem singer finishes. Kent drops his hand from his heart and sits back down as the guys start to skate for center ice, quickly writing Puck drop gotta go

Go Aces Antwone sends with a spade emoji. Kent tucks his phone into his suit pocket and focuses on the ice.

He keeps smiling faintly for a few seconds longer.

And then it slides away as Zimmermann wins the face-off against Vichy. Kent braces his elbows on the crowded table and leans forward to concentrate on the game.

* During the season, the Aces' official soda sponsor does a promotion where occasionally one of the guys gets photoed sitting on a throne made of twelve-pack boxes and answers fan tweets for an hour. One of the defensemen was supposed to do the March event, but Korsy gets knocked off the active roster with a hand injury the night before. The club tosses Kent's center into the spot instead.

"There's consequences to being funny online," Kent reminds Chazzer.

"They oughta make you do this, bro," he retorts. "Getting out of it by only posting about Kitt is cheating."

"Dude, if they did, do you think they'd let me bring her in?" Kent grins. "Put her on that chair for the photo? I could answer every tweet in emojis and claim she was hitting the phone with her paws."

"God give me strength," Chazzer sighs, before flipping up the brim of Kent's hat to knock it off and walking away. Kent snickers to himself as he catches it before it hits the floor.

He's putting on deodorant after his post-workout shower when he hears one of the guys crack up in the dressing room.

"Parse, c'mere!" Kirbs yells a second later.

Kent gives his wet hair a final scrub before draping the towel around his neck as he heads into the room. "What?"

"Check this," Kirbs replies, holding out his phone. "I sent Chaz a tweet for that promo thing."

"Nerd."

"Look what he wrote," Kirbs replies. Kent reads Kirbs' post: @vegas_acesWhats your fav part of the season so far? Inquiring minds!!!

Kent repeats "Nerrrrrd" as he checks Chazzer's answer: The game of psychological warfare going
Kent snorts hard. "Screencap that before they make him delete it."

"How do I do that on here?" Kirbs asks, pulling his phone back.

"Still haven't figured out these newfangled smartphones, old man?" Kent asks. "Should we get you a rotary dial already?"

"Hey, hey." Kirbs headlocks him. "Cram it, brat."

"Now shake your fist and tell me to get off your lawn," Kent grins, trying to twist loose.

Outside the room, the trainer calls, "Don't fuck up your arm, Carl!"

Kirbs lets go of Kent with an exhale and looks behind them at the door. "Swear he's got eyes in the back of his head."

"Has to around here," Kent agrees, picking up his towel from where it fell and chucking it at the laundry bin. "Hold the off button and the round one down at the same time. That'll do it."

"All right."

"Old man," Kent adds, grabbing his clothes out of his stall before escaping back into the showers. Kirbs yells, "Fuck you, Parse!" after him.

(When you spend over half a year every year working with the same guys nearly every day and trusting them to have your back in high-adrenaline games most nights, you learn to put up with each other's shit.

Or to just make yourself stop hearing it.)

*

Despite injuries, losses, and internal and PR turmoil, the Las Vegas Aces claim a spot in the 2016 playoffs.

The Providence Falconers clinched their playoff berth a week earlier.

*

Their first playoff series is against the Seattle Schooners. The other club's above them in the rankings, so the first two games take place on the Schooners' home ice.

The Aces win the first game in Seattle.

The next morning, their goalie gets food poisoning. Boxy's better by tomorrow; but Coach Moss puts him down as backup anyway, and has Arno start the second game of the playoffs.

Seattle comes back at them hard. From the start of the game, one of the Schooners' late season call-ups keeps planting himself in front of their net, despite Arno's increasingly rough attempts to shove him out and in spite of a couple uncalled cup checks. Tobin just shrugs them off and keeps on screening the goalie, making himself available to his teammates' passes.

By the end of the first period, Tobin's already scored one ugly goal with the tactic, putting Seattle
up 2-1. When the Schooner gets in front of the net yet again early into the second period, Arno sticks him hard in the balls and then punches him in the back of the neck for good measure, driving Tobin out.

The refs finally whistle that one.

"It's his fault for gettin' in there," Kent argues afterward. "Arnolds's got the right to clear his space."

"You been ignoring those cup checks all night," one of the Schooners' alternate captains, Fearn, retorts to the ref. "You can't keep lettin' 'em get away with this shit!"

"A guy gets in the blue paint, bad things happen," Kent replies. "He knew he was taking a risk, he chose to go there."

"There's a limit, Parse," the ref says dryly. "I don't call this, I might as well resign now."

"He's got a right to get his crease clear," Kent repeats. "If Tobin couldn't handle the consequences, he shouldn't've gotten in there in the first place."

Fearn side-eyes Kent narrowly.

"You can clear the crease within limits." The referee looks over at Arno. "Two minutes, roughing. This isn't the 90s. Can it."

Arno nods once tersely. Kent exhales in irritation as the ref leaves to announce the penalty.

Kent skates back to the Aces' goal with Arno. "{}Little too obvious. Control your shit."

"Yeah, yeah. Go kill it."

"You better keep that goddamn puck out," Kent orders, as one of their guys leaves the bench and skates over to the box to sit the penalty for Arno. "Rest'a the fuckin' night."

"I will," the goalie replies, pulling his mask back down. "You keep it in their zone like you're supposed to."

Kent snorts under his breath and looks at the bench. When Coach Moss gestures that he's on the penalty kill, he heads over to the face-off.

One successful penalty kill and a couple minutes later, Kent's half-tilted away from the ice and listening to Coach Kurlansky. The man's pointing out one of Seattle's forwards, telling Kent to take advantage of the player's sloppy stick-handling whenever the guy's chased fast while heading for the Aces' goal.

And then there's a vicious pain in the side of Kent's face.

Coach Kurlansky jerks back. Kent doubles over reflexively. "{}Fuck!!"

Further down the bench, there's a crash and a lot of yelling. Someone tries to put a towel on Kent's face. He punches the arm away, because fuck this hurts.

Kent realizes he's been hit with another puck.

The yelling gets louder. Kent blinks his eyes open and forces himself to lift his head.
Scrappy's hauled a Schooners player over the railing and halfway down to the floor, swearing at him. Fearn's trying to fight his way back up, but Trojan has a skate dug into the loose edge of his shorts, helping pin him. Vichy's holding Chazzer back as the other man tries to get at Fearn. A couple officials are on the other side of the rail, telling Scrappy to let go before he takes a penalty for this.

"Sonuvafuck!" Kent snarls, taking the towel from the trainer. The side of his face is too wet. He must be bleeding.

Fearn's good enough that he wouldn't accidentally lose control of the puck like this. Kent's been deliberately hit. Again. "Asshole!"

Scrappy lets go when the head coach grips his upper arm hard and tells him to. Trojan doesn't move his foot, forcing Fearn to wrench his shorts free and tearing the fabric in the process. A ref tells Trojan to can the petty shit.

Kent presses the towel a little harder to his cheek, and snarls when the pain flares worse. "Fuck."

The trainer grips his shoulder. "C'mon, Parse."

"I'm good," Kent grits out.


Kent exhales hard, but doesn't argue. The trainer tugs on his shoulder.

Kent throws the bloody towel at Fearn's face as the Schooner climbs back over the railing. "Fuck you, cockstain!"

"Parson," Coach Moss says sharply.

Elliot pulls harder on his shoulder. Kent jerks it loose, but gets to his feet.

He grinds his teeth into his mouthguard as more blood starts running down his cheek before he even reaches the hallway. Elliot hands him a new towel as they head for the doctor's room.

He finally gets back during the second intermission, after they've stitched and glued his face, and told him to get an x-ray tomorrow to see if his cheekbone's broken. The equipment manager's attached a full-face visor to his helmet.

After the coach goes over battle plans in the dressing room, Kent shakes off the towels they put on him to keep his body temperature from dropping too fast and carefully pulls his bloodied jersey back on with a scowl.

Vichy hands him his helmet, tapping a thumb against the new visor. "Closest you've come to playing college hockey, Parser."

"Shitty as I expected," Kent replies flatly, slowly putting it on. Vichy and another college guy both go "hey."

Kent huffs out a breath, and then swears when it fogs up the visor. He keeps swearing as he has to unstrap the screen to wipe it clean.
"That hadn't been deflected, it coulda gone into your ear," Brownie says, tapping the open gap in his own helmet around his ear. "Get some plastic there before you start wrackin' up concussions."

"Won't hear as good like that," Kent mutters.

"Mod your helmet, Parse," Brownie repeats. "Unless you plan to start talkin' less shit."

"I didn't say a goddamn thing to him."

"You did something," the other man says. "Fernsy don't do this shit unless he's really pissed."

Kent sneers derisively.

A guy comes in to announce that the intermission's wrapping up. Kent straps the screen back in place and gets to his feet.

He fucks up enough passes and turns over enough pucks in his first couple shifts that Coach Moss guts his ice time, sending out another winger with Kent's line while he gets exiled to sit at the end of the bench. His face hurts.

Arno doesn't allow any more goals for the rest of the game; but the Aces fail to score. They lose 2-1.

Kent's culled from the postgame media, probably because PR's worried he'd break script if one of the reporters asked him about the former Aces' player Tobin's game-winning goal. Or maybe they wanted to bypass any questions about the sanitation violation the league might slap Kent with, since technically he threw a biohazard at Fearn.

Or maybe the trainer just assumed it would take more time to get Kent to take the serious painkillers.

"What's this?" Kent asks, when Elliot gives him the pill and a cup of orange juice.

"Oxy."

"I hate that shit," Kent mutters, dry swallowing it. At least the game's over. All he has to do is ride to the hotel, eat and pack, and then get on the bus to the plane. He can manage that, even if his head's messed up.

"You hate all of them, Parse," Elliot replies. "I have a list of everything I've tried with you, it reads like a goddamn pharmaceutical sell sheet. At this point I'm just starting over from the top and praying."

Kent growls in the back of his throat before sipping the juice.

"Is there anything you remember taking that you were okay with?" Elliot asks.

Pot, but. "It's not an option," Kent mumbles into the cup.

The Aces' trainer is silent as Kent slowly drains the juice; and by the time he's finished, Kent's realized what he's basically admitted to.

He drops his arm. "That's not--I didn't--"

"Teenagers make bad choices sometimes, Parse," Elliot interrupts, taking the empty cup. "You
aren't who you were in Juniors."

Kent clenches his fists slightly, and then catches himself and makes his hands relax.

Elliot hands him a soft protein bar. "Don't skip dinner, no matter how bad it feels to chew. Puking with a busted face'll feel worse."

Kent nods gingerly and takes it, and slides off the cot.

He hangs back in the hallway to the dressing room, chewing on the bar, until the media's cleared out.

"You chuckin' that towel's trending on Twitter, bro," Chazzer tells him later, on the bus to the airport. It breaks up the sour, we-lost quiet.

Chazzer twists around in his seat and raises his phone over the headrest, so Kent can see the gif. "Note on the most popular post's 'Kent Parson is a petty little bitch.'"

"Duh," Kent replies, sitting on his right hand because the doctor told him absolutely not to touch his face as it swells. It's harder than he expected. Even with the painkiller, this feels weird. "This is news? Fuck've they been all this time?"

Chazzer snickers and drops back into his seat.

"Actual devil," their goalie sing-songs under his breath next to him.

Kent elbows him in the arm. "Piss off, Boxy."

"Don't take it out on me just because you're gonna lose your pretty boy status, Parse."

"Nope."

"Yes," Scrappy says, a seat over and down. "That's gonna scar, Parser. Or I'll eat your hat."

Kent points over the back of the seat in the direction of his voice. "You're on."

Scrappy snorts.

When they're crossing the tarmac to the plane, Kent finally remembers that his first alternate mentioned one of the defensemen started a fistfight with Fearn soon after Kent had to leave the ice.

It wasn't a smart move. It took Lean out of the game for five minutes, crippling their top defense pairing. Maybe they could've tied the score if he'd been on the ice instead of in the box.

But still, Kent gets that the thought's supposed to count. So he drops back in the line until he's alongside Lean.

Kent pops him lightly in the arm. "Thanks for tonight, man."

Lean twitches the corner of his mouth in a brief smile. "Yeah." It's dark enough despite the airport lights that his new black eye isn't visible. "Dick move they pulled."

"Playoffs," Kent says with a shrug. "Get away with everything you can."
They won't clear him for game three in Vegas. The Aces lose again.

There's a two day break between the third game and the fourth. The swelling along his cheek goes down enough that Kent makes it through practice.

The head coach grills him on whether he thinks he's genuinely ready to play, before finally making the game-time decision to include him on that night's roster. The Aces lose again.

Late into the first round of the playoffs, a Blackhawks player gets caught on video yelling gay slurs at the referee who sent him to the penalty box.

"I told you," Kent says to Scrappy the next morning during breakfast in the clubhouse, as he scrolls through an article on the damage. "Keep your head down, and someone else'll fuck up worse sooner or later."

Scrappy eats another forkful of sausage, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Vichy's got his forehead on the table with his arms folded over the back of his head in his "I'm so done with this shit" ostrich pose. He's been doing that pretty much since Kent sat down at the table, but it's not like Kent was wrong. He was dead right.

"Idiot," Kent adds to himself, as he reads through Shaw's by-the-numbers statement. Why didn't Chicago look at how Vegas handled their own PR hit? Adams and her team did it right. "You fucked your negotiations."

"What?" Scrappy asks.

"His contract's ending," Kent replies, nodding at his phone. Unless something's changed since he last checked. Shaw's one of the worst pests in the Central division; they haven't played a game against Chicago yet without him and Scrappy getting into a fight. It could be a problem if the Aces manage to get their shit together enough to advance to the conference finals and end up facing the Blackhawks there again. "Fifty says he's traded by exit interviews."

Scrappy keeps looking at him for a long moment, and then he shakes his head. Vichy raises a hand without lifting his head. "In."

"Why, man?" Kent asks sincerely. "You know I'm right. He's gotta go. The PR can't handle it."

"Fan favorite," Vichy says, muffled. "You've done a whole spiel on that immunity, Parser. In."

Kent shakes his head. "Fans want a team that doesn't force 'em to defend off-ice shit," he replies. "Winning'll only save you for so long."

"You know I'm right," he insists, because Vichy's just being stubborn. "They're keeping Kane, so they gotta boot anybody else who fucks up. You saw how Sharp went. 'We had to manage cap space,'" he says, imitating Chicago's GM. "No, man. You traded him because he fucked Keith's wife and you couldn't keep it inside the dressing room."

"Jesus," someone says. Kent looks over his shoulder to see his first alt standing behind them,
holding a plate and staring.

"Meet Playoffs Parse," Scrappy tells Brownie, raising his voice over the noise of Vichy cackling hysterically into the tabletop. "Know why every guy in conference is out for his blood? This." He points his fork at Kent's mouth. "This shit right here."

"I'm right," Kent says, because he is.

"Going to be your gravestone, Parser," Scrappy retorts.

"Epitaph," Vichy corrects like an ass, still snickering. Scrappy rolls his eyes and socks him in the arm.

*

The Aces play with desperation in game five back in Seattle. The Schooners lose.

They return to Vegas for game six. The Schooners lose again, in triple overtime.

There's no real postgame afterward, because nobody's in good enough shape to deal with reporters. It's long past midnight.

A couple guys had to get saline drips during the final intermission, in order to rehydrate enough to go out for the third OT. One of their defensemen, Sunny, had to leave the game after breaking his jaw when a puck bounced wrong while he was blocking a shot.

After the game was done and they were finally off the ice for the night, their goalie fell asleep in his stall, still half-dressed. Everybody left him alone to rest, until the trainer woke Boxy back up to make sure he was okay.

The club pays for taxis to take home anybody who doesn't have a wife or girlfriend or other family around to drive them. Kent and his center split a ride; but Chazzer passes out during it, so Kent forces himself to stay awake and gets the driver to go to Chazzer's place first, even though they were already halfway to his own apartment.

He trips over the cat when he finally gets in, but Kent doesn't bother turning on any lights. He just double-checks that his alarm is set for tomorrow morning, and then he passes out fully clothed on the couch.

*

In game seven of the first round of the playoffs, the Las Vegas Aces lose to the Seattle Schooners.

After it's all over, they go through the obligatory handshake line, as if that could really erase all the shit both their teams have pulled against each other during the past couple weeks.

Kent watches as Lean and one of the Schooners' sophomores, Rahe, skate past each other without shaking hands or even acknowledging each others' existence. That's gonna get brought up by the media.

He comes up to Rahe in the line soon after. They shake hands briefly with the same default "Good game."

And then Kent--coldly furious about getting cut down so early into the playoffs when
Zimmermann's team has already advanced to the next round, more than smart enough to work out that whatever hazing happened between Lean and Rahe was bad enough it'd damage Rahe's brand if it got out of the dressing room, and still inclined to lash out when angry as if hurting someone else could ever really make him feel in less pain himself--Kent adds lowly, "You won't get away with what you did forever."

Rahe startles and jerks back around to stare at him.

Kent continues on to the next guy in line. Fearn tells him "Good game" with a tight jaw, looking past him at Rahe; Kent repeats the same.

*

Seattle goes on to face the San Jose Sharks. Las Vegas goes home.

*

The usual offseason schedule begins.

They all clean out their lockers and go through their exit interviews. The rookies and a few other players get reassigned to the farm team, to help the Sovereigns on their own run in the AHL playoffs. Most guys leave for their summer homes.

Kent gets minor surgery on his shoulder. He spends almost every evening at home, watching playoff games as more teams are steadily eliminated on the way to the Cup finals.

*

Providence defeats Pittsburg and advances to the Eastern conference finals.

And then the Falconers beat the Lightning, and head to Seattle to for the first game of the Stanley Cup finals.

*

In early June, the L.A. Kings strip their current team captain of his C and assign the captaincy to a better-scoring player instead.

Kent follows the news with no real surprise. He tries not to think about the guys on the Aces who had a better season than him this year, or who are younger and still coming into their prime: Vichy, Chazzer, Catalano.

Everybody can feel it when their replacement starts coming up behind them. The Aces' former captain was standoffish with Kent during Kent's own rookie year, because they both knew he was going to replace Reboul sooner or later.

Everybody sees it coming.

*

Vegas's feeder team, the Reno Sovereigns, win the AHL playoffs and take home the Calder Cup.

Several guys who went to play for Reno for the past month return to Vegas to celebrate. They bring more Sovereigns players with them; Kent coordinates with his alternate captains to throw them all a party.
He decides to rent out a place out for it, so the guys can whoop it up without having to deal with paparazzi. Brownie and Trojan call around and get more of the team to come back for the night. The Aces might've lost their own playoffs, but Reno's success deserves to be commemorated.

Kent repeats that phrase multiple times one morning while he's driving to the sports bar with Vichy, because Vichy knows the manager there and said he could probably get Jason to book the place on short notice if they came in person and handed over cash. Kent refrained from commenting on how that sounded.

"You're gonna have to smile tonight," Kent points out. "And actually say things like 'Way to go, Reno.'"

Vichy deliberately scowls deeper. "No."

"I'm gonna make you do a speech," Kent smirks. "Full out, standing-on-a-chair toast for the biggest little city in the world. I'll put it up on Instagram."

"I will burn in hell first," Vichy says flatly.

"Jesus Christ," Kent sniggers. "It's the same state, man. Where does this shit come from?"

"Isn't New York just Manhattan?" Vichy says pointedly.

Kent waits until they hit a stoplight, and then punches him in the arm.

Vichy makes a scoffing noise. "So shut your mouth, yankee."

"You're bad as Boxy, man," Kent replies, because their goalie's response when he was invited to the party was "Not on your life."

The scar on Kent's cheek's faded a lot over the past weeks. He picks up an Aces cap at one of the fanstores the afternoon of the Sovereigns' party.

Kent shows up to the sports bar early. As soon as Scrappy and his wife come in, Kent tosses the hat to him.

"What?" Scrappy says, looking at the cap in his hands in confusion.

"You want seasoning with that?" Kent replies. "That's cool. Whatever you need to eat it."

Scrappy gives him a long, long look.

"No," he finally says.

Kent smiles wider. "No, you don't need seasoning?" he asks. "Or no, you're welching on a bet?"

Scrappy pulls the cap on. "Thanks for the free hat, Parse."

"Failed in the clutch, Scraps," Kent grins.

Scrappy gives him a middle finger before pointing to it for good measure, holding Kent's gaze and raising an eyebrow.

Kent snickers. And then he shakes Luisa's hand and asks about her and Scrappy's daughter.
With the way the schedules worked out, the Sovereigns' party ends up being the same night as game seven between the Falcs and Schooners.

By half an hour in, the bartender's tuned multiple screens to the game at Lean's insistence, even though it's still in the pregame commentary.

By the end of first period, Kent's glad this is a private event. Lean's already almost through his second drink and just straight-up catcalling the TV while one of the Sovereigns' defensemen, Kawapit, eggs him on. Though as far as Kent can tell, Lean's not so much rooting for the Falconers to win as he is just really fucking invested in watching Seattle lose.

"Where's this chirping been all season?" Kent comments to Lean's defense partner, because this is the loudest he's ever seen the guy be. "We gotta get him like this on the ice."

"No," Brownie drawls. "I like bein' able to play with a guy who's on the ice, not in the box for startin' shit."

"Wow what's that like," Chazzer deadpans from his seat further down the bar.

Kent snorts. "I got better, man."

"Every fuckin' L.A. game, bro. *Every fucking one.*"

"I don't need to hear anything from the guy whose neighbors showed up in Schooners jerseys to the playoffs."

"Mike gave me so much crap for comin' back down here and not to his party tonight," Chazzer says, shaking his head. "So much."

Kent tilts back to look around Brownie at him. "That why your phone blew up after Seattle scored?"

"Yup." Chazzer takes another sip of his beer. "Dicks."

"You got bad taste in friends, Chaz," Kent tells him. "You gotta get a new place."

"I'm leaving town if the Schooners win," he grumbles. "I refuse. I'm spendin' summer elsewhere."

Brownie thumps him sympathetically on the back.

"Fuck yeah!" Lean yells, fists in the air, when Zimmermann scores and takes the Falcs one up over Seattle.

"Oh my God," Vichy sighs in his seat next to Kent. "Is he drunk."

"Nah," Kent says, because he was keeping an eye out. Lean's third beer has been sitting on his table since second period, still mostly full and dripping condensation onto the coaster. "Maybe this'll get it outta his system."

"Fingers fuckin' crossed," Vichy mutters into his scotch. On the other side of him, Scrappy--hatless again after autographing it and giving it away to the bar back--makes an agreeing noise.

Kent takes another sip of his drink and studies the replay of Zimmermann's goal.
By the time the game's over, it's late. Several guys who only came into Vegas for the night take off after congratulating the Sovereigns' players a final time.

A couple Sovereigns leave as well, also citing flights. Kent slaps Wilson and Borislavyshyn on the back as they go with a final "Way to kick ass, guys."

He makes a mental note that Borislavyshyn might've been willing to spend some of his free time in the same place as Vichy, but he's still leaving as soon as he can without being overly obvious about it.

But it's better than things were at the start of the season. It's a step forward.

Several guys have taken over the pool table and dartboards, going through a couple platters of nachos to soak up the alcohol. Kent stays at the bar with a few remaining Aces, most of who're watching the post-game celebration.

He stares blankly in the direction of a couple screens without watching, checking occasionally that his smile still looks right in the mirror behind the bar and half-listening to the guys' commentary beside him. Vichy thumps him on the back silently as he leaves for the bathroom.

A few moments later, Scrappy says something quiet in Italian and pauses in the middle of scrolling through his phone.

Then he looks over at Kent. "Uhhh, hey, Parser. You see this?"

"It's on the screens, Scraps," Kent points out.

Scrappy ignores that and shifts into Vichy's seat. "Naw, look." He eyes Kent kind of uncertainly for some reason as he holds his phone out. "It's all over social...."

Kent takes it, eyebrow quirked.

Scrappy's twitter account is on the Stanley Cup hashtag. The second post from the top is a shaky video from somewhere in Seattle's stands and the text **HOLY SHIT WTF??????????????????** with a whole lot of emojis and hashtags. When Kent restarts the video, Zimmermann's kissing that kid from Samwell.

Kent's grip on the phone loosens.

Someone comes up behind his shoulder. And then Scrappy's linemate says, "...Ooooh, so he's gay or whatever? Jesus Christ."

The retweet count on the post is climbing faster than the likes.

Kent starts to open up the comments, and then he stops himself and thinks *Don't look.* Kirbs says something else about Zimmermann; farther away, one of Kent's lineys calls, "Come on, Carl."

"Did I say something wrong?" Kirbs asks. The number of posts in the Stanley Cup hashtag keeps going up.

By the time Kent registers that maybe that was an actual question he was supposed to answer, Kirbs's apparently decided he's okay to go on. "I'm saying, there's always something *with* him. Prolly why it took him so long to figure out the league...."
Go to hell, Kent thinks, at the same time another part of him goes, If he'd figured out the league he wouldn't've done this to his career.

Kirby makes a comment about the Cup parade and then laughs at it. Kent doesn't catch that it's a gay crack until he hears Chazzer stifle a chuckle; a couple more guys laugh out loud.

The likes on the post are starting to climb, but the retweets are still ahead. The comment count just keeps growing. Twitter's stopped listing how many new posts are under the Stanley Cup tag.

There's a quiet thump behind Kent. Kirby goes, "Ow--damn, Jeff."

Chazzer calls, "Go back to your glory days talk, Carly."

***

"Right. Glory days..." Brian adds, deliberately doubtful. Beside him, Prochazka chuckles again, out loud this time.

Kirby turns away from Parson, rubbing his arm where Scalfano popped him, and comes back over. "I'm just sayin'!"

"Shuddup Kirb, we're in public," Brian finally says. This might be a private event, but that doesn't mean the employees aren't listening. The bartender's making a drink right by them.

Kirby gestures behind him at Parson. "I'm not saying anything wrong!"

"Parse innit listenin' to your shit," Brian drawls. Parson's still staring at the phone Scalfano handed him, looking as checked out as Brian's ever seen the kid.

Parson promised him, when Brian talked with him about the Aces’ culture, that this place was different. That if Brian's brother and his family visited, his nephew wouldn't hear the exact same crap Kirby's spouting right now.

Most of the time, that's been true.

Most of the time, when the talk hits a certain threshold, Parson starts shutting it down and telling guys not to fuck up the Aces' PR. But there's still a low level of comments from a few guys that Parson either doesn't care enough to tackle every single time, or that he's too used to hearing to register anymore.

Brian used to be too used to it to hear it either, until he made a similar comment about his nephew one Thanksgiving and then his brother punched him over the table. And then Brian had to decide whether he was going to sit down and think seriously about his shit, or if he was going to lose a whole side of his family.

Easy choice, that one.

So whenever Parson's too used to this shit to hear it or too busy to deal with it, Brian figures it's his job to step in. He signed onto the Aces intending to be a leader here; this's just another part of that responsibility.

Besides, finding out a guy you played with in Juniors is gay is probably a lot to deal with.

If it'd happened to him, Brian knows he'd thinking about the past, wondering if there was anything weird the guy said or did that he missed. Especially if they ever roomed together on roadies--that'd
be fuckin' strange for sure. Parson's clearly preoccupied.

So Brian grins and tilts his glass at Kirby. "Did you skate any of the Cup finals? Y'dodged the question there, Carly."

"Hey, hey," Kirby retorts, slinging himself back into his seat by Prochazka and Troy, leaving Parson and the phone behind. "Course I did. Shit, man, I thought I was gonna drop the Cup on my head when Scraps gave it to me, I was so fuckin' dead."

"That woulda been a great vid," Prochazka snickers.

Kirby points at him. "You didn't look any better!"

"I had a fucked hip, what was your excuse?"

Farther down the bar, Parson hands the phone back to Scalfano before pushing out of his seat and heading for the bathrooms.

Fuckin' strange for sure, Brian thinks sympathetically.

***

Kent buys two cigarettes and a light off one of the guys in the kitchen, and then cuts outside through the propped open back door.

A guy chucking trash bags into the dumpster looks at him. "Hey, man, what're you doing?"

Kent holds up the lit cigarette with a smile. "Just wanted to catch a smoke. I'm not supposed to, I don't want the guys to see me and gimme shit."

"Yeah, but--"

"You can check with Stacy if you need to make sure I paid my tab," Kent promises, hoping he's remembering the bartender's name right. "Or I got my receipt, if you wanna check."

The guy does. Once he's satisfied Kent's not running out on his bill, he warns him that he'll have to go back inside through the front. And then he heads back into the kitchen and shuts the door behind him, leaving Kent alone.

Kent slumps heavily against the wall. He stares at the cigarette as it burns down, and tries not to think.

When it's almost down to the filter, Kent uses it to light the second cigarette. He exhales the smoke with a cough and makes a face as he drops the butt to the concrete.

Guess that's why he didn't care about cameras last year, he thinks vaguely as he grinds it out, because trying not to remember how he saw Zimmermann and that kid flirting back at that party at Samwell is just making him think about it more. Kent snorts humorlessly.

Bittle. The kid said his name was Bittle.

He tilts his head back to rest it against the wall, and stares up at the light pollution in the sky as the cigarette burns down. "You fucker."

Out of sight, someone calls, "--Parser?"
Kent shuts his eyes and grits his teeth, clenching his hands into fists and almost burning himself with the cigarette.

Then he makes himself relax his hands again. Kent shoves his free one into his pocket, hooking his thumb out. "What is it."

Vichy comes around the corner a couple moments later. "Are you oka--what the hell?"

"I'm not smoking," Kent says flatly. "I just need an excuse to be out here."

It was a trick he picked up back in Juniors: a way to skip out on a party for a little while without looking weird, something he could pull if Zimmermann was starting to feel overwhelmed or if Kent thought the guy needed to cut off for a while but he knew it'd turn into a whole big thing if he told Zimmermann that directly.

Vichy blows out a breath and comes over, draping an arm across his shoulders. "You okay?"

"Don't touch me," Kent replies. "People'll think you're gay."

"--Oh my God." Vichy was starting to pull his arm away, but now he drops it back down heavier. "Kent."

Kent jerks his shoulders, but Vichy refuses to be shaken off. "I'm good. I'll be back in a minute," Kent says. "Go away."


Kent grits his teeth again.

He tosses the cigarette on the pavement and grinds it out so his teammate won't end up inhaling any secondhand smoke. "I'm fine. Fuck off."

"Do I even need to tell you how obviously that's bullshit?" Vichy retorts. "You're hiding in an alley smoking, fuckin' Milbury's freaking out on TV--"

"I'm not fuckin' smoking," Kent snaps, because he doesn't want to hear what that asshole commenter said. He doesn't want to hear about any of this. He already knew how the reaction to one of them getting outed was gonna go, he doesn't need to hear it.

Zimmermann outed himself.

Kent stomps down hard on the cigarette butt.

One night during his second year of Juniors, he and Zimmermann were at a party with some other guys from the team and a bunch of girls from school. Several of them were drunk enough that somebody successfully got a game of spin the bottle going; Kent joined in mostly for the excuse to chirp the hell out of the rest of guys.

Inevitably, one of his spins ended up on another dude. The same thing'd happened to Jack right before Kent's turn, and he wimped out and refused.

Kent--already perpetually competitive when sober, and now with a beer and a half lowering his inhibitions--grinned wide and told Jack "Looks like fate, dude!" before grabbing his collar and hauling him over to smack him one on the mouth, because come on, that was the game.

Jack jerked back a second later. He didn't say anything, even as the rest of the people in the circle
laughed or went "ewwww" or gave Kent shit for being a weirdo. Jack just stared at him, eyes wide, frozen.

Kent rolled his eyes and thought *Stop freaking out all the time*, and then threw himself into the lap of the girl next to him.

"He is a shit kisser," Kent informed her, holding his arms up pleadingly. "Tammy, make it better."

Tammy just laughed harder. Her boyfriend--Kent's fellow alternate captain for the Océanic--stood up, lifted Kent out of her lap, literally chucked him over the back of the couch like Kent'd never spent a day in the weight room in his life, and told Kent to take his drunk ass to the kitchen and get some water.

He got laughed out of the room, but everybody'd learned that Kent Parson played to **win**.

Jack came into kitchen while Kent was downing a cup of water from the sink, and punched him half-heartedly on the elbow. Then he asked, "Want a break?"

"Yeah, cool," Kent answered, refilling his cup and fumbling a crumpled pack of long-stale cigarettes out of his back pocket.

The trick always went the same; it didn't need to be fancy to work. Kent went out to the far corner of a yard, or down the street, or off to somewhere else a decent distance from wherever the party was, and then he lit up a cigarette and just let it burn out in the darkness. Jack came over soon after to supposedly chew him out for screwing up his lungs by smoking, like a good captain.

Kent started the play like usual that night, going out behind the backyard tool shed before trying to light up. It was late fall, starting to get genuinely cold, and the wind was bad enough that he couldn't get a flame going.

"Goddamn," Kent finally muttered around the cigarette in his teeth, shaking out his hand as Jack came around behind the shed. Stupid cheap lighter and its stupid hurting flintwheel.

"...You shouldn't be smoking, anyway," Jack told him, taking the cigarette out of his mouth.

Kent rolled his eyes and rubbed his sore thumb for a moment longer. And then he took the cigarette out of Jack's hand and wedged it back into the pack. He didn't need to waste it; they were pretty much invisible to the house.

"Hey, you're not mad, right?" Kent added, punching Jack lightly in the arm. "I was just horsin' around."

Jack didn't answer. He just kept rubbing his hands the way he did sometimes if he wanted to hide that they were shaking, and he wouldn't fully look at Kent. It was too dim behind the shed to really make out his expression, but he looked kinda freaked out again.

Kent shifted around to face him. "Zimms, c'mon. It was just a joke. Nobody's thinkin' about it," he added, gripping Jack's shoulder and shaking it a little with a smile. "They just figure I'm drunk. Chill out."

"Kenny--" Jack started to say, but then he stopped and swallowed instead.

Kent frowned. "You okay, man? You wanna go?"

"--No, I...." He trailed off again, and then drew a slow breath.
Kent patted him on the bicep. "Alright. C'mon, Zimms. We'll tell 'em you're takin' my dumb ass home before I start wearing a lamp shade or somethin'." Kent grinned as he started to move past him. "You think anybody's ever actually done that? Where'd that shit come from?"

Jack wrapped an arm around his waist, making him startle to a stop. And then he leaned forward and kissed Kent for real.

Now, tonight, almost nine years later, that feels even more than usual like the night where everything in Kent's life started going wrong.

Especially because now that everybody knows about Zimmermann, someone's eventually gonna figure out about Kent.

The asshole didn't even warn him. They're that fucking non-existent in each others' lives, Zimmermann couldn't even bother to warn--

Kent kicks the cigarette butt away and slumps against the wall, grinding the heels of his hands against his eyes. "That fucker."

Vichy tightens his grip around Kent's shoulders, and doesn't say anything.

Soon, Kent exhales hard. He rubs his eyes again, and then makes himself check his watch.

11:19. He's gotta get back inside before anybody else figures out why he's acting so weird.

Kent shrugs at Vichy's arm on his shoulders and pushes away from the wall. "Let's go."

". . . All right, Parser," Vichy replies, letting his arm fall.

Inside, the TVs have moved off the ice and into the studio, where the commentators are deliberately talking about the series run and Providence's first Cup, and not about Zimmermann and Bittle. Kent heads back to the bar where he left his phone.

"'Sup?" Chazzer asks as Kent passes him, looking kind of worried. "You alright?"

"Preppin' a statement with my agent," Kent says breezily, because it's occurred to him that he's gonna have to do that. He nods at a screen. "Somebody's gonna be callin' around wantin' some comment on that showoff."

Chazzer starts to retort, and then he looks past Kent at Vichy and drops it instead.

"Yeah, it sounded alright," Vichy says, clapping Kent on the back and pushing him at his seat. "Go send that."

--His phone is sitting on the fucking bar, he obviously wasn't just talking to his agent. Jesus Christ, what a shit lie. No wonder Chazzer looked disbelieving.

"Cool," Kent replies, before walking away.

The kitchen closes soon after. The party winds down further; more guys head out. Kent gives the remaining Sovereigns players a final congratulations and tells them not to go too nuts tonight, and takes off himself.
The next day, pretty much all the news keeps coming back to Providence's press conference.

Kent knows he should watch it. He knows that he should study the follow-up discussions, too; they're gonna be necessary information on how things'll go down and what'll happen to his own brand whenever he finally gets outed.

Instead, he keeps the TV off and rips the plug out of the socket for good measure.
The morning after Providence wins the Stanley Cup, Kent calls his agent with his official statement on the kiss, in case anyone starts sniffing around about him and Zimmermann.

Allen tweaks it to be less bare-bones neutral and more "I respect Jack's right to his privacy and to discuss his personal life on his own terms. The Las Vegas Aces have always been strong proponents of inclusivity and diversity, and I commend Providence for both their Cup win and their support of Zimmermann."

"You're sure that's not too by-the-book?" Kent asks, when Allan reads it back to him. "It sounds like a PR buzzword mad-lib."

"Thanks, Kent," Allan says dryly.

"Sorry," he replies, pacing his apartment. "I really appreciate this, Allan. I just--I don't wanna sound weird."

"The whole point of issuing a statement like this is to tell everyone 'Fuck off and go talk to the source, I'm not commenting further,'" Allan reminds him. "It's fine, Kent. It hits all the necessary points."

Kent exhales slowly.

When he starts to walk by the couch again, Kitt stretches out and rolls over slightly to show her tummy. He stops pacing and starts petting her instead. "Okay. Thanks."

"Of course," Allan replies, before confirming: "And you don't want to release it preemptively?"

"No," Kent replies. "I don't wanna--I just. If somebody asks, give 'em that. If nobody asks, I don't have any comment."

"All right," Allan agrees. He falls silent; Kent can hear him typing. Kitt yawns and stretches more.

"Okay," Allan tells him a few moments later. "It's ready if we need it."

"Cool. Thanks."

"Of course," Allan repeats. "Can I say something personal?"

Kent eyes his phone narrowly.

And then he forces his expression to be more relaxed, so that it'll carry into his voice. "Yeah, 'course."
"That homophobic attitude that LGBT people can't succeed in sports has taken a pretty heavy blow, now that there's a gay Stanley Cup champion," Allan says. "Two champions would make it even harder to pretend Zimmermann's a one-off."

"Mm," Kent says neutrally, as he mentally moves his agent from the "probably suspects I'm gay" list to the "knows it" one. "...If he keeps his mouth shut about me, I don't wanna talk about him."

"That's fair," Allan agrees. "Your contract extension'll open for negotiations next Friday. It's good sense to stay below the radar until we've got that worked out."

"Yeah." There's a reason Kent's okay with working with agents or PR staff: at least they're honest about the world they all have to negotiate. "That statement's all I've got to say about this."

"Understood," Allan replies. "Let me know if your GM says anything to you before next week. And go get some rest."

Kent glances over at the microwave clock. He turned on the small light above the sink before calling, but that's it. It's still dark outside. "Thanks again for doin' this so early."

"It's eight for me," Allan reminds him, since his office is in Toronto. "It's barely five there. Get some more sleep."

They say their goodbyes and hang up. Kent gives Kitt a few more scritches behind her ears, and then he shuts off the light and heads back to bed.

*

He gets invited to the annual awards ceremony, because he's the Aces' nominee for the Masterton: the trophy for the league's "hardest-working player representing perseverance and sportsmanship."

Somebody apparently leaked all the conditioning and recovery work he had to do in the first half of the season.

Which is irritating. Maybe whoever did it thought they were doing him a favor, but having more info about his injuries out in the media just increases speculation on whether his 2014-15 season was his career high and now he's on the decline. He coulda done without that crap.

It was bad enough that he barely scraped into the top twenty points rankings. Now he's only going to the awards as a pity nominee for the "you didn't let injuries totally fuck up your stats this year" trophy, where he's going to have to listen to everybody talk about Kane inevitably becoming the second ever American-born player to win the Art Ross, one year after Kent himself became the first before falling hard from that height.

Another one of the Aces'll be attending, too. Chazzer's in the running for the best defensive forward this year, though he told Kent he's pretty sure it's gonna go to the L.A. Kings' new captain.

Kent adjusts his tie in the bathroom mirror, and then fixes on a casual smile and heads out for the ceremony.

Showy, the defenseman who was traded out to Houston last summer, catches up with Kent while he's milling around after the media soundbites.

"Congrats on the nomination," Kent says, because Showy's in the running for the "gentlemanly play" trophy that no Ace has ever been voted for in the club's ten-year history. He slaps Showy on the back with a half-hug, before pulling away with a smirk. "Y' left Vegas and got soft."
"Fuck off," Showy grins. He slides his hands into his pockets and nods as they head deeper into the Hard Rock's lobby. "My eyes. Was there always this much neon?"

"You've fallen so far so fast," Kent replies, shaking his head.

Showy starts to jab him with an elbow, but then stops. "How's your shoulder?"

"Terrible," Kent lies. "The worst. You're gonna have to take the chirps like a man."

Showy snorts and moves around to his other side. Kent dodges the elbowing with a snicker.

"For real, congrats," Kent adds. "You deserved the nod."

"It still doesn't feel real," Showy tells him, lifting his eyebrows as they skirt around one of the display cases. "First the All-Stars, now this?"

"You're good," Kent replies with a shrug.

"Fuckin' highest praise right there," Showy drawls. "From you."

Kent smiles wider briefly, and then glances over at the other man. "Things all right with you and Skalski?"

Showy gives him an arch sidelong look.

Kent rolls his eyes and holds out a hand. "Truce."

Showy shakes it. "Yeah. He's a good man.

"He knows why they signed me," he adds, lifting a shoulder. "But he's cool about it. And he's a great player. I think the coaches are finally startin' to get the systems right."

"Good."

Showy thumps Kent on his good shoulder a couple times. And then, when they're in sight of the other man's family, he grabs hold of it to bring Kent to a stop.

"One more thing," Showy says. "See you at the airport tomorrow morning. You're coming to Houston for a long weekend."

"What?"

"Or you can tell Emi to her face that you changed your mind and you're not coming to visit," Showy smiles, before waving over at his wife and daughter and parents. Emiri and Showy's mom wave back.

"...You are the worst," Kent replies.

"Yeah, wow, it's like there's consequences to being such a stubborn ass that people gotta railroad ya to get you to do somethin' for your own good," Showy replies cheerily. He looks back to Kent with a raised eyebrow. "When's the last time you left the house, Parse?"

"Yesterday."

"For something other than a doctor or workout?"
Kent huffs out an irritated breath.

"Uh-huh. I follow the news too," Showy tells him. "Can you tell me honestly you really haven't been spendin' most've your time hiding in your apartment since the Falcs' press conference?"

"I wanted a break," Kent says, frustrated. "I been fuckin' on point all season, I don't get one?"

"Yeah," Showy says, serious now. "You don't really have to come if you don't want to. I didn't really tell Emi anything. But why dontcha get out of the city for a few days?" he asks. "We're renting a place on the beach. Take photos of the ocean and send 'em to Vich, ask if he can comprehend this strange oddity."

Kent snorts under his breath.

"I got another session tomorrow, man," he says. "I can't just drop everything."

"You have the weekend free? We got the place through Sunday."

Kent makes a face. "You're not gonna quit 'til I say yes, are you."

"Signs point to no, pal," Showy says with a small smile.

Kent sighs theatrically, but pulls out his phone to check his calendar. "Maybe. Maybe."

After the ceremony's over and the post-event media's done, Kent and Chazzer and Showy catch up again for a few more minutes.

"Now that's a Vegas kid forever," Kent grins, while Chazzer's giving their former teammate a final back-slapping hug goodbye. He nods at Emiri, who's passed out in Showy's dad's arms despite the lights and the noise of the casino behind them. "And you were complaining about the neon."

"Yeah, yeah," Showy replies, scrubbing Kent's hair and destroying the product holding his cowlick down. Kent slugs him in the arm.

Once Chazzer's headed for the valet and out of hearing, Showy adds, "Text me the arrival time, I'll pick you up."

"You don't gotta, man," Kent says. "I can rent something."

"Still gonna," Showy replies. "I can take you on a tour. 'Here's the good burger place. Here's the town where one year the water was so polluted it caught fire.'"

"--Where the fuck are you living?" Kent asks in disbelief.

"A city owned by oil and chemical interests," Showy answers, shaking his head. "You'll love it. It's like the perfect confirmation of your uber-cynicism."

"I might pass on that invite," Kent says dryly. "Thanks though."

Showy lifts his shoulders with an exaggerated tilt of his head. "Okay, I guess I'll just wake Emi up so you can tell her Uncle Parse isn't coming after all. It's gonna be awful optics, making a little girl cry at the awards."

"You know you can't get away with this forever, right?" Kent asks.
"Why do you think I'm milkin' it for all I can while I can?" Showy replies. "Send me the arrival time. Try to fly into Hobby, IAH is hell to get to from--there, you're gonna book it for IAH. Why did I even say that." He hangs his head.

Kent laughs out loud. "You left Vegas and got soft, man. Shoulda known better."

Showy tries to mess up his hair again, but Kent backs away in time. "Yeah, yeah," the other man repeats. "See ya soon, Parse."

"Yeah, see ya."

*

Kent flies into Houston's Hobby airport on Friday morning, half because there's no reason to be a dick to Showy just to be a dick and half because he doesn't want to get predictable. He brings an empty duffel bag in his carry-on.

Once he lands, Kent pulls it out and then fills it up with bottled water from one of the airport stores. It's stupidly expensive and heavy, and the cashier looks at him like he's crazy, but it's worth it for the moment when Showy takes the bag to put it into his trunk and then almost drops it to the ground with a "What the fuck!"

"I came prepared," Kent shrugs.

"Damn," Showy says, opening the bag enough to see the water. "Good timing. We were getting low. I was gonna go by the grocery."

"Jesus Christ," Kent replies. "You just made this sad."

"I know, right?" Showy tells him, hefting the duffel into the trunk as Kent puts his suitcase inside. "You thought I was kidding about the town with the water on fire, I was not. Multiple guys here warned me not to move too far south."

"It was nice knowin' ya, Showy," Kent comments, raising an eyebrow.

Showy pushes the trunk shut. "Pal, don't joke about that. It's gotten too real."

It's a pretty good weekend, though Kent loses Friday night and a good chunk of Saturday morning to the draft.

Showy rolls his eyes when he figures out why Kent keeps double-checking the time to make sure it hasn't started yet. But he understands that Kent's obligated as captain to follow it, in order to tweet shoutouts to all of the Aces' new prospects. So the man puts it on the living room TV.

"This's defeating the point of getting away, Parse," Showy calls as he does.

Kent just shrugs as much as he can while hauling a bucket of water over to the pile of towels where Emiri's carted all her seashells. "Not my fault you got bad timing."

Showy rolls his eyes a lot more theatrically.

Kent spends most of the evening listening for the Aces' picks and then pausing to tweet as he rinses and dries seashells for Emiri, because apparently he's not good enough to be trusted to help with the actual decorating. Which is okay; Kent didn't really need his phone to be covered in glitter.
fingerprints by the end of the night.

He's stuck in the house alone the next morning after breakfast watching the last rounds, though Showy comes back inside for a while to work out. When it's finally wrapped up and they've eaten lunch, the other man lobs a bottle of sunscreen at Kent and tells him it's time to get outta the house. Showy's wife opts to do some work stuff while Emiri naps, so they tell Rie bye and head for the boat Showy rented.

"Can you eat the fish here?" Kent asks, prepping the lines while Showy drives the pontoon out into the gulf. "Didn't they dump a bunch of oil or something?"

"I ain't gonna risk it," Showy agrees. "I think it's supposed to be okay now, but we'll toss 'em back anyway."

Kent makes a face. "We're doin' that catch and release bullshit?"

"Oh, this sounds like it's gonna be great," Showy says, audibly grinning. "What're your strong opinions on fishing, Parse? Higher or lower than golf?"

Kent glances upward in annoyance, because he goes through the golf debate with several guys every year.

He gets that it's a good way to stay sharp over summer, and to practice all the physics and environmental considerations they have to do on the ice--with the bonus of not having to worry about getting checked. God knows he listened to Zimmermann talk about all that enough times.

But Kent can do pretty much the same thing for way cheaper with a pool table. And without having to worry about catching lyme disease.

"It's boring as hell," he replies. "The only point of it's to eat. This, you're just wasting bait."

"Fishing's not boring," Showy retorts. "It's hard. You oughta know that, I thought you liked it."

"Fuck no," Kent replies. Fishing's just sitting around waiting for something to happen, and being stuck in your head the whole time because you aren't supposed to talk. When he was a kid, he was only willing to do it with the one uncle who made really good fish. "I do this crap for team bonding stuff, not because it's fun."

"Parse. You win those contests half the time."

Kent shrugs a shoulder. "I don't have to like something to not suck at it."

Showy laughs at him. "You competitive motherfucker."

"I play to win."

"Colon, the Kent Parson story," Showy tacks on.

"How're you doin'?" Showy asks, after he's cut the engine and they're drifting in the ocean, watching the lines. Boringly.

"'M alright," Kent answers, rolling his shoulder slightly to show he's got full mobility back. "How're you?"
"I'm doin' good," Showy answers, shifting around in the drivers' chair to face him. "I mean it, though. You alright? Like, after that shit in Orlando and everything?"

Kent exhales slowly, sinking deeper into the seat he's stretched out on.

"...I guess," he answers. "Antwone was real jumpy after they caught that asshole headin' for the L.A. parade, but he's doin' better now."

"Who?" Showy asks.

Kent shrugs as much as his slouch allows. "Some dick had a buncha guns and explosives, told the cops he was goin' to the gay parade. Same morning as Orlando."

"Fucking...what the fuck is wrong with the world," Showy growls out.

"People are assholes," Kent replies unemotionally.

He wound up going to L.A. on the first flight he could get that Sunday, after Antwone called. He told Kent he was fine, that he hadn't headed over to the parade yet and wasn't planning to go anymore; but Antwone sounded like that really bad mix of freaked out and angry at himself for feeling like a coward by being freaked out that Kent figured fuck it, he should just go. He could get a hotel if Antwone meant it about being fine and wanted to be alone.

They spent Sunday holed up in Antwone's studio apartment, watching stuff on Netflix and eating Japanese takeout and having sex. Kent turned off the NHL notifications on his phone, so that they wouldn't get interrupted with alerts about the Falconers' and Schooners' sixth playoff game that night.

He had to leave early the next morning. Antwone had work, and Kent had physical and mental therapy sessions coming up, and then the Sovereigns' championship party to prep.

But it wasn't bad. It would've been nice, under other circumstances.

They've been checking in on each other most nights since, even if it's just a couple texts, now that Kent's in offseason and has a normal person's schedule. Antwone lives and works a pretty good ways away from West Hollywood; but still.

Showy shakes his head and downs the rest of his water.

"Alright," he adds, leaning over to grab the cooler. He looks back at Kent as he gets another water bottle. "Who's Antwone, though?"

Kent turns his head and stares at him.

". . . Bullshit," he finally says. "Seriously, Vichy didn't tell you?"

"--Wait," Showy says. "Wait. Is this the dude you jumped off a balcony for?"

Kent scowls. "I didn't 'jump off' the balcony."

"You are quibbling over the verb," Showy replies, grinning. "Okay Parse, what did you do off the balcony?"

"I climbed down it like a normal person."

"Are you--do I really have to point out the fuckin' flaw in that statement?"
"Yeah, yeah," Kent replies, rolling his eyes and picking up his soda.

"Sheeeeeeeze," Showy chuckles, while Kent's taking a drink. "This's why I got an incoherent message New Years sayin' 'Why can't Parser do anything goddamn normal, who fucking even' and then that raptor growl he makes when he's strangling air.' He clenches his hands in front of his face to imitate Vichy.

Kent laughs. "Sounds right."

He sets the can back in one of the cup holders, eyebrow raised. "For real, he didn't say anything?"

It's not like he really thought Vichy would go around blabbing about it. But still, Showy and Vichy are close friends. Kent didn't assume Vichy was gonna keep his secrets that tight.

...He probably should've, though. Vichy's somebody he can trust. Same as Showy.

"Pal, I heard that and decided 'Naaaaah, I'm gonna wait 'til tomorrow and see who's still alive,'" Showy drawls. "When I talked to him later, he'd calmed down enough that all I got was you jumped off a balcony, and a literary metaphor I could tell you, but then you'd just call me a nerd, so."

"The Romeo and Juliet one? He's getting stale."

"No, Parse, your anti-intellectual ass gets the dumbed down metaphors," Showy replies. Kent gives him a middle finger. "I get the choice Martin Beck ones."

Kent just shakes his head and drops his hand, because he knows better than to create an opening by asking who that is.

Showy cracks open up his new water. "So your dude's all right, though?"

"Yeah, he's doin' better."

"Good."

They catch a couple fish and then chuck them back, like the holier-than-thou tourists that swamp Kent's hometown every summer.

But for all Showy's claims that fishing isn't boring, he eventually spends more time sunbathing than watching the lines. Kent stays under the awning's shade so he won't freckle even worse, and streams through a couple more language lessons on his phone.

Showy eventually wakes up from his nap and then gets another water bottle out of the cooler. "The hell are you watching, that's some frown."

"Nothin'," Kent answers, pausing the video.

Showy snorts in disbelief and leans a hip against the seat to look over Kent's shoulder. "That a cartoon?"

"Nah," Kent answers, dropping his phone into its plastic baggie. "The only language stuff the library had for Ukrainian was this kids' thing."

Showy stares at him for a long moment. And then he starts snickering.
He scrubs Kent's hair hard. Kent smacks his hand away with a "Hey."

"You are physiologically incapable of turning off captain mode," Showy tells him. He checks the time on his own phone. "We still got this a few more hours--wanna see if Emi and Rie wanna go for another ride?"

"Yeah, cool," Kent replies, pushing up off the seat and going to pull in the lines so they won't tangle in the motor.

He stays over for another night, and helps Showy and his family pack up the place the next morning and take it back to their home in Houston.

"Did you get me at the airport just to have the extra help?" Kent asks suspiciously, as they're hauling luggage into the other man's house.

"Sure's been a great perk!" Showy grins. Kent keeps side-eying him.

The flight home is normal, if kinda empty. Usually people are flying away from Vegas on Sundays.

Kent spends most of it catching up with Kitt's Instagram and thinking. He spends the rest of it getting recommendations on travel agents from a couple of the guys.

*

The next evening, Kent calls Antwone after the man's off work and asks, "Hey, you wanna go on a trip?"

"Yeah, sure," Antwone replies. "When were you thinking?"

"I only really got this and next week open," Kent says. "I know it's short notice. I didn't really think about it until the other day."

"Hm," Antwone says a little distantly, like he's leaned away from the phone. "...I can maybe do that. Were you thinkin' a weekend trip or something? The holiday weekend?"

"Yeah, I could do that. Do you...." Kent starts riffling through the brochures the travel agent gave him. "Wanna go to the Adirondacks? It sucks this time of year, but if we go backcountry campin' we can get away from most've the tourists."

"What's that?"

Kent starts to give him a quick and dirty breakdown of the rules, even as he makes a mental note to check if anything's changed since he was a kid. Halfway through, Antwone says, "So basically we go do hardcore survivalism in the backwoods. This sounds like the start of a horror movie."

Kent snerks. "Fair enough."

But anything closer to the trails is out. Kent's been going home less and less during offseason for the past few years, because the town's a supply point and he's gotten recognizable enough that he either has to hide inside his parents' or family's houses the whole time he's there, or else be prepared for it to take twice as long to do anything if he goes anywhere tourists might be. And to keep his appearance and personality on point from the second he steps out of the door.
Being spotted hanging out with a strange, non-hockey guy now that Zimmermann's fucked everything up would just be asking for trouble.

Kent tosses the Adirondacks brochure down the kitchen island. "How 'bout Australia?"

"I," Antwone says. "Do--are you goin' alphabetically?"

Kent flips through the next several flyers. "Yeah, looks like. I got a bunch of brochures," he adds.

Antwone says, "You've gone from camping in the middle of nowhere to flying outta the country. Are you okay? You need an alibi for something?"

Kent snickers and shakes his head, which is kinda pointless since they're not on Skype.

"Was there anywhere you wanted to go?" he asks. "I'm cool with most places."

"No, I just...I'm havin' a vision of my teenage punk self lookin' at me and saying 'What the fuck happened to you,'" Antwone replies. "But...Australia."

"Is it winter there?" he adds.

"I think so? It's probably not all on fire at least," Kent adds. It's gonna be another week of 100+ temperatures in Vegas; and the wildfires around Southern California don't look like they're stopping any time soon. It can't be worse.

"Sign me up," Antwone agrees. "Are you for real?"

"Yeah, sure," Kent says. "I've never been there, it could be fun."

"If there were an understatement machine, it'd be calibrated to you, dude," Antwone tells him. "Lemme talk to my boss and see what I can get off. When do you have to be--oh, damn."

"What?"

"Yeah, okay, I just pulled up ticket prices," he replies. "I don't think I can do this, Kent."

"I can cover it," he offers. "It might be easier if they just book everything at once. Just lemme know what days you can do."

Antwone makes an uncomfortable noise. "I don't wanna be a leech. You know? Is there anything closer around here you wanna do?"

Kent snorts before he can stop himself.

"Sorry," he says, because he's sure that sounded assholish. "Sorry, I wasn't--just, like, Antwone. I've had people wantin' to be part'a my entourage since I was a teenager. You're not one of those guys. Believe me, I'd know."

Antwone whistles quietly.

Kent just shrugs. "For real, it's cool," he promises. "Like, the plane and the hotel and wherever. I'd be going there anyway, it's just an extra ticket. I just...."

Kent starts fidgeting with the brochures. When the silence starts to drag awkwardly, he makes himself breathe out.
"...This season sucked," Kent admits. "I just...I wanna get away for a while. I don't wanna be alone. I know it's really short notice, we can do something closer. That's cool too."

Antwone blows out a long breath.

"Tell you what," he says. "If Blake loses his mind and gives me, like, a week off, screw it, let's go to Australia."

Kent chuckles as his shoulders relax again. "Cool."

They eventually decide to go to Portland for the long weekend. Kent doesn't know much about the city other than it's full of hipsters--and that Chazzer, his center who lives by Seattle during offseason, has a rival-obligatory hatred of its soccer team--but Antwone seems pretty enthused. Kent figures it serves him right for hooking up with a musician.

He calls his mom afterward, because this is gonna be the second year in a row he doesn't go home for his birthday.

"That's all right. It's work again?" she asks.

Kent shifts in his seat on the couch, and then makes a face at Kitt when she thumps her tail against him for daring to disturb her perch on his lap. "Nah, I'm, uh. I was gonna go somewhere with a friend. I'll definitely swing by when I'm done with conditioning, though. When's good for you?"

"A 'friend'," his mom repeats suspiciously, which was the part Kent was--apparently too obviously--trying to bury.

"Yeah."

"Is this a girlfriend, or a guy friend?"

"It's a guy," Kent says, wishing this awkward conversation was over.

He's pretty sure the reason nobody in his family's willing to talk to him about the gay conversion camp fight that happened back when he was a teenager is because his mom was probably on board with it, at least a little. She tries to be supportive and stuff, but he knows it's been weird for her to have her only kid turn out gay. Even if Kent's at least an athlete, and not one of those stereotypical homosexuals.

He knows for sure that she never liked Jack. She thought he was a bad influence on Kent, with all their partying and off-ice stuff back in Juniors. She probably blames him for turning Kent gay or whatever, too.

He adds, "I started kinda seein' someone. We're just goin' north for a couple days to get outta the heat."

"If you're goin' away on trips together, it better be more serious than 'kinda seeing' each other, Kenny," his mom replies. "Why haven't I heard about him before?"

Because this, Kent thinks wryly. "Moom."

"Don't you 'mooooooooom' me," she retorts, which is not how he said it at all. "Does he have a name? Should I be comin' over there to make sure you're going with someone decent?"
"I mean, I could ask his breeding credentials if we're one'a those froufrou Boston blue-bloods now," Kent says dryly.

"Kent Vincent Parson."

"Sorry! Sorry, sorry," he says, snickering. "I had to."

His mom "hrumphs" at him. Kent promises, "He's fine. His name's Antwone. Well, Elvin Chavarría. He goes by Antwone."

She grills him for a while longer; but she finally drops it so they can figure out when Kent should come by in August.

After he hangs up, Kent thunks his head back onto the arm of the couch. "Sheeeeeeze."

Kitt fwacks him with her tail again. Kent rolls his eyes as he reaches out to scritch her ears, and says, "Don't you start."

*

Antwone calls him unexpectedly early the next morning, while Kent's in the middle of a quasi-official meeting with the Aces' trainer.

Once he and Elliot have wrapped up and the man's left, Kent hangs behind in the coffee shop and calls Antwone back without checking the voicemail. "Everything cool?"

"Were you for real for real about Australia?" Antwone replies. "Because Blake gave me a week."

"Seriously?" Kent asks in surprise.

"Right?" he agrees. "I worked three Christmases in a row, guess he realized he owes me."

"Sweet," Kent grins, thumbing over into his notes to take down Antwone's free days.

He calls the travel agent once he's home. Things panned out lucky: Kent's got more free time next week than he expected, because he doesn't have to go to his mental therapy session.

He was meeting with Elliot because apparently the therapist that the club sent him to felt that Kent was too "defensively hostile" for her to successfully work with.

She recommended a different guy, who'll supposedly have an approach Kent'll be more responsive to or whatever. Elliot was meeting with him half to give Kent the new shrink's name and address, and half to tell Kent to try a little harder this time.

*

He has to fly into L.A. for the flight to Sydney. Kent spends most of the day wrapping up last-minute details, schlepping between airports, and waiting for Antwone to arrive.

His agent's annoyed that he's skipping town the day before his contract negotiation opens. But Kent's never done anything like this before--and there weren't any flights he could take after July first for another week--so Allan mostly tolerates it.

Besides, last time negotiations opened, the Aces waited until it was down to the wire to offer him an extension. Kent doesn't expect to hear anything from the club tomorrow. Or until the end of the coming season. If at all.
He's in the airline lounge, half-listening to the nerdy podcast that one of the guys kept haranguing him to follow last year and taunting another teammate via texts about the rumors of L.A.'s Lucic signing with Edmonton, when he sees Antwone wander into the corner of his vision.

Kent tells Mitts *Keep your fingers crossed maybe he'll leave the pacific* and *Gotta go* before raising a hand in greeting. Antwone catches sight of him and starts across the lounge.

"Damn, man," Kent says appreciatively, because Antwone's in a full suit with a tie and everything. He pulls his suitcase off the seat next to him, and Antwone drops into it heavily. "You're lookin' sharp. Were we supposed to dress up?"

"Everything said first class," Antwone replies, readjusting his tie slightly. "I didn't wanna look outta place."

Kent looks down at his jeans.

"I thought about it," he says lamely. "But I figured, fifteen hour flight, I'm gonna go for comfortable."

"Yeah, I regretted this soon as I walked out the door," Antwone agrees, eyebrow raised. "Upside, when I got into the studio Blake realized he couldn't talk me into staying through tomorrow."

"Nice."

Antwone nods off while they're still waiting for boarding to start.

Kent lets him sleep. He knows the other man was working overtime to be able to fly out tonight.

He listens to more of the podcast instead, and charges his phone to make up for Mitts' string of texts trying to goad Kent into replying before Mitts finally either got bored or went to sleep, since it's even later over in Newfoundland.

* 

As soon as they land the next morning, clear customs, and get coffee, Kent sets off for the airport phone store that one of the flight attendants gave him directions to.

"You need a burner?" Antwone asks, as they make their way through the concourse.

"Yeah, if they don't got sim cards," Kent answers, scanning the stores. "I didn't have time to grab one."

"--Shit," Antwone whispers, stopping abruptly.

Kent does the same and looks over. "...Did you pack a plug adaptor?"

"No," Antwone answers, rubbing the heel of his hand against the bridge of his nose. "Crap. Think they'll have somewhere sellin' those?"

"Yeah, probably. We'll find one," Kent replies. He sets his coffee on a bench and shrugs off his carry-on bag so he can rummage through it. "I got a spare, if you wanna hang onto it."

"Thanks," Antwone says tiredly. "Sorry 'bout this. I should've remembered."

"You were bustin' your butt at work." Kent hands him the adaptor and shrugs the strap back onto
his shoulder. "I only knew about this stuff ’cause they warned me before I moved to Switzerland, and I kept the old list. It's cool."

"Hold up, Switzerland?"

"Oh, yeah," Kent answers, looking over as they start walking again. "Uh, short version, a while back the NHL and the players' union got in a fight over contracts, so I went and played in Switzerland for a while 'cause they were willing to pay me for it."

Antwone tells him, eyebrow raised, "I really wanna hear the long version of these stories, dude."

"Not in public," Kent replies, because they're probably gonna go through the whole charade again in 2019. He's better off not getting caught commenting on that until it happens.

Antwone makes an amused noise. "Gotcha."

Once they've got the sim cards and adaptors, they dick around outside in Sydney for a while, waiting for their next flight. And then they finally get to Cairns and the hotel.

"I cannot believe you went to Australia to stay in a casino," Antwone calls, as he unpacks his laptop in the suite's office.

Kent shrugs. "I know how to work 'em," he replies, sticking his clothes into the bedroom closet.

When he was planning the trip, Kent's only criteria for the travel agent was somewhere with a full gym, somewhere not real hot, and somewhere not super-crowded. Which, in hindsight, probably made her job more of a pain in the ass.

Once she sent him a list of possible cities and hotels, Kent saw the casino while skimming the email and picked there immediately, because time was of the essence and also because he does know how they operate. It's something kinda like home in a place where all the slang is weird.

When Kent tells Antwone as much, he just laughs. "Dude."

*

When Kent wakes up the next morning, he freaks out for a second when his phone says it's Sunday before remembering that he's not in Vegas. He heads into the main area of the suite and learns that Antwone's apparently gone grocery shopping and made breakfast.

"Thanks, man," Kent says, taking the mug of coffee and pulling out a seat at the balcony table. "You didn't hafta."

"Least I could do," Antwone replies. "The store's only a couple blocks down."

"Oh, nice."

The breakfast has too much fruit and not enough protein, especially since Kent's gotta work out before he can take the rest of the day off. But he doesn't want to be a dick and say that out loud. He can just boil a couple eggs after he gets back or something.

When Kent returns from the hotel's exercise room, Antwone's staring at his laptop and looking zoned out. He spends a little longer on there while Kent gets a shower and starts to make lunch;
and then he pulls off his hardcore headphones and says, "I give up."

"Jet lag sucks," Kent agrees. "You oughta be over it by tomorrow."

"Hope so," Antwone says, coming out of the office and into the kitchen. "Want help?"

They spend most of the afternoon and evening watching TV and Netflix between having sex. They stay inside the hotel suite.

* 

The next day is similar, though when Kent gets back from working out, Antwone's scowling at his laptop. He goes back on it after lunch, still looking aggravated.

Kent's stretched out on one of the couches, listening to another episode of Catsby's nerd podcast and checking in on the video camera at Kitt's cat hotel, when inside the office Antwone yells, "What the fuck are these levels, you hack?!"

Kent lifts both eyebrows.

There's a banging noise a second later. And then Antwone stalks out of the office, heading for the kitchen.

Kent pulls out his earbuds and calls, "Everything okay?"

"It's a fucking penguin documentary," Antwone grits out. Kent pushes off the couch and goes to the kitchen, where the other man's yanking the coffee bag out of a cabinet. "It's background noise for Netflix. But there's standards. You can't hear the narrator unless it's turned way up, and then the music's too loud. It'll get turned off before it finishes. They track that shit! The whole thing has to be fixed, but we're at deadline, because fuckin' Joey thinks he can dump shit and blame me--!

He stops and thumps the coffee on the counter, digging a thumb and finger against his eyelids.

Kent says, "You wanna get a coffee at the place downstairs? Get outta here for few minutes?"

Antwone stays silent at first. And then he rubs a thumb against the bridge of his nose, exhaling slowly.

"...Yeah," he says, letting go of the coffee bag. "Yeah, sounds good."

He drops his hand from his face. "Sorry. I'm just gettin' sick of cleaning up that fucker's half-assed shit."

"No prob, man," Kent replies.

The hotel's coffee shop has the same pseudo-Starbucks look as everywhere, and tastes like it too. There's even a couple people talking with American accents at one table.

"Just like home," Kent says to Antwone.

"Dunno if I'm proud of that," he comments. Kent grins.

After they head back up to the suite, Antwone spends most of the afternoon and evening working.
Kent makes dinner and then does extra pushups and crunches in the bedroom with the TV turned super low, half because he can tell he's gone over his daily calorie intake these last couple days and half because he's starting to get stir-crazy bored.

Even though it's been his choice to stay inside so much.

* 

The next day starts out the same, but that afternoon Antwone finally finishes his project from hell and then collapses on the bed for a nap. After he wakes up, Kent high-fives him.

"You wanna eat dinner out?" Kent asks, as the coffee's brewing in the kitchen. "The Chinese place here? Somewhere else?"

"Yeah, Chinese sounds good," Antwone replies.

"Nice," Kent says. He checks his watch, and then leans back against the counter and tries to waggle his eyebrows. "Wanna work up an appetite first?"

Antwone snorts out a laugh. "You are the opposite of smooth."

The restaurant menu's so ridiculously thick they end up sending the waitress away twice while going through it.

"Dude, they got kangaroo," Antwone says at one page.

"You gotta eat it," Kent replies automatically.

Antwone makes a dubious face.

"You gotta," Kent repeats. In the corner of his vision, he notices two people standing by the entrance and looking at them.

Or no. The women are looking at them, and then talking to each other. And then looking at them again.

"I'll get it if you eat the crocodile," Antwone decides. One woman swats the other on the arm--and then she pulls a phone out of her purse and starts toward them.

"Fuck," Kent says involuntarily; and he can hear the fear in his voice.

Antwone looks up. "--You okay?"

"Just--stay cool," Kent replies, rubbing a hand over his mouth to make sure he's got his PR smile on. And then the woman pauses on the other side of the railing separating the restaurant from the hallway, next to their table.

"Hi, sir?" she calls. American accent. --The people in the coffee shop yesterday, he was fucking warned.

Kent looks over as his stomach drops more, and keeps smiling.

"Um, this is gonna sound so stupid, but uh--there's an American hockey player you look exactly like," she says, fidgeting with her phone. "I've got a friend in Texas who's a hockey fan, and he's
like in a rivalry with one of the guys on her team, and, uh, basically, could I take a picture of you to play a prank on her? This sounds so dumb saying it out loud, sorry, my friend dared me," she justifies, nodding back at the other woman.

There's two possible responses.

The first one is to be stupid. The second one is to be smart and go along with the assumption that he's a doppelgänger and let this whole thing slide unless it goes viral, for the very understandable reason that outing himself in public is stupid as hell.

Or at least it would've been understandable, until Zimmermann fucking went and did just that, and changed all the game's rules.

So since the only actual response still open is to be stupid, Kent just moves forward with it.

"Depends," he replies, smiling a little wider. "She a Stars or Aeros fan? 'Cause if it's Houston, I gotta. Let's see Zach Short top that."

She blinks once, and then stares. "--Wait. I--no. Are you--?"

"Kent Parson," he agrees, shifting around more in his chair and holding out a hand.

"Oh my God," she says, fumbling with her phone before giving him a jerky handshake. "I'm so sorry, oh man, are you sure?"

"Yeah, 'course," Kent replies, reflexively shifting to his put-'em-at-ease grin. "If it's for a prank, I'm definitely in."

"Oh wow. Okay. Okay. Thank you!"

Kent smiles and makes a peace sign for the photo, since she isn't doing a selfie. The woman tells him "Thanks so much!" again, before glancing at Antwone.

Kent watches her visibly decide not to say or ask anything.

Instead, she just repeats another "Thanks!" and then heads back to her friend, grabbing the other woman by the elbow and dragging her off as she shows her the phone.

"Kent?" Antwone asks quietly. "You alright?"

Did his smile wear off? He was smiling for the photo, right? Kent rubs his mouth again to check.

The waitress pauses by their table again. "Did you need another moment?"

"Yes," Kent says. "No. I'm sorry, I forgot I had a conference call I gotta take. Could we just get the check for the drinks?"

"Do you want to go take it?" Antwone asks, and thank God he sounds like he's caught the play. "I can order."


"No, of course," she replies, shifting out of the way. Kent leaves, taking care not to walk too fast.
As soon as he gets back to the suite, he calls the Aces' head of PR.

Adams doesn't pick up. Kent calls a second time, and then belatedly remembers the seventeen hour time difference. He hangs up mid-ring and sends a text instead: *Becky when you get this can you call me*

He drops his phone onto one of the living room tables, and stares blankly out the balcony doors at the ocean.

Didn't even make it a month.

*Thanks, Zimmermann,* Kent thinks bitterly, swallowing hard and clenching his hands. *You asshole.*

It's his own fault. He *heard* American accents yesterday. He should've been more on guard. He should've known nowhere in public's ever really safe. They should've just eaten in the suite.

He got complacent.

And now things are going exactly the way that always does. He should've known.

Kent forces his hands to relax, and rubs his face hard.

The door opens. Kent drags his hands up his face and over his hair, and looks over his shoulder.

"Hey," Antwone says, locking the door. "You alright?"

"Yeah. I dunno," Kent answers. "Everything go alright down there?"

"I told 'em we were in the presidential suite and she said they'd send the food up," Antwone replies. "Cool."

"Kent, seriously. You okay?"

"I dunno," he repeats, because he's not gonna know until he hears back from Adams and finds out how bad this fucks him over with the club. "I just--" and then his phone rings.

It's Adams. Kent answers and immediately says, "Sorry Becky, I forgot it was so early there."

"It's fine. What's happened?" Adams replies, sounding gravelly from sleep but also alert. Kent guesses it's adrenaline; getting a call from a problem player in the middle of the night is gotta be PR staff's worst nightmare.

"Sorry," he says again. "It's not--I dunno if it's gonna be anything, maybe not, but I wanted to warn you."

"Okay," she interrupts calmly. "What's happened?"

Kent exhales hard and tells himself to get coherent and be useful. "Right. Yeah. I'm in Australia and somebody took a picture of me a few minutes ago. I dunno if she's gonna put it online, but I figured I should tell you. Uh. I'm here with--my boyfriend," Kent adds. "We were out. I dunno if he was in the photo, I didn't see it. But I'm pretty sure she guessed. Who he was."

"Okay," Adams repeats, still calm. "Thank you for the notice. We can keep an eye out. Do you have a photo of him we can use for reference?"
Kent pulls down his phone and opens up his messages so he can send the one he took of Antwone sitting at the balcony table yesterday morning. "Yeah." He looks over at Antwone, who's lingering by one of the armchairs. "You okay if I give them your picture?"

"Is he there?" Adams asks tinnily. Kent flips back into the phone and sets it to speaker so he can hear better. "Could I speak to him?"

Kent looks up again. Antwone nods, and holds out a hand.

"Hello," he says, after Kent gives him the phone.

"Hello," she answers. "I'm Becky Adams. I work for the Las Vegas Aces' PR department."

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Antwone Chavarría."

"Pleasure to meet you as well, Mr. Chavarría. Despite the circumstances," Adams adds, a little wryly.

Antwone chuckles politely as he sits down in one of the armchairs. Kent makes himself stop abortively pacing and sits on the edge of the nearest couch.

"I wanted to let you know the photo will be for internal use only," Adams continues. "Just in case we need a cross-reference for any posted pictures with Kent in them. Vegas's policy is that players' personal lives are their own private business."

"Okay," Antwone agrees. "I'm fine with that."

"Thank you. We appreciate it."

Antwone does that thing everybody does, where they nod even though the other person on the line can't see them. "Here, ah--I'm going to give you back to Kent, so he can send the picture."

"Thanks. Have a good day," Adams concludes. Antwone tells her "You as well" before passing the phone back over.

Kent returns to his messages and texts the photo. In the background, he can hear a coffee machine start running, even though it's just past one a.m. in Vegas. "I'm really fucking sorry about this, Becky."

"Kent. I've known you since you were eighteen," Adams replies, since she was one of the people at the Aces' table when he was brought over to meet everyone after being drafted. "We have plans and statements in place. Take a breath. Things will be handled."

"Though--if I can be honest?" she adds.

"Yeah, 'course," Kent replies. He's woken her up in the middle of the night during offseason by tossing a possible PR bomb in her lap; that's the least he owes.

"I'd rather get a full year's look at how Providence handles Jack Zimmermann's coming out, and how that goes for their financials," Adams says matter-of-factly. "But if that isn't your preference, or if other circumstances make that unfeasible, then we'll manage."

"No, that's--I don't, that's fine. I don't wanna--I'm not trying to, like--" he is absolutely trying to hide being gay, he has been for years, because he's not a fucking idiot. He doesn't live in a fucking fantasy world where not matching people's expectations doesn't have consequences.
"I know you're a private person, Kent," Adams interjects, and he shuts up and quits rambling. "That's fine. Your off-ice situation isn't the club's business."

That's bullshit, but Kent stops himself from snorting derisively. Adams is obviously trying to calm him down; she doesn't lie unless there's a good reason. He doesn't need to be rude about it.

"Okay," he says instead.

"If anything comes of this, we'll deal with it," Adams tells him. "Given recent circumstances...mm. Well. We can discuss this later."

"Okay."

"We aren't a traditional hockey market, Kent," she adds. "People pay less attention to things around here. I'm sure everything will be fine. Enjoy your vacation. This is, what, the first one you've ever taken? That isn't an endorsement or event?"

Kent scratches the back of his neck. "I go home for holidays and stuff."

"You sweet summer child," Adams says dryly, and Antwone stifles a chuckle. Kent goes, "Hey."

"Enjoy your trip, Kent," Adams repeats. "We can set up a meeting after you're back. Things are going to be fine."

"...Okay," Kent says. "Thanks, Becky. I mean it."

"You're welcome." She takes a drink of coffee. "Ah. If anything else comes up while you're there, Iain's in Killarney at the moment," she adds. "That might be less time distance. You can always contact me, of course. But just so you know."

"Got it," Kent replies. "He using his regular phone?"

"I believe so. I'll confirm and let you know."

"Okay."

"Where are you staying?" Adams adds. "I'll get Grace to make that another alert keyword."

"Right, yeah. I'm--we're at the Pullman. Uh, Pullman Reef Hotel Casino, the one in Cairns," Kent adds, in case there's a bunch in Australia.

Adams pauses.

"You're staying in a casino?" she asks.

"Yeah," Kent shrugs. "It looked alright."

"Am I still on speaker?"

Kent looks at his phone at that.

But then he cuts it out of speaker, and swaps it to his other hand, away from Antwone. The other man starts to lift an eyebrow, but then he drops it and looks past Kent and out the balcony doors instead, indicating that he's not listening. Kent tells her, "No, you're off."

"All right." Adams takes an longer drink of coffee, and then says, "Do you know who Gary
Loveman is?

It feels like the name should be familiar, but Kent can't place it. "No?"

"He used to be a Harvard Business School professor, specializing in math," Adams says. "Then he went to work for Caesar's, analyzing how to spot and track repeat gamblers and the amounts they win."

Kent, finally recognizing the name of Caesar's former CEO and pretty sure there's no safe response to this, makes a vague noise in the back of his throat.

"Mn," Adams replies. She takes another slurp of coffee. "I want to do a thought experiment, where some Caesar's...representatives found me at the coffee shop I frequent and... The short version is that you aren't going into any of their properties again. Not for non-Aces-related reasons. You aren't banned," Adams tells him. "You just aren't interested in setting foot in them. Ever again."

After a long moment, Kent says, "Sorry, Becky."

"Mn," she repeats, which is really hard to read. "Are you going to go into any of Caesar's properties?"

"No, ma'am."

"Okay," Adams says. "Maybe also stay out of the casino there. I'm sure there's a ton of other, more interesting things to do."

"Okay," Kent agrees. "I haven't been in there. Promise."

"Let's keep it that way," Adams replies, before shifting back into business mode. "I'll confirm Iain's number; I'll send you an email once I do. Did you have anything else?"

"No," Kent says. "No, that was it."

"All right. I'm going to go, then. Have a good rest of the day, all right?"

"Yeah. Okay. Sorry again about--about all of this. And the late call."

"It happens," Adams replies. "It's off season. Things'll be handled, Kent."

They work out a couple more details, planning a meeting once he's back in the U.S.; and then she hangs up to go get in front of all this and probably cuss him out a lot now that he's not in hearing. Kent blows out a long breath and slumps into the couch.

Antwone's looking at him again. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah," Kent says reflexively. "--Did you ever wanna go into the casino?"

Antwone shrugs. "Nah, not really my thing."

"Okay, good."

He lifts an eyebrow. "What was that?"

"Uh," Kent replies, flipping his phone idly in his palms. "I guess Caesar's got sick of me counting there and leaned on Becky to make me quit. That's all. --Also, I never admitted that," he adds.
Antwone stares at him for a long moment. "...You count cards in Vegas."

"'S a long story."

"You know that phrase 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know'?" Antwone asks, eyebrow higher. "I'm starting to think that's you, dude."

Kent snorts. "It's their own fault. And it's not illegal."

"This is gonna be an amazing story, isn't it."

Kent chuckles and rubs his nose briefly. But before he can start telling it, the other man leans forward and goes on: "For real though, Kent. Is everything okay?"

"I don't know," Kent says tiredly. He lifts his shoulders. "I'll find out when they decide how they're gonna deal with this."

"It could be nothing," Antwone offers, which is a nice thought but also a great way to get blindsided by being unprepared.

But a nice thought. "Yeah. Maybe. Probably. Just...better safe than sorry."

Antwone squeezes his knee. "Hope so." He hesitates for a breath, and then adds, "Do you...is it an okay place? Are you gonna be alright, bein' out there?"

"Dunno." Kent rubs his face with his hands. "I mean. I figured they guessed by now. At least some of 'em. It just...it was easier. If we didn't talk about it. Everything was hard enough, it was just. Easier."

Antwone's quiet for a few moments, rubbing his thumb comfortingly along the side of Kent's knee. Finally, he says, "At least there's a precedent now? With the Zimmermann guy being out? So you're not the first. Or the only one."

"...Yeah," Kent mumbles, his hands still over his face. "He was always the brave one."

Antwone's hand pauses for barely a second at that. He falls silent again.

Kent digs the heels of his hands against his eyelids, and then drops his arms. He picks his phone back up from his lap and fidgets with it for a heartbeat before shoving it down the couch.

"I wasn't gonna ask, 'cause it's not my business," Antwone says. "But. You guys used to date?"

"No," Kent replies, wishing he'd hung onto his phone so he'd have something to do with his hands. He folds them in his lap instead. "...Maybe. I thought we were," he says softly. "I dunno."

Antwone comes over and sits next to him, pulling him into a hug. Kent exhales and sinks heavily against him, rubbing hard at his eyes again.

Their food shows up a little later. Antwone gets the door while Kent washes his face. He leans into the bathroom briefly to ask if Kent wants to eat on the balcony or in the dining room.

"Balcony for sure," Kent says as he dries off, because it'd be crazy to waste the nice weather here. He's either already caught out, or he's been paranoid for nothing. He'll find out soon enough. Either
way, there's no reason to keep hiding anymore. And they've already been eating out there for the past couple days, anyway.

"Didja have more stuff to work on tonight?" Kent asks, as they're trying to fit all the plates and bowls onto the table. He expected the restaurant to send up takeout boxes or something, not covered dishes on a rolling cart. Fancy suites are always weird.

"I can take a break," Antwone says, accidentally pushing a plate too hard against a glass and sending it tipping over the edge of the table. Kent catches it before it falls. "--Thanks. Nice reflexes."

Kent shrugs.

Antwone pulls the cart closer and starts moving some of the dishes back onto it. "This is ridiculous. I didn't order that much."

"We gotta bring out a bigger table," Kent agrees, wiping off the water that spilled over his hand onto his jeans.

"Definitely," Antwone nods. "What'd you want to do?"

Kent nods at the ocean out past the balcony. "You wanna go out somewhere?"

Antwone glances up at him as he's settling into his chair. "...You sure?"

"I'm going crazy stayin' in here," Kent says honestly. He lifts his shoulders again. "Either that picture isn't a big deal, or it is and we'll just deal with it when it comes up. It's stupid not to have any fun 'cause of worrying about it, right?"

"...Yeah," Antwone says, starting to smile a little as he studies Kent's face. "Yeah, goin' out sounds cool. Anywhere you wanted to go in particular?"

"Uh..." Kent says, looking out over the balcony.

"We could just start down the waterfront and see what's there," Antwone suggests.

A little later, Kent hesitates in the middle of eating one of the dumplings and looks up at Antwone again. "Uh."

Antwone wipes away some of the sauce on his mouth and raises an "uh-huh?" eyebrow at Kent as he chews.

Kent shifts in his chair. "I told Becky you were my boyfriend 'cause it was fastest way to get to the point, but--I...." He fidgets with the half-eaten dumpling, trying not to spill filling all over his palm. "...Are we dating?"

Antwone takes a moment to finish chewing.

"I mean, this is pretty high-level for a hookup for me," he says wryly, reaching for his water. Kent chuckles once hesitantly. "But I wasn't sure what's normal in your world."

"Nnnnnnot this," Kent replies as Antwone takes a drink, because okay, yeah, maybe he should've figured this out before flying halfway around the world and staying in a stupid-fancy hotel in another country with the other man. Hindsight.
"Do you wanna keep things casual?" Antwone asks seriously, setting his glass back down.

Kent scratches his forearm uncomfortably.

Most of him wants to say "Yes."

Partly because that feels like the easiest way to go. And partly for the same reason that when he said "we'll just deal with it" earlier, he unconsciously meant himself and the club, not himself and Antwone.

He pours so much of his energy into the Aces' team and organization, and into his own efforts to perpetually improve as a hockey player, that the idea of trying to start and then maintain a long-distance relationship with someone from a completely different world than the one he moves in feels...exhausting? Stupid? It'd probably never work in the long run, and then he's gonna be out all that time and effort and probably miserable again too. It's definitely stupid.

...Is he doing that self-defeating speech thing the shrink talked about?

Kent rubs a hand hard against his face, and then drops it with a huff.

"I mean, that's the asshole answer, right?" he says ruefully.

"Well," Antwone hedges, which is probably more generous than Kent deserves. "I get it, dude. We live in different cities. And your schedule's ridiculous, what, all but two months of the year?"

If he's lucky and the Aces have a deep run into the playoffs. "Yeah...."

But.

"But," Kent says awkwardly. "I like you. I don't wanna...."

"... I never dated anybody where we didn't already know when it was ending," Kent tells him, which is mostly true.

He and Jack knew that one of them would be in Vegas and the other would be in Long Island for years after the draft until they were free agents; but they would've had phones and internet and offseasons. It wasn't the same as knowing that Inez was leaving Vegas once her consulting work was done, or that Conrad was staying in Switzerland after Kent went back home to the U.S. Or that Brigit was a one-night stand, or that Kent originally planned to break up with Luiselli as soon as scrim started and gave him the excuse. "I don't know how this works."

"...Okay," Antwone nods slowly, after considering that for a few moments.

He looks at Kent again across the table, and spreads his hands slightly. "How 'bout we just hang out for now, and we'll figure the rest of it out later?"

"...Okay," Kent says. "You sure?"

"I like you too, Kent," he tells him. "We'll figure things out. It don't have to be right now."

"...Alright," Kent says, quieter. "Thanks."

Antwone taps a foot gently against his under the table. "Yeah."

Antwone picks up his chopsticks again, and then adds, eyebrow raised, "'Sides, if I don't have to introduce you to Ella yet, I don't have to hear her go 'Another goddamn white boy, El? At least it's
Kent cracks up so abruptly he accidentally crushes his dumpling.

"You have a type for one year in college, you never hear the end of it," Antwone grumbles.

"Okay, but like, for a hockey player? I am," Kent manages between snickers, grinning.

"Alright, well, never tell her that."

Kent laughs more as he licks dumpling filling off his hand.

They spend some of the evening wandering up the road toward the waterfront, detouring into a park and then stopping at a bar after it gets dark. Antwone orders a fancy cocktail; Kent decides to stick with wine, but gets a glass of the most ridiculously named red on the list.

"There a story behind that face?" Antwone asks, nodding at him while Kent's reading the cocktail menu.

"I can just hear our old goalie," he says, tapping the rusty nail's ingredients list. "'You used Talisker for a mixed drink? You should be murdered.'"

Antwone snorts.

"Burival was a mixologist," Kent explains. "Had strong opinions on scotch."

"Amazing." Antwone takes a sip of his drink, eyebrow raised. "Hockey is not like I imagined."

"I think our team's weird," Kent replies. "Or maybe all teams are weird differently?"

"No kidding."

They're finishing up their drinks when Kent gets a phone call. When he checks the screen, it's the Aces' GM.

It's currently about three a.m. in Vegas.

Kent stares at the phone in silence for several long heartbeats. Antwone looks at him quizzically, before his expression starts to get more concerned.

Kent accepts the call before it changes over to voicemail.

"Hey, George," he says with an empty smile, willing his voice to sound normal at least. "I'm out right now, can you hear me? I can call you back in...seven? Minutes if you want."

"No, that's not necessary," Impey replies, and Kent's fingers tighten around the napkins he's gripping. "I wanted to catch you before it got too late there. I wanted to give you the basics of your contract extension."

"Uh."

"Obviously, we'll work out the details with your agent," Impey continues smoothly. "He let me know you were out of the country, so rather than try and manage three timezones I was going to
wait until you got back. Becky said you'll be here next week?"

"Yeah. Yeah, uh, by Sunday."

"We'll pick up the formal process then," Impey replies. "I just wanted to give you an idea of what we're offering, considering your history here with Vegas and the other contract negotiations we have coming up in the next few seasons."

"Okay," Kent agrees.

Half of him kinda wants to throw up. And half of him can't help but be impressed at how the GM waited until Kent got himself into trouble, and alerted the club about it, in order to hit him at the right moment to negotiate down his price. Now that's a fucking power move.

"Do you have a pen?"

They paid with cash at the bar. "No, uh, lemme get one."

As he starts to slide out of his chair, Antwone mouths "pen?" Kent nods.

The other man pulls out his business card case--and under other circumstances Kent would've made a mental note to tease Antwone about being permanently on his hustle--and snaps it open before handing Kent the stubby pen inside.

He takes it with an inaudible "thanks" and tries to smooth out the napkins he crumpled up. "Okay, got one."

Impey gives him the basic outline of his potential contract extension with the Aces: the amount, the number of years, and the bonuses' setup. Kent writes down the numbers and details carefully, and then reads them back twice to make sure he didn't mishear, because they don't make any sense.

"Okay," Kent says at last. "Thanks, George. Uh, did--was there anything else?"

"That's all," Impey replies. "Did you have anything?"

"Not uh, not right now," Kent answers.

"All right. I'll talk to you next week, then."

"Okay."

After he hangs up, Kent rubs his eyes hard and then hands Antwone his pen back.

"You wanna call it a night?" Antwone asks, leaning in so he can be heard over the crowd. "Head back to the hotel?"

"Yeah. Please," Kent says, dropping the hand over his face. He starts folding the napkin so he can shove it in his pocket.

"Okay," Antwone agrees, pushing out of his chair.

Once they're back, Kent copies the contract info onto one of the suite's notepads and then re-does the math on his phone to make triply sure he's not fucking up somewhere. Antwone brings his laptop into the living room and works on the other end of the couch.
Finally, Kent drops the pen onto the pad and drags a hand over his hair, smashing down his cowlick. He's gonna have to wait 'til Allan reviews this. His agent should be able to figure out what Kent's missing.

Antwone sets aside his computer and looks at the pad, and then visibly refrains from whistling. "...Is that not a lot for hockey?"

"No, it's a lot," Kent replies, because it's a lot. It's not the highest salary in the league, but it's one of them. It's absolutely the highest the Las Vegas Hockey Club would be paying out in its eleven-year history.

"So--is eight years short for a contract?"

Kent shakes his head. "No, that's the longest the league'll let extensions go for."

Antwone's starting to look confused about why Kent's been at this shit for the past half hour, which is fair. "Okay. So what's wrong?"

Kent drags a hand over his hair again. "Uh. Okay, that AAV--uh, the annual salary, that's basically what I'd be making every year," he says, pointing at the number. "But that's just the average. All these front-loaded bonuses...."

Kent scrubs a hand over his face. "Man, my agent could do this better. Uh, basically any time you hear 'front-loaded,' the contract's good for the player. Not the club," he explains. "It means they can't afford to buy me out even if they wanna. And trading me would be really hard, 'cause most other clubs aren't gonna want to eat this either."

Not to mention his full no-move clause is still intact. Meaning Kent would have to agree to waive it first for the club to be able to trade him.

The Aces' GM basically called him in the middle of the night, hours after Kent warned the club he might've fucked up their PR, to tell Kent they want to offer him the kind of contract that only franchise faces and the absolute top elite players can get out of their organizations.

This extension would keep him signed with the Aces until he's almost 35.

Just. What the fuck.

"Stop me if I'm missin' something," Antwone says, one eyebrow slightly raised. "But aren't you, like. Really good?"

"There's better," Kent mutters. The top pick in the draft this year was another American, a kid good enough that he spent the past year playing in Europe instead of in Canada's Junior leagues.

And Matthews doesn't have a bad off-ice record dragging down his potential value, the way Kent did. The way Kent still does.

He scrubs a hand over his face. "I don't fuckin' get it," Kent says, sincerely baffled. "They coulda jumped on today to cut their costs re-signin' me. What is this?"

Antwone gives him a long, considering look.

"...Okay," the other man says after a few moments. "I know professional sports are pretty garbage. But...is it unrealistic that maybe they thought, 'Oh crap, we might lose him to a better team if we don't put a ring on this?'"
Kent almost snaps that his team's a damn good one, but then he shoves it down. He knows that's not what Antwone meant.

"Providence is an outlier," Kent says. "The league isn't like that."

Antwone just looks at him again.

Kent exhales. "No--look, I appreciate the thought," he says. "It's just...that's not how things are. Providence is weird."

"Alright," Antwone says slowly. "I'm not doubtin' you're more familiar with all this, Kent. But--with how you been these last few hours, I think maybe you been afraid of being outed for so long, you can't believe anything positive about it."

Kent lets out a much longer, slower breath.

"I'm not sayin' blindly trust a contract, that's wild," Antwone tells him. "And if you know these people're out to scam you, yeah, be suspicious."

"...They're not," Kent mutters, rubbing his face again. "...I don't think. It's just business. They're gonna do what's best for the club."

"Which probably don't involve losing one of its best players," Antwone points out.

Kent makes a muffled snort. And then he slumps back into the couch and leans to the side, against Antwone's shoulder.

"Thanks," Kent says honestly. "For real."

"Yeah," Antwone tells him, draping an arm over the back of the couch and starting to rub Kent's neck. "Been a roller coaster few hours, huh?"

Kent tenses up for a breath at the touch.

It's a subconscious reaction; he doesn't realize he's doing it. It's been a habit of his ever since Epikegster, when he broke down and reached out to Jack while they were alone in the other man's room and then got emotionally and physically pushed away, because Jack had a good idea where that situation was going and he wanted different things for his life by then.

Most of Kent's teammates haven't noticed it. Even though Kent was noticeably more physically interactive with them during the last season, none of those headlocks or wrestling matches or general roughhousing registered at the same level of intimacy in his mind. So he never flinched away from them.

Brigit didn't catch it, because their one night stand wasn't exactly a good statistical sample. Elena picked up on it, and misread it as her and Kent being on the same page that she was using him for insider trading info and he was using her for no-strings-attached sex.

Antwone's registered it. It's one of the reasons he originally assumed this was a fling for Kent rather than anything serious.

Though, by now, he suspects there's other factors involved.

Antwone knew from the beginning that Kent was both closeted and highly jumpy about the fact. He's hooked up with a few guys like that in the past, and been treated like someone's down low
before. He knows this kind of reaction.

Especially since tonight reinforced just how much of a knife's edge Kent apparently believes he's walking between the subject of his sexuality and the heteronormativity of his profession.

Antwone doesn't personally think much of the choice to stay closeted. He decided to live his life out over a decade ago, even at the cost of becoming estranged from most of his conservatively Christian family beyond his sister.

But after watching Kent look like he was having a borderline panic attack twice in three hours whenever a member of the Aces' administration called, Antwone can sympathize with the clear raw fear driving Kent's choice.

And he gets that there's a difference between being out and gay and a smallish name in the music business, and being out and gay and a well-known athlete in a major league sport.

The knee-jerk backlash when Jack Zimmermann gave homophobes the middle finger and kissed his boyfriend in the rink was pretty hard to miss. Antwone saw a fraction of it, and immediately dropped all plans to ask Kent about the game the next time they talked.

Though he set a screenshot of the clip as his laptop background for a while, to remind himself that no matter how many fucking bigots there were in the world or how many guns they had, they still weren't gonna win.

It helped.

Until tonight, Antwone assumed that Kent never mentioned that game either because the trolls hit home harder for him. Now, he figures that's still true--but with extra reasons, if Kent and Zimmermann used to be a thing.

And then Kent exhales and sinks back into the massage.

"Bluuuuuuugh," he agrees, because that pretty much sums it up.

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He wakes up from a stress dream in the middle of the night.

Or some time like that. It's still dark outside. Kent stretches out the tension in his body, and then realizes that the nightstand lamp on the other side of the bed is on. Antwone's leaning over the nightstand and scribbling something on a notepad.

"Aw, sorry," Antwone says, when he realizes Kent's up. "I thought you were a deep sleeper."

"'S cool," Kent answers. "You 'lright?"

"Yeah, just wanted t' get this down."

"Workaholic," Kent says with a faint smile, stifling another yawn.

"...Yeah, I guess," Antwone replies, a little lower.

"Oh," Kent says, recognizing the tone of withdrawal. He pokes him in the back. "'S a compliment."

Antwone chuckles once. "Thanks."
Kent shifts around and buries his head into the pillow with another yawn.

He can hear Antwone writing for a little longer; and then the light snaps off. Antwone settles back down on the mattress.

"'Nother project?" Kent asks. "Joey again?"

"Nah," Antwone replies, shifting closer and draping an arm over Kent's waist. "Side hustle."

Kent snickers and shifts so that the edge of the satin wrap around Antwone's braids isn't tickling his shoulder. "Definite compliment."

Antwone laughs softly.

Kent wakes up again a few hours later, after more bad dreams. His phone says it's around five a.m., so he gets up and makes coffee.

While he's waiting, he replies to the text Mitts sent him about the article on Lucic being spotted wearing a new Oilers' shirt with McDavid's jersey number. Thank fuck Aces veterans have dignity.

No shit should I buy your shirt and retweet a pic

One up him and buy my jersey Kent sends. And then never talk to me again.

Hahaha

I dare you, do it Kent replies, before shifting out of his messages to Skype Showy.

The man lives in Houston even during offseason, so it oughta be about two p.m. there. Kent's starting to regret going to Australia instead of Portland, or just to anywhere else in the same general time zones as the U.S. Hindsight.

When Showy answers, Kent gives him the rundown of his extension offer and then asks, "Is this bullshit? Are they trying to screw me again?"

"You are the most cynical motherfucker I hope I will ever know," Showy replies in amusement. "'Here Parse, we wanna pay ya nine mil a year and getcha locked down in Vegas for another decade.' 'What's the scam?''"

"You're the one who said--"

"I know, I know," Showy agrees, because he was the one who warned Kent how the front office played him on his previous extension a couple years ago.

Showy blows out a breath. "I made it abundantly fuckin' clear to George half why I wasn't staying with the Aces is 'cause the way they treat you is horseshit," he says. "Maybe he's afraid I'm gonna poach ya. Houston's startin' to double down on You Can Play with this bathroom bill crap goin' on-

"What the hell?" Kent interrupts.

"Yeah, I know, it's bull--"

"You know what I fucking mean, Showy."
"If you aren't gonna look out for yourself, somebody has to," his former teammate says.

Kent scowls and picks up his coffee. "Piss off."

"I know you lean in real hard on that blue-collar, regular joe backstory, Parse," Showy drawls, "but it's pronounced 'Thank you.'"

"Fuck you."

"Closer," he half-grins. "Got one of the two words right."

Kent scowls more at the phone and seriously considers hanging up. It's too early for this shit.

"Look, I don't think it's a scam," Showy says. "Get your agent to go over it with a fine-tooth comb, but honestly? I think George realizes he can't get away with that shit a second time. Zimmermann's gutted the standards lettin' 'em let you make yourself miserable for their sake. And the way L.A. and Chicago've shot themselves in the foot the last couple years, they can't pretend you're any kind of legit problem off the ice any more."

Kent lets out a slow breath through his teeth. ". . . Maybe."

"The most cynical, Parse."

"Yeah, yeah." He takes another drink of coffee. "...Thanks, Showy."

"Sure thing," he replies. "Meant it about Houston if you decide to go shoppin' around, though."

Kent's pretty sure he wouldn't survive a month in the same dressing room with Houston's captain before he and Skalski were at each other's throats. "Nah."

"Uh-huh," Showy replies dryly; but he looks like he's thinking the same thing. "Can't blame me for tryin'. You are hell to play against."

Kent snickers. "I got better. I quit chirpin', didn't I?"

"Parse," Showy says flatly. "That was worse. You goin' silent is the nightmare scenario. Was that not your next-level mind game? 'Cause that's what I was assumin'."

Kent stifles a laugh. "No, man. Coach told me to clean up my act."

"Holy shit," Showy replies. "That last game was the worst of my life!"

Kent just shrugs. Outside the shut kitchen door, he can hear the shower start running.

Showy grumbles to himself as Kent goes to get Antwone's mug. "Alright. Thanks for the heads up."

"Well, that was last year. Whole new season comin' up," Kent says, smirking wider.

"Fuck you, Parse."

Kent chuckles to himself.

Showy rolls his eyes and changes the subject. "You get my email 'bout that water machine company?"
"Yeah," Kent agrees. "I sent it to my lawyer, but I probably won't get back with him 'til I'm home. Count me in unless anything goes weird."

"Gotcha," Showy says. "Okay. If I don't catch you tomorrow, happy birthday."

Kent blinks and looks at his watch. "Shit, right, today."

Showy raises an eyebrow. "It's the third, Parse."

"Nah, it's the fourth here," he answers. "Thanks, man."

"What? Where're you at?"

Kent starts to answer, and then instead he goes out to the balcony and turns the phone around so the video catches the inlet and the mountains on the other side. "Guess."

He turns the phone back to himself several seconds later. Showy's frowning in concentration.

"What time's it there?" he asks.

"Nope," Kent grins. "Figure it out with what ya got. I thought defense was for the cerebral types. Wing's where the anti-intellectuals go."

"You ass. You are so fucked first game against Parse, you know that right?" Showy warns him, snickering.

Kent just grins wider and tells him good luck.

When Antwone comes into the kitchen, Kent's halfway done making breakfast: toast and a little fruit and most of the rest of the eggs for himself, toast and some eggs and most of the rest of the fruit for the other man. Antwone types up the groceries they're out of while waiting for his coffee to cool.

"You like eggs a lot?" Antwone asks, as they're carrying their plates out to the balcony. "You wanna get two cartons?"

"Nah, not really," Kent answers, hooking out a chair with his foot. "But they're the best protein with the most nutrients, so I just learned to eat 'em."

Antwone starts to reply; but then his expression shifts from teasing to considering. "Is this a work thing?"

"Yeah," Kent agrees, as they settle down at the table. "I got a pretty strict calorie count per day. Gotta max their value."

"Gotcha," Antwone says. "Sheeze, dude. You don't even get a break in offseason?"

Kent shrugs. "You c'n usually cheat for a few weeks, before you gotta start getting prepped for conditioning," he admits, because he has absolutely scarfed an entire pizza during the first week after playoffs before and it was the best thing ever, even if his nutritionist got mad about that page in his log. "But...."

"... Last season was the worst of my career," Kent says, jabbing his fork into one of the hardboiled eggs. "I can't afford to come into training camp overweight."
Antwone nods. "Got it."

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By the time he gets back from exercising and out of the shower, his phone's blowing up with texts from the guys.

Kent skims them enough to determine that Showy figured out where he was and then weaponized the Aces to send him lousy jokes. Mitts is demanding that Kent box a kangaroo if that's a real thing and to do it anyway even if it's not. Vichy's told him to get on Skype since his phone's being weird.

"I'm impressed," Kent acknowledges, once he's on the call with Vichy. He heads for the formal dining room where they stuck their empty suitcases: it's the one farthest from the office where Antwone's working, and Kent doesn't want to disrupt him.

He pauses to rip the page with his new contract data off the notepad. "How'd he get it that fast? You cheat and ask Becky?"

"The dome in the background--why does Becky know where you are?"

Kent looks out the window at the hotel's glass dome. He should've turned the phone in the other direction. "Nice work."

"Parser," Vichy says flatly. "Why the fuck does PR know where you are."

"Ask me later in person."

"Oh my God," Vichy mutters, pressing a thumb and finger against his eyelids. "What've you done."

"I mean, if you don't know by now I guess I didn't get caught," Kent replies.

He just meant it as a knee-jerk goad. But once he says it, Kent realizes it might be true. If that woman was going to post her photo publicly, she would've by now. Right?

Vichy makes an exasperated growl.

"Yeah, yeah," Kent replies, sitting down in one of the dining room table's uncomfortable chairs and studying the paper. "You got some free time?"

"Depends," Vichy retorts.

"I mean it," Kent says seriously. "I can call later."

Vichy frowns slightly. "What is it?"

"You know the contract you signed last year was bullshit, right?" Kent says, because Vichy agreed to a three-year extension with the Aces right before free agency opened last summer.

Vichy makes a face and looks away from the camera. "It was a good deal for not getting into playoffs enough--"

"It was bullshit," Kent repeats flatly. "You're a workhorse for this team. If they aren't gonna give you the A you've fuckin' earned by now, they can fuckin' well pay you what you're worth."

"That's--it's done already, it's too late now. What is thi--"
"No it's not," Kent replies. "You'll be up for extension again season after this one. What're you wantin' to make? You and Nadiya still trying to have kids?" he adds, because Vichy quit talking about that a few years ago.

The other man falls silent again now. And then he rubs his face hard, and dodges the question by asking, "What is this, Parser?"

Kent takes a photo of the paper all his extension data's on and texts it to Vichy. "Check your phone. Impey gave me the unofficial contract they wanna offer. Dependin' on how much they soften up Chazzer to take a lower--"

"Jesus," Vichy says, looking away from his webcam. The text must've arrived.

"Yeah, it's rough on the cap," Kent agrees. "They're definitely workin' Chazzer to try and get him to take a discount, but other guys are gonna start wantin' more in a few years."

Kent thumbs over into his Google docs account, and then into the spreadsheet he keeps on the Aces' players salaries against the club's cap limit. As he starts to send Vichy a permissions link to it, he asks, "What's your ideal AAV? Actual ideal, them paying you what you're worth. If I know that, it'll help figure out the rest."

"The rest' what?" Vichy replies, confused, before glancing aside again. "Why do you--what's this?"

"Spreadsheet on the guys' salaries." Kent--who's begun to realize that Vichy apparently wasn't assuming Kent would factor in the club's needs or the fact that he wants to keep playing on the same team with this dick for some reason, and who's also starting to have several uncomfortable emotions related to that realization, with embarrassed defensiveness topping the list--says, "If I know what cap hit you wanna take with the next extension, then I'll know what mine's gotta be to keep us under."

Vichy stares at him.

Kent hunches his shoulders in slightly as he sinks back in the chair.

"I don't wanna go below 8.5," he starts to walk back.

But then he tells himself to quit being stupid. This is too important to the team.

"But I can negotiate a little if it'll get you and Chazzer the right numbers," Kent continues. "If you need time to think about it, fine. I'll be back Sunday. George'll probably start negotiations Monday, so just tell me before then."

It's true; Kent was running through the numbers in his head while he was on the treadmill earlier. If he's making $8.5 million a year, that should let him add in a second ART chiropractic session per week, which would definitely get him through the league's marathon seasons in better shape. He'd still be able to cover his life and work expenses, all while socking away enough money in savings, even with inflation.

Nevada doesn't have personal income taxes, so Kent's willing to go lower for the Aces. As long as nobody in his family has any major financial or medical emergencies they need loans for, then even when Kent inevitably has to start adding extra chiropractic sessions as he gets older and wracks up more injuries, he should still have a safe amount in the bank when he retires.

$8.75 million a year would be ideal. $8.25 he could work with, if he makes this trip his last big
splurge for the next few years.

Vichy's rubbing his eyelids hard. "I don't . . . why?"

Kent, who has pretty much used up all his reserves of honesty and willingness to be vulnerable in the past sixteen hours, goes with, "Because I don't wanna play against you, asshole. I like being alive."

Farther away in the suite, Antwone laughs out loud.

Kent guesses he should've shut the dining room doors. He should've predicted the conversation with Vichy would go a lot like this. Friggin' hindsight.

"I'm not joking," Kent calls over his shoulder. "Anatoly Klimentov, look up his stats. Nobody that big should be able to skate that fast, it's a crime against nature. I really look like a twink next to him, it's embarrassing."

Antwone starts laughing harder. Vichy says, "Like a what?"

"Really?" Kent replies, looking back at his phone with an eyebrow raised. "Don't look that up. Look, if you need time to figure out the numbers, alright. Just lemme know by Sunday."

"I don't..." Vichy says muffledly, rubbing his face hard with his hands. ". . . Gimme a sec."

He disappears from the frame, leaving Kent staring at an empty couch. Kent huffs out a breath, and then pushes out of his own chair and heads into the main room.

Antwone's getting more coffee in the kitchen, still snickering. "Dude."

"I know how much I'd drag him to make him fuck up plays so he didn't score on us," Kent replies. "I'd be dead by the end of the first game."

"Anatoly's the big Russian dude, yeah?" When Kent nods, Antwone gives him a considering look. "...Yeah, you might be."

"I'd deserve it," Kent shrugs, because he definitely would. Vichy'd be too much of a threat not to go all out on the chirping.

From his phone, Kent hears a woman's voice. He lifts it back up, and then waits for the video to stabilize.

"Kent Parson," Nadiya says evenly. "Why is my husband laughing hysterically in our bathroom."

"I told him to tell me what AAV he's going for in the next extension, so I know what mine needs to be so we aren't over the cap hit," he answers, because Nadiya's been Vichy's significant other for long enough that she doesn't need the lingo translated. "Then he left."

Nadiya studies him with an unreadable expression for several long moments.

And then the video goes laggy again as she picks up the laptop and starts carrying it through the condo. There's a knock before Kent hears her say "I cannot with you two," and then something else in Russian.

Several moments later, Vichy takes the laptop and sets it on the kitchen hightop. The video finally stabilizes again as the other man grumbles, "I can't with you, Parser."
"That English degree's really payin' off, huh?" Kent drawls, and Vichy tells him to go fuck himself. Antwone leans against the counter, chuckling silently.

"Just send me the number before Monday," Kent repeats.

Vichy makes a guttural noise, and then rubs a hand hard over his face again. "...Alright. Alright, yeah. Lemme think about it."

"Okay," Kent replies. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, see ya."

After he's hung up, Antwone asks, "Was that reverse psychology, or...?"

Kent makes an aggravated noise in the back of his throat. "'S own fault for not realizin' I wanna keep playing with him," he mutters.

Antwone lifts both eyebrows briefly as he takes a drink of coffee. Kent makes a face and tries to shove his phone in his pocket, and then remembers he's only in his boxers. He goes to finish dressing instead.

An hour later, Showy sends him a screencap of a convo between him and Vichy. Kent can see just enough of Vichy's text bubble at the top to get that he must've been ranting about the earlier call with Kent: it ends with *Why can't Parser do anything goddamned normal!*

Showy replied *sounds like a couple emotionally-stunted dipshits tryin 2 tell ea other they're friends by metaphorically talkin bout contracts 2 me*

Later: *no response 2 that huh?*

*i'll go ahead n send this 2 parse so u 2 can get on th same page, ur welcome*

Most of Vichy's reply is clipped out, but it started with a whole lot of middle finger emojis. Kent snorts under his breath before telling Showy *You're an ass.*

*if this deal goes thru I wanna 40% cut not 33%* Showy replies. *th extra's my bonus fee 4 yrs of emotional wranglin u 2*

*That sounds fair* Kent has to admit.

*

Kent sleeps for longer that night, but he still wakes up during the middle of it. When he checks the time on his phone, he sees a bunch of texts from family and other people telling him happy birthday.

He takes the phone out to the living room and starts replying, since he might as well if he's up anyway. He doesn't notice how weird autocorrect is making his responses, until eventually his dad texts that they forgot the time difference and that he should go back to bed.

Kent rolls his eyes, but ends up yawning as he does. He leaves the phone on the couch and heads back to the bedroom.

Antwone's sitting up in the bed and working on his laptop.
"Aw, sorry," Kent says.

"Nah, you didn't wake me. Just had an idea," he replies. "You alright?"

"Yeah," Kent answers, stifling another yawn as he climbs back in on the other side. When Antwone tells him he's almost done, Kent says, "'S cool. How's the project goin'?"

"Good," he replies. "Think I'm gonna get it done early."

"Cool."

Antwone's already up when Kent wakes the next morning. He keeps working during breakfast, trying to wrap up before end of business back in L.A. Kent replies to more texts and catches up on his voicemails.

He's rolling his eyes and grinning at Aunt Jenna and her family singing "Happy Birthday" into his mailbox when Antwone shuts his laptop abruptly and says, "What the heck?"

"It was yesterday," Kent replies, waving it off. "Time difference."

"What the heck."

After Kent's back from working out and Antwone's woken up from his nap, they head out for the waterfront again.

"You sure you don't want more sleep?" Kent asks, when they stop by a coffee place because Antwone's still yawning.

"Dude, no," Antwone tells him. "We gotta celebrate."

"It's not really 'celebrating' if I end up carryin' you back to the hotel," Kent replies with a half-smirk. Antwone just shakes his head.

"I'll be fine," he replies. "Thanks for being cool about me ditchin' you so much."

"I've been doin' the same thing," Kent shrugs, because at this point in the trip they've pretty much decided that they're spending the mornings on their own stuff.

"Still."

"It's cool man, promise," Kent says. "I gotta work out. I'm glad you got stuff to do then."

"Alright," Antwone agrees. He stretches his legs out to the side of the table they're sitting at in the back garden. "I think this should be the last of it, until Joey fucks up something else. Chang just wanted some tweaks done."

"Client? Or coworker?" Kent asks, making a mental note to add it to his list if it's the second one.

"Client," Antwone answers. "He didn't need it immediately, but I'm hopin' to get him to invest when I open my place, so. Gotta butter him up. You know."

Kent nods. "You're startin' your own shop?"

"Yeah. Not yet, and uh, don't tell Blake," Antwone adds. Kent makes another mental note. "I got a
couple more years to build up clients, and then I'm gettin' out of L.A. and going home."

"Where's that?"

"Chicago." Antwone shifts his cup on the table. "For real 'bout Blake, though. I'm not gonna poach clients or anything. I just wanna stay on good terms with him so he'll contract me afterward. When Joey goes into a meltdown once he's gotta do his own work."

Kent snickers.

"It's gonna happen," Antwone replies, lifting an eyebrow as he takes another sip of coffee. "I dunno why Blake hasn't fired him yet. Like dude, are you--"

Antwone breaks off and glances over his shoulder at the family that's also out on the patio. They're sitting on the other end, but they've got a little kid with them. He lowers his voice before continuing, "--You sleepin' with him or what? 'Cause you can do better. I will set you up."

Kent snickers again. "Is he?"

"Nah, he's straight," Antwone shrugs, before shaking his head. "Blackmail. Know each other's moms. Gotta be somethin'."

"Gotcha," Kent nods. "Won't say anything."

"Thanks."

Kent adds, "You're from Chicago?"

"Born and raised in Canaryville," Antwone grins, shifting accents so suddenly that Kent raises both eyebrows. "Got real good at killin' the accent after I came to L.A."

"No kiddin'."

Antwone chuckles. Kent asks, "You got a specific date?"

"Not exactly. Depends on...."

Antwone trails off and takes a long drink of his coffee. Kent stops himself from quirking an eyebrow again, and waits instead.

"Friend of mine's supposed to get out in a few more years," Antwone says, looking at his cup. "I wanna be established by then, so he's got a job with me. Since it's hard to find work once you got a record, you know?"

Kent--fully aware of felony collateral consequences thanks to the prison staff in his family, and who mentioned offhand where a lot of his relatives worked once to Antwone when talking about his hometown--just nods. "He's a music guy?"

Antwone's shoulders relax slightly. "Yeah. He was the frontman for our band."

Kent nods again. "Cool."

"...He's not a bad guy," Antwone says. "He didn't--it was the fault of the shit booking company that put a skinhead group on our lineup, because all punk's the same, right?"

"Jesus," Kent says reflexively, because that's a lot of bitterness right there.
"Yeah. BigTime Entertainment. Or MyAfton, whatever they're callin' themselves now," Antwone mutters. "It was already a crappy show, then those fuckers started in and--"

He cuts off again, and takes another drink of coffee.

Kent presses a leg comfortingly against his under the table.

Antwone keeps the cup to his face for a long moment, his eyes shut. And then he finally puts it back down with a long exhale.

"Darryl took the rap," he says quietly. "He could pull off that prep school white boy look when he wanted, we figured he'd be alright. But then the dumbass teenager running the levels testified 'bout Darryl throwin' his guitar at him during check--which was his own damn fault for not bein' able to do his one job, it wasn't like Darryl to do that. But of course it made him look like the bad guy. And then they made it aggravated assault even though it was that skinhead's own fuckin' knife, and." He exhales again. "...It wasn't supposed to go like it did."

"That sucks," Kent offers, because he's not sure what else to say.

"Yeah." Antwone rubs his fingers against his eyelids. "...Yeah. He wasn't even in the fight, but he took the fall. Least I can do is make sure he's got a job and roof when he's out. If I'm my own boss, I can hire whoever I want."

"Gotcha." Kent bops his knee against Antwone's leg and says sincerely, "If that's what all the work's for, man, do what you gotta do. You're bein' a good friend."

"Thanks," Antwone says, dropping his hand and smiling at him.

He drains the last of his coffee. Kent drinks his water, but doesn't pull his leg back.

Antwone sets his cup back down on the table, and then huffs out a laugh. "But yeah, Chicago. Definitely getting back there sooner than later. L.A.'s not any better 'bout the obsession with connections, but at least Chi-town's home. It can get away with it."

Kent chuckles.

Antwone gives him a wry grin. "Don't worry, I won't start wearin' your Blackhawk rival's jersey or anything."

"He's not a Blackhawk," Kent says before thinking about it.

Antwone arches an eyebrow with an amused whistle.

Kent shifts in his chair and shrugs. "Just...nah."

"Still mean it about wantin' to hear the long version of these stories, dude."

Kent reaches up to push down his cowlick, and then catches himself in the tell and wraps his hand around his glass instead. "...He's a guy who plays in Chicago. You don't get to call yourself part of a team if you keep screwin' it over.

"Guys keep wrecking the PR there 'cause the problem's comin' from the GM," Kent shrugs. "Or the owner, when it's that constant. But their club keeps havin' to get rid of guys after they mess up big once. They can't afford any more bad PR besides Kane, 'cause he won't keep his off-ice crap managed."
Kent looks down at his glass as he toys with it. "I might screw up, but at least I got teammates and coaches that kick my ass back on the right path."

Antwone's still got that eyebrow raised.

"...I have not been seein' the right news, huh," he says, when Kent doesn't go on. "Last I heard, everybody back home was psyched he won your trophy after some crazy points run."

"Of course he did," Kent says flatly. "Gettin' accused of rape was the third strike. They squeezed him dry last season 'cause if he faltered for a second, they'd chuck his ass out to whatever club'd still have him and he knows it. Same thing happened to me the year before that, you always know when you're--" and then he stops and takes a long drink of water.

Antwone's expression shifts to serious. He reaches out and squeezes Kent's forearm briefly.

Kent finally exhales slowly, and sets his empty glass back down on the table.

"...I screwed up and broke curfew a couple years ago, sneakin' outta the hotel before a game. To go to a party because...." He lets out another breath. "...'Cause of stupid stuff about Zimmermann, anyway. I already had a good streak goin', but I knew I had to keep it up after that," he says.

"I'd already messed up before, I had to prove I was still a useful asset. You always know when you've gone too far." Kent shrugs. "They're never gettin' another year like that outta him, that was just fear."

"...I'm gonna be honest, Kent," Antwone says slowly. "Sometimes you talk about yourself and your team in a way that seems really normal to you, but kinda freaks me out. You're a person, not an 'asset.'"

"Not to the club," Kent replies. "The team's good guys. The club's the business. We're all assets to them, that's just...y'know. Sports."

"I am so damn glad I went into music," Antwone says dryly. Kent snorts.

Antwone shifts his cup aside on the table to clear the space between them. "So not your rival. Got it."

"He's an extremely good player who's gonna be remembered for being a violent drunk rapist," Kent says flatly, and Antwone whistles low again. "That's not a fucking 'rival.' That's a waste of talent. I put my team on its knees like that, they'd cut my brakes before it became my legacy. And I'd be proud of 'em for it."

He's fucked up, but not so bad that the Aces had to lose Scrappy after someone went trolling for dirt on the man back in January. Not like how Chicago had to lose Sharp and then Shaw after their own screw-ups.

Kent's kept his off-ice shit managed well enough that the club still had enough goodwill to get through last season's brand hit. He's fucked up, but not so bad that he's poison to his team.

"Rival," his ass. A real rival was Jack.

A real American-born rival's gonna be if Matthews can carry his Juniors stats over into his NHL career. Kent'll find that out when the season begins.

Antwone starts snickering.
Kent's spent most of last season listening to a lot of surzhyk-flavored Russian phrases and idioms being translated into English, thanks to the Rusinglish that the Aces' Ukrainian rookie and the team's two Russian-as-a-second-language speakers wound up using among each other. After over half a year, he was used to it; so it takes him a second to catch the double entendre. "Augh, gross."

"I didn't say anything--"

"Groooooss."

Antwone shakes his head. "Killin' a whole realm of porn here, Kent."

"We have an entire section of fines for farts," Kent says flatly, and Antwone laughs out loud. "I'm never datin' any of those dumbasses, gross."

*

The rest of the week is pretty good. They stick with the same schedule they've had so far: breakfast, working separately in the mornings, and then getting back together for lunch and hanging out the rest of the day.

They go out a lot more often during the afternoons and evenings.

The hotel has a thing were you can get somebody to bring a koala to your room for a photos op. Kent and Antwone end up doing it mostly because they kept joking about it until it ended up sounding like a dare, which finished with Kent on the phone with the concierge even as they both snickered about how stupid this was.

Antwone very quietly but very clearly loses his shit once the actual koala is there, though. He keeps hissing "It's so cute!" at Kent as they take the pictures, while the koala itself mostly looks disgruntled at being awake in the middle of the day.

Kent, in a fit of fuck-all-this-fake-shit post-workout endorphins, posts the solo pic of himself with the koala to his Twitter with Know that wanna-nap feeling mate #australia

It takes several hours for the rest of the internet to wake up and start ripping him for it. Trojan's one of the first, @-ing him on Twitter and intentionally using so much Brit slang that Kent just DM's him with You're doing the thing where you're talking fake English again mate.

Trojan DMs him back. Kent understands all of that response, because he recognizes cuss words and emojis.

When he gets a chirping text from Showy, Kent starts to send back I was restrained, look at this dude freaking out over a tiny bear along with one of the pics of him and Antwone together; and then he pauses.

"Hey, Antwone?"

The other man looks over from his laptop. "Yeah?"

They're sitting on the same sofa in the living room; Kent's channel surfing while Antwone finishes up some email. Kent turns the phone to him. "You cool if I send this?"

Antwone reads it and then makes a mock-annoyed face. "It was cute. Yeah, it's fine."
"No, like, are you okay with me showing him your picture?" Kent replies, just to make completely sure that Antwone didn't think he was asking about the barely-even-a-chirp-level comment. "He's a cool dude, I promise. He, uh. Already knows about you, just not what you look like."

Antwone pauses, and then looks over fully from his laptop. "Yeah, go ahead. It's cool. ...Which guy was he?"

"Oh, uh. He wasn't at Anatoly's new year's party," Kent explains, resting the phone on his thigh. "He got traded last summer. He's in Houston now. Zach Short."

"--Wait," Antwone says, raising an eyebrow. "Zach? The guy you were picking fights with all that one game?"

Kent shrugs uncomfortably. "That's just on the ice. He's a really good dude, I promise. I trust him."

"Hey," Antwone says, sincerely now. "It's cool. You got good taste in people, Kent. You say he's a good guy, I believe you."

Kent fidgets slightly with the phone. "...Okay."

"I'm not gonna be mad if you wanna talk about me to the guys you trust," Antwone tells him. "I'm out at work. Don't worry about that with me. It's cool. I promise."

"Okay," Kent repeats, a little more confident. "Cool."

Antwone tosses an arm over his shoulders and gives him a quick hug.

Kent sends the text to Showy as Antwone goes back to revising an email to one of his clients. Showy soon writes back "I c 1 dude havin a normal reaction 2 a koala & 1 dude pretendin he's 2 cool 4 a koala"

Kent snorts, and shows that text to Antwone too.

They go to the rope course/wildlife place inside the dome one afternoon, because it's right there. Kent ends up having to pass on most of the cool stuff in it, though.

"You sure?" Antwone asks, as he's waiting to get fitted for a harness for the climbing area.

"Yeah," Kent replies, looking up at the ropes doubtfully. "Looks too much like bungee jumpin' than rock climbing. I'm pretty sure it'd go on the ban list." Plus, half of it looks like the upper body strength training he's gonna have to do at conditioning camp. There's zero percent fun in that.

"I'm not gonna tell anyone," Antwone points out in amusement.

"Nnnn...." Kent's already got enough crap going on with the front office. He's better off not pushing his luck.

"It's cool," Antwone tells him. "You sure you're not gonna be bored?"

"Nah, I'll go look at the other stuff," Kent answers, shaking his head. "Yell if you do something I should take a photo of."

Antwone chuckles in the back of his throat. "Okay."

He gets strapped up for the intro climbing course. Kent wanders off to the gift shop to buy two
stuffed koalas.

He gets recognized one more time while they're out at the Great Barrier Reef, this time by an English couple. They take a selfie, but the guy mainly asks a few questions about next season's lines and then asks Kent to "Tell Troy he's doing a bare nice job there in the U.S."

Kent texts it to Trojan later that evening, once they're back at the hotel: *Met some Brits, they said tell you you're doing a bear good job at the hockey what what*

*Parse the arse* Trojan replies later.

Kent snickers and sends back *Took you this long to think that up? Weak, man.* Trojan doesn't deign to respond.

Eventually, it's time to fly back to go home.

* "What's your schedule the next couple months?" Antwone asks, while they're hanging out after dinner and crampedly watching a movie in one of the sci-fi-y pods that first class has instead of seats.

Kent pulls his phone out of his jeans. "One more free week, then some endorsement stuff," he answers, scrolling down his calendar. "That summer PR event, 'nother break, conditioning camp...scrim. Uh, the unofficial skate before training camp starts. Lets new guys and prospects learn our home ice, lets you know who's serious enough they're comin' in early. Then training camp. Then pre-season kicks off."

"Sheeze," Antwone replies, setting his drink back on the table-shelf. "'Off' season's just a polite lie, huh?"

Kent nods as he takes a sip of scotch. "Pretty much."

* A week after he's back, he and the Aces finalize the details of his new contract.

Kent Parson signs an eight-year extension with the Las Vegas Hockey Club at an annual value of $8.4 million per year--a value that all the Aces' media arms, and more than a few non-associated commentators, point out is one heck of a hometown discount, considering Kent's overall value and production for the club since he was drafted.

His brand takes a significant swing upward.

* During his first meeting with the new mental therapist, instead of starting out with a bunch of emotional buzzwords, the man tells Kent he wants him to take an EEG assessment.

"I'm going to be honest, most of the evidence for EEG training is anecdotal," the man says, as Kent reads the printout describing brainwave categories. "But you mentioned you use an accelerated performance recovery machine?"
"Yeah," Kent agrees. "Yeah. The ARP's anecdotal too, but I mean, I think it works."

"So you have some comfort with neurofeedback therapy?"

"I guess so, yeah," Kent says.

"Would you be willing to try this?" he asks.

"Yeah, I can." Kent looks back down at the printout. "What's it supposed to do?"

"Essentially, it's going to create a map of your brain," the man tells him. "One that will let us know what areas, if any, aren't operating at their ideal level. With that, we'll know what parts need to be targeted with more training, to get them functioning at that ideal level."

"Huh," Kent says, because that's so . . . normal. Practical. Not what he expected from a shrink.

"The brain isn't technically a muscle, but it acts a lot like one," Dr. Fisher tells him. "So we can condition and strengthen it the same way. The assessment would be the first step in determining what kind of training you need."

"Okay," Kent says, relaxing back a little into his chair. "Cool. Yeah, okay. Where do I go?"

The doctor says he'll send Kent's information to a psychologist who specializes in EEG assessment and training, and have that office contact Kent for an appointment. He and Kent spend the rest of the session covering more questions about brainwave levels and other stuff about EEG, and discussing Kent's previous experiences with neurofeedback.

Now that he knows he's basically just working with a mental trainer, Kent's a lot more open about the fact that the ARP is primarily his alternative to painkillers. He still shies away from explicitly talking about Juniors or Zimmermann.

Dr. Fisher suggests that he start a log detailing his physical reactions to any painkillers he takes, since that should let them potentially narrow down what chemicals his body might be reacting poorly to. He tells Kent he can do voice notes if trying to write while under their influence feels like too much of a stumbling block.

"Okay," Kent agrees. And then he hesitates. "Uh...."

Dr. Fisher waits patiently.

Kent exhales through his teeth, and tells himself to just say it. It's probably information the doctor needs; and odds are it'd come up eventually anyway. "A guy--an old teammate of mine, he thought it might be a mental thing."

"That the painkillers make you feel poorly because of a mental reaction, not a physical one?" the man clarifies.

Kent nods.

"Do you feel like that might be the case?"

Kent scratches his forearm and looks away, out at the window. Dr. Fisher waits again.

Finally, Kent blows out another breath and turns his head back to the man, looking at his desk. "I really don't like how I feel with 'em."
"Okay," Dr. Fisher says. "It's possible it could be mental. The brain is a complex organ. It has complex reactions to stimuli. It could also be a combination of mental and physical reactions. The log will let you track possible physical causes."

"Okay."

"There's nothing wrong with it potentially being a mental response," he says. "If it is, then that'll be another factor you train your brain on."

"...Okay." Kent makes a half-grin briefly. "Elliot'll be happy about that one."

"How will you feel about it?"

Kent lets out another long breath.

"You seem uncomfortable talking about painkillers," the man says. "But I don't want to attribute reactions to you that aren't correct."

"...I guess," Kent mumbles eventually, when the doctor doesn't add anything after that. "Maybe. I'm not 'uncomfortable,' I just.... I'm tired of it being this whole big...thing," he says, waving a hand. "I just don't like 'em."

He huffs. "But I gotta take 'em sometimes. So I guess, yeah, I wanna figure out what works or not already." He already knows that ibuprofen does. But if that's not good enough, then fine, whatever. At least this'll be done with.

"All right," Dr. Fisher says. "Let's begin with the log to track physical reactions, whenever you need to take one. The more data you have there, the more information you'll have to supplement the brain map."

"Okay."

They shift to talking about locations and how far out he's willing to travel for EEG sessions, so Dr. Fisher can factor that into who he sends Kent to--the league hasn't published the new season's schedule yet, meaning Kent has no idea where he's going to be at any given time for most of the next several months. And then his session's up.

*

During conditioning camp, Kent gets one of the guys to film him doing the rope climb. He texts the vid to Antwone with Since I didn't do the ropes with you last time

Dude warn me before you sext Antwone sends back soon after. Kent has to stifle a cackle so the other guys won't look over.

*

Vichy's one of the first to arrive for scrim, like usual. He and Kent meet in the clubhouse at breakfast.

"Had a good camp?" Kent asks, as he finishes up his eggs.


Vichy makes a tired noise as he pours a cup of coffee. "The hell do I pay guys to try and murder
me,' d'you ever wonder that?" he asks. "How was Australia?"

"It was alright."

Kent waits a few more breaths until Vichy starts to take a drink, and then he adds casually, "Got banned from Caesar's for counting cards."

Vichy chokes hard on his coffee.

Scrappy comes into the kitchen several minutes later, after Vichy's tackled Kent and wrestled him down to the floor. "Finally happened."

"Help," Vichy grits out, because Kent's still trying to fight his way free even though he knows he's just uselessly burning energy at this point. It's the fuckin' principle of the thing.

"One sec," Scrappy says.

Kent hears a phone camera click. Vichy twists around enough to look over.

"Gotta let Robber know the bet's closed. I won," Scrappy explains, audibly grinning.

"Jeff," Vichy replies, betrayed. Kent starts laughing again.

"Said you'd make it through Zimmermann's rookie year on balls and willpower," Scrappy continues, coming over to sit on Kent's legs. Kent tries to kick him in the calf, but the other man dodges. "First day next scrim, you'd finally snap."

"You're an asshole," Vichy growls out, as Scrappy settles on Kent's legs. "Why'm I friends with so many goddamn assholes?!"

"Common denominator's you," Kent manages with a grin.

Vichy headlocks him again. Scrappy sniggers.

*

Once he's back in Vegas for the season, nothing's weird with the front office. Nobody there acts any different toward him.

The only change Kent notices is in the Aces' ban list. The rule about allowing someone to sleep overnight only if she's a wife or girlfriend has been rewritten to "only if they're a spouse or significant other."

*

At the Sydney airport, Kent bought a kangaroo hand puppet wearing boxing gloves that had buttons inside to make its arms punch. He leaves it in Mitts' locker the first day of training camp.

Mitts spends the morning going around socking everyone with it, until a few guys finally bribe the equipment manager to "misplace" it while they're all out on the ice that afternoon.

"I didn't think it was possible," Trojan says to Kent during a pause in one of the morning meetings, as they watch Mitts covertly and repeatedly bop Tommy in the back with the puppet's fists while Tommy steadfastly keeps his eyes on the assistant coach and pretends he has better taste in friends. "You made him more annoying."
"It took a lotta thought," Kent agrees, grinning. Trojan makes an amused noise in the back of his throat.

Several minutes later, Coach Kurlansky steps out of the room for a second when somebody calls for him. Tommy immediately turns and lunges at Mitts over the folding chairs.

*

Shortly before preseason starts, Kent and Vichy and Showy's lawyers sort out all the details so that they can form an LLC, in order to invest in a company Showy learned about that's building solar-powered water generators.

The point of the machines is to create drinkable water from moisture in the air, not for anything commercial like hockey ice. But both the Aces' and the Aeros' social media teams drop mentions of it, because it's great PR for members of a water-siphoning sport in drought-heavy states to be giving back like that.

The Aces do a spot about it on their Jumbotron during one of the preseason games as well, because desert.

*

Most of the Aces' preseason games are against other teams in the Pacific, like usual. But one game crosses over with the Central division, because the Aeros've been tossed out of their arena for some singer or event.

Kent and Short start chirping each other halfway through the warmups, until another one of the Aces comes over and breaks it up.

"Every fucking game, Showy," Vichy says, wedging between them. "Stop baiting the goddamn bear already."

"Gotta make him humanize me," Short replies, shrugging. "So he won't do the fuckin' numbers thing."

"Oh my God," Vichy mutters. Kent narrows his eyes.

Short just grins back wider, showing teeth as he says cheerfully, "I know my shit, Kenny!"

"I'm in hell," Vichy growls, shouldering them farther apart. "It's not other people, it's just you two assholes."

"Still other people, pal," Short points out with a snicker.

Vichy gives him a flat stare. "Fuck off, 'Parson.'"

Kent says, "Hey."

"Cram it, pedant," Vichy tells him, before shoving Kent and Short farther away and onto their own teams' sides of the ice. "Fuck."

Once the game's over, Kent texts Showy to hang back a sec, he's got a present for Emiri.

Showy laughs out loud when Kent gives him the bow-wrapped koala bear. "You dick. This is
'cause I told you she's the one that liked that pic, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," Kent says. "Tell her she's got great taste."

"Did you find the worst bow you could 'cause you know I'm gonna have to carry this on the bus?"

"Yup," Kent grins. "Have fun."

Showy tries to smack him on the head with the koala's butt. Kent ducks, snickering.
First half of the 2016-17 season

The club's new arena finally opened in early April. The Aces didn't have any games in it before the season ended--the team would've rioted at starting the playoffs on new ice--but in September 2016, the Las Vegas Hockey Club is finally out of the Orleans casino's arena and into its new home at T-Mobile.

The arena management gives the team a tour while the staff's building out the ice for preseason. There's a lot of pink neon.

Which Kent figures makes sense, given the naming rights sponsor. But still. It's like...a lot.

He texts a couple photos of the worst spots to the former Aces' player who was griping about neon during June's awards ceremony. Showy sends back a Youtube link for "Blinded by the Light."

*

Kent was originally tagged for Team USA for the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. But after his shoulder surgery in late April, he had a long talk with his personal doctor and physical therapist, and with the Aces' doctor and trainer as well. And then Kent sent in the paperwork to beg off the nomination.

He probably would've been fine. The WCH wasn't until September. He'd gone hard on the physical therapy, and he got his shoulder back to where it needed to be.

But as much as Kent wants to play for the U.S. again--the more the NHL and the IOC keep farting around about the 2018 Olympics, the more Kent's pissed at himself for losing his chance to go to Sochi back in 2014--he didn't want it enough to risk the coming season.

Kent's hometown discount to the Aces during his contract negotiations bought his personal brand a lot of positive energy. But at the same time, taking a blatantly low-paying contract extension immediately after his career worst season and two years after a massive PR fuckup with the Samwell kegster gave his haters more supposed proof that he was on the decline.

Kent intends to fuck up those claims by rebounding this year, and getting back to where he's supposed to be.

So Kent once again plays the long game, and sacrifices the World Cup for the 2016-17 season.

The WCH starts in late September, right in the middle of training camp and preseason, because somebody in the league can't schedule. Kent invites all the Americans currently trying out for Vegas' roster to watch the U.S. games at his place.

It pretty quickly turns into several nights of a bunch of guys getting buzzed and shouting insults at Kent's TV, because the U.S. decides to lose every game.

"What is this horseshit, you assholes!" Vichy yells after a turnover. " Fucking play right!"

"Wow," Brownie says with a raised eyebrow, looking up from Kent's heavily dog-eared and note-scrawled copy of Hockey Confidential as he and Nino and Kent lean against the kitchen island. The couch cushions are piled on top of it, because Kent confiscated them all after Catsby chucked one at his screen after the U.S. gave up a goal to Canada.
"You should've heard him during the Olympics," Nino replies.

"Yup," Kent agrees, taking a sip of beer. "Half the Russian insults I know, I learned then."

Brownie chuckles and looks back down at the margin notes around McDavid's interview. Vichy bites off something in super salty Russian at the U.S. players gathering at the face-off dot before adding, "Feel shame, motherfuckers!"

Nino shakes his head as Kent snickers.

On screen, the color commentator's talking during the gameplay pause, about how poor Team USA's been this game despite the fact that Crosby's out with an injury yet again, so the U.S. isn't even facing the "greatest player in the world" right now. Over the noise of Catsby giving Vichy the gears for his outbursts, Kent hears the commentator say something about how Team Canada can keep going without Sidney Crosby, but Team USA can't succeed if Patrick Kane doesn't get it together.

"Jesus Christ," Kent mutters reflexively, with more emotion than he meant to show. Brownie glances over.

Kent jerks his chin at the TV. "This the shit the guys put up with when I get my ass injured?"

"Feels like it sometimes," Brownie agrees.

Kent pauses.

His alternate captain, who's played for significantly more NHL teams than Kent has in his career, just lifts his shoulders. "S what it feels like any time a franchise face goes on IR."

Kent blows a breath out through his teeth. "...Still. Sheeze."

"Guys don't step up to fill the gap, that's on us," Brownie says practically. Nino nods in agreement.

Kent can't really argue with that, but saying so out loud would sound dickish. He makes a vague noise in the back of his throat instead.

Robber, standing over by the doors to Kent's balcony, loudly interrupts whatever Catsby was saying: "Fuck off with that, seriously. You gentrified motherfucker, callin' Brookline Boston."

"Shove it up yer ass, Southie!" Catsby leans around Vichy to yell.

"Can I not get management called on my ass again, guys?" Kent says. Robber drains his water bottle and then chucks it at Catsby's face.

Kent sighs theatrically as Catsby scrabbles over the back of the couch and goes for Robber, kneeling Vichy in the shoulder as he does. Vichy shoves him over the edge with a snort.

"Maybe just bribe your neighbors," Brownie suggests with a little smirk.

"Thanks," Kent deadpans as he picks up one of the sofa cushions. "Dash, duck."

Das looks over and then immediately dodges as Kent throws the cushion at Robber and Catsby.

The guy has good reflexes. Kent doesn't expect him to fight his way onto the defense roster this season--he's a teenager, still young enough that he hasn't developed the adult physical strength to last against older players--but he'll be surprised if the GM doesn't call Das up for at least a couple
games, to get him some major league experience.

Vichy watches the pillow sail past his shoulder and smack Robber in the head. And then he looks back and gives Kent an annoyed face, spreading his hands. Robber cusses Kent out.

"You woulda deserved it if it hit ya," Kent tells Vichy, because Vichy and his goddamn loud yelling was the reason the apartment manager came and told Kent to quiet down his party last time. Vichy gives him a middle finger.

The night of the final U.S. game, Kent and Brownie start playing pool during second period because why not. Kent does want to study how the Americans are getting outplayed so bad by the Czech Republic, but there's way too much chirping going on at the moment for him to be able to focus. He'll re-watch the game later.

As Kent runs the table, Brownie asks dryly, "The fuck is this, Parse."
"You didn't hit it the right angle," he replies. Brownie aimed too low, and put too much spin on the cue ball. Rookie-level mistake.

"None'a you fuckers warned me he's a pool shark," Brownie calls to the room.

"Chazzer's only one who knew," Kent answers, clearing the last of the solid balls and starting in on Brownie's striped ones.

"Jesus," the other man snorts, as somebody else calls, "Wait, what?"

"The hell didn't you wanna bet?" Brownie asks, leaning on his cue and watching as Kent keeps emptying the table.
"I don't bet on pool."

Brownie raises an eyebrow with a half-smirk. "Didn't know that was an option 'round here."

Kent pauses, and then looks over at him. "--D'you think we bet a lot here?"

"Nah, just ribbin' you."

"No, for real," Kent says. "Showy said he took some shit for the bettin' in Houston. Is it a lot compared to other places? 'Cause we should look at that if so."

Brownie thinks about it.
"... More'n other places I've been, yeah," he agrees, shrugging a shoulder. "Doesn't seem excessive or anything. Just parta the culture. It's Vegas, yeah?"

"Hm." Kent makes a mental note. "Alright."

Brownie chuckles once as Kent turns back to the table and lines up his next shot. "So's that why you didn't bet? I'm not complainin', I'd be cleaned out right now."

"Nah, I just don't bet on pool."

Brownie raises an eyebrow again, clearly expecting more to that.

Kent blows out a breath and readjusts his shot, and doesn't go on. He's never told anybody the
reason besides Jack.

...But.

It's not like he broke any laws. And even if he did, whatever, the statute of limitations has to be over by now.

And Kent doesn't have as good a camaraderie with his first alt as he ought to. He started out last season putting in the work to develop a relationship with Brownie; but then Kent kept getting deeper into his slump, and getting more tense as his first game against Zimmermann got closer, and then he just...never got back to it.

Most of that low grade tension between them is gone. Brownie sorted out his place on the team, and adjusted to working with a younger captain. Kent figured out how to interact with an older, newcomer high-level player who was looking set for several years' run with the Aces. But still. It could be better.

Brownie's been working hard with both the new defensive assistant coach and with the younger defensemen he was signed to mentor. Kent's glad to have him as a teammate and an alternate captain. So. Fuck it, whatever.

Statute of limitations's definitely gotta be over by now, anyway.

"I got rolled for sharking once when I was fifteen," Kent says, dropping his voice as he shrugs briefly. "I don't bet on pool anymore."

Brownie studies him, mouth pursed against a disbelieving smile.

Kent's voice apparently wasn't low enough, because a second later the TV mutes.

"What," Vichy says evenly, "the fuck."

"And if that ever leaves this room, I'll find you," Kent informs all the guys without looking up from the table. "I told my parents I was mugged, and they're gonna keep thinkin' that."

"What the fuck."

"Somebody pin him down before he tries to kill me for bein' a dumbass," Kent replies.

"Are you--is this for real?"

"Before he switches from 'Parser' to 'Parson,'" Kent adds.

Vichy makes an exasperated growl and starts to shove up off the couch. Catsby tackles him around the waist, cackling.

Vichy twists around to stare down at him, and says dead serious, "Make better choices, Catalano."

"Fuck!" Catsby cracks up laughing, as Robber calls him a dumbass. But he doesn't let go. "I regret everything!!"

"Why?" Brownie asks, sounding genuinely curious despite the fact that he's still holding down a smirk.

"My parents' water heater broke, and I busted my backup stick in a game," Kent answers, lining up on the final ball. "I needed more twigs. I figured pool'd get me the money faster'n cards."
"... Every time I think I got a read on you, Parse," Brownie says.

"Go hard or get out," Kent shrugs again, as the last ball sinks into the corner pocket. He goes to shoot the cue ball in.

Brownie shakes his head but shifts out of his way as he comes around the table.

"I got lucky, they just busted a tooth," Kent adds, poking his tongue against the replacement molar he got after moving to Vegas.

And he had to get a tetanus shot, because the glass shard he was holding cut his palm while he was curled up tight with his knees against his chest, protecting his hands.

He'd grabbed the glass when the first guy shoved him down on the concrete behind the building. Kent could handle losing a tooth or taking some bruises to the back or thighs; but if they tried to fuck with his hands or ankles, he was ready to stab the nearest guy's hamstring and then just run as hard as he could. He wasn't gonna have his future get screwed up just because a couple assholes couldn't handle losing.

Kent doesn't mention any of that. He never even told Jack about that part. He just said the cut was an accident.

"What the hell, Parser!" Vichy says, trying to break Catsby's grip around his waist.

There's other people around, so Kent can't comment out loud how it's rich hearing this from the guy who's on the goddamn mob's shit list, because Vichy also pulled the same crap Kent used to do in order to play--except that Vichy screwed up enough that he got caught.

So instead, Kent rests his cue on the floor and just stares at Vichy, one eyebrow raised as high as he can get it.

Vichy apparently finally recognizes the hypocrisy. He scowls at Kent before distinctly mouthing "Fuck you," and starts to sit back down.

"Uh-huh," Kent remarks. He hands his pool cue to Brownie, who takes it with a confused look. "You ain't hard."

"You did not just--" Vichy says, busting loose of Catsby's hold and coming for him over the couch. Kent sprints around the table and breaks for the door with a cackle as Catsby yells "Really??" after them.

The apartment management gets called on him again.

* 

The World Cup steadily thins out, until it's just Team Canada facing off against Team Europe, which is basically where the league stuck all the leftover continental players. The Eastern and Western Europe guys and the Canadians on the team--the ones who're still in the bet on the WCH winner--ramp up their trash-talking during practices.

Eventually, PR forbids them to do it during the practices where the public's allowed in. None of the chirping's serious; but the last thing they need is somebody on the other side of the glass pretending that it is, and accusing the team of xenophobia or something.
Kent would like *one* scandal-free season already. It feels like they've been cursed ever since Vichy was too trusting and somebody recorded him complaining about the lockout while he was in Russia. Even if that was mild compared to the next few years: Tobin's overdose, Kent's fuckup at Samwell, someone digging up dirt on Scrappy.

The morning after Team Canada wins the World Cup, Kent comes into the clubhouse to find the common room draped in a just obnoxious number of Canadian and Quebecois flags.

He takes a selfie with a raised-eyebrow "really, guys?" expression, getting as much of the room in the background as possible. Kent uploads it and tags every single Canadian on the team, starting with Mitts and Boxy, and ending with & arnolds, who needs to get on social media already. it's 2016 dude

That afternoon, Catsby starts posting pages of weird superstitions from the Canadian version of the Farmers' Almanac.

Vichy retweets them all, and then tells Kent to get his ass off Instagram and onto Twitter, they're doing important work there.

* 

After the roster's locked down, the guys go through the photoshoot for the club's annual calendar. Meaning Kent once again goes through Vichy's annual criticizing of his suits.

"This is a new one," Kent retorts. "It looks good."

Vichy gives Kent's clothes that same upper-lip sneer he does to opponents he thinks are pure rats with no skill, which is overkill. It's a good suit; it's just not any of Vichy's fancyass bespoke shit.

"What's wrong *now*?" Kent says in exaggerated resignation, because he knows what's aggravating Vichy is his shirt. The real one he's going to wear for the photoshoot is hidden in his duffel.

"What're you expecting me to do?"

"Throw out your entire closet and start over."

Kent pulls a face. "Hey. I clean up nice."

"You mean like when they actively force you to redress for this?" Vichy replies, eyebrow raised. "Because you *always* show up in the wrong color for the season?"

"They're clothes, not trees, Vichy," he replies. "They don't have 'seasons.'"

Vichy stares at him silently as he finishes knotting and straightening his tie. And then he turns and walks out of the dressing room.

Kent snickers quietly.

"Jesus," Scrappy says, shaking his head. "You can't blame this one on being American, Parse. There's a set of colors you can wear every season, this is *basic."

"Maybe if you're Italian," Mitts grins. "They use fashion to teach colors in kindergarten?"

"Only reason *you* aren't worst dressed on the team is because Parse exists," Scrappy tells him.
"I know what seasons are," Kent replies, starting to undo his ace of spades-shaped cuff links.

Zimmermann's mom walked him through the basics of all that stuff when a late growth spurt forced Kent to buy a new shirt a couple days before the draft, though one of his aunts managed to let out his Sunday suit enough for him to get through the ceremony with it. He was wearing an Aces' jersey over it after the first pick, anyway. And once he signed his initial contract with the team and got his first paycheck, he never had to budget equipment before clothes again.

"You shop in thrift stores with your mom!" Mitts calls helpfully, because Kent's never living down one comment he made back in his rookie year.

"'Shopped.' I know what seasons are," Kent repeats, pulling his other shirt out of the duffel. "I have to, if I'm gonna wear the wrong shirt for 'em all the time."

"...What?" Scrappy replies.

"Bullshit," Chazzer says, looking up from buttoning his shirt. "No. You would. How long've--?"

"How many years has he been givin' me shit about my suits?" Kent replies, nodding at Vichy's stall. "Because that long."

Chazzer starts laughing.

"No way you've been wearing trash clothes for years just to irritate Vich," Scrappy says, eying him narrowly like he's pretty sure that's exactly what Kent would do.

"'Kent Parson is a petty bitch,'" he replies, making air quotes before shrugging his jacket off.

Mitts, cackling, leans over and holds up a hand. Kent high-fives him and starts to change his shirt.

When he arrives at the clubhouse the next morning, he barely gets inside before he's jumped by Vichy and Scrappy, hauled down to the laundry room, and chucked into one of the club's industrial-sized dirty clothes bins.

"Nice coordination," Kent says as he stands back up. "You guys always make a good team. Great chemistry."

Vichy stalks out of the room, flipping him the bird over both shoulders.

Scrappy takes a photo of Kent trying to get out of the wheeled bin without sending it flying out from under him, which is harder than it should be. Of course they tossed him into one that wasn't near anything solid he could grab. "Need a hand?"

"I'm good."

Scrappy rolls his eyes and shoves his phone into his pocket before gripping the sides of the bin to steady it. "Get outta there before you kill yourself. Didn't anybody ever teach you pride's a deadly sin, Parse?"

"Raised Protestant, Scrappy."

"If you can make that comment, you know what I'm saying," Scrappy retorts.

Kent smirks. "Is chickens fish?"
"All right," he replies, because Kent's not the only one who's said stuff in his rookie year that he never gets to live down. Scrappy pushes Kent back onto his ass into the dirty laundry. "I tried."

He leaves. Kent snickers to himself as he gets back to his feet.

When he's finally managed to get out without falling on his face, he heads for the kitchen to get some breakfast. Vichy and Scrappy are already there; Scrappy checks his watch obnoxiously when Kent comes in.

"Did you park behind the building?" Kent asks, heading for the pans of eggs and sausages on the counter. "Just to pull off the element of surprise? Great strategizing."

"I can't hear it when fucking embarrassments to all men who know how to dress themselves talk," Vichy replies flatly.

"You're gonna have a real problem with half the team then," Kent replies, getting a plate. "I don't think Arno'd wear anything but tracksuits if they let him. Maybe learn sign language?"

Vichy presses a hand against his face. "Why."

"Yeah, technically we'd hafta learn it too," Kent agrees, shrugging. "Get a hearing aid."

Vichy covers his face with both hands, muttering. Scrappy chuckles into his mug.

* 

They start filming the intermission promo vids soon after. Last year it was some word association thing; this year, it's the club's color commentator asking them random questions.

"Last question," Kohan tells Kent. "If you had to be stuck on a desert island with one teammate, who would it be?"

"Definitely not Ivanovich or Catalano," Kent replies without missing a beat. "City boys are useless."

Vichy--sitting next to him because he was roped into being Kent's partner for this particular video--makes that stifled noise he does when he wants to call Kent an asshole but can't because they're being filmed. "Hey."

"What's the difference between magnetic north and true north?" Kent asks him.

Vichy frowns in confusion. "What?"

Kent shakes his head and looks back at Kohan and the camerawoman with a "see what I mean?" face. Vichy kicks him under the table.

The graphics guy keeps that exchange in the video, because Muñoz is awesome.

* 

The American first pick of the 2016 draft goes straight into the league without a stop in the minors. During Matthews' first game of Toronto's regular season, he gets a hat trick and then tops it off with an extra fourth goal, just to put the knife in deeper to whoever in Ottawa failed to properly
scout him.

Matthews is the only Leaf who scored that game. Ottawa won 5-4.

Kent watches the game as the team's flying back to Vegas from Edmonton, changing up his usual seat and taking one at a table so the team's top two centers and its leading defenseman could join him.

Kent's other linemate and alternate captain, Trojan, was leaning across the aisle to watch the first period; but he had a rough game tonight clearing space for both Kent and Chazzer against the Oilers and finally just fell asleep instead. It's already past midnight.

"How the fuck d'you still lose?" Chazzer asks through a yawn, cheek propped heavily on his fist. "That's a fuckin' curse right there."

"Bad team," Kent replies, because there's no such thing as curses. Just bad systems, and bad teammates. "Don't matter how good you are if you got no support."

Vichy snorts next to him. "That humble act's slippin', Parser."

Kent holds up a middle finger to the side without looking away from his tablet. "Fact's a fact. Tavares's seen, what, four playoffs? Total. Zero Cups. 'Cuz he's stuck with the Isles, and I got the Aces. The whole team matters."

Chazzer starts shaking with stifled laughter.

Vichy blows out a long breath through his teeth. "Chriiiiiiiist."

And then he headlocks Kent.

"What?" Kent says, elbowing him hard in the side. Somebody lobbs a hat from a couple chairs ahead and hits Kent in the shoulder with it. "Hey."

"I fucking can't with you," Vichy growls.

Kent elbows him again. Somebody throws another hat, getting Kent in the face. One of the guys calls "Shut up already, jackasses!" before being told to shut his own loud ass up himself.

Their first game in L.A. is halfway into October. Kent goes back and forth on whether he should see if his long-distance boyfriend wants to hook up while he's in Antwone's city.

They did once before in preseason, during another L.A. game. But that was preseason; Kent was okay with sacrificing his usual nap time to hook up with Antwone then. Those scores don't count toward the annual playoff rankings.

Then he finds out that they're going to be flying into California the day before the game, because they're leaving Seattle in the middle of the night in order to get out ahead of the coming windstorm. Vegas and L.A.'s clubs agreed that the Aces could go straight there and use the Kings' practice facilities, because of a bunch of technical stuff about flight permissions or whatever.

And the day before, Antwone mentioned that he's got another grease ant infestation in his apartment that he's trying to kill.
So Kent figures what the hell, it's stupid to waste a good opportunity.

While they're heading to the airport after the Schooners' game, he texts Antwone to ask if he wants to meet up at the hotel tomorrow night.

That evening after team dinner, Kent doesn't change out of his suit. He's not technically leaving the building, but still. He really doesn't wanna pay another fine for breaking the club's dress attire rules.

Antwone's finally texted that he found parking and he's headed in, so Kent's washing up in the bathroom. He forgot that he left the connecting door to Vichy's room unlatched like usual, until the other man comes into his room: "Parser, where's your deck? Somebody marked mine."

"You leave it around Tommy?" Kent asks, spitting out his toothpaste. "Front pocket of my bag."

"Goddammit--you really think it was him?" Vichy asks, coming up to the doorway of his bathroom.

And then he takes in Kent's suit, and narrows his eyes suspiciously. "...Why aren't you changed."

Kent finishes rinsing out his mouth. "Got a date. Take the cards and don't bug us the rest of the night."

Vichy looks like he wants to say several things at once, and can't figure out which one to start with. Kent manages to keep a straight face as he dries his mouth.

"Seriously?" Vichy finally manages.

"Yup." Kent drops his towel onto the counter before shouldering past Vichy and over to his bag to get the cards. "Fuck off so I can get my fuck on."

"Oh my God," Vichy snorts out. "You did not just."

Kent tosses him the deck and then shoves him at the connecting doorway until Vichy finally goes, still chirping him the whole time. Kent rolls his eyes as he locks the door on his side; and then he packs all his stuff back up into his suitcase, because he saw Scrappy in the other room and he's got a good idea what's coming.

He rented a second hotel room for himself and Antwone on a different floor, away from the team, for a reason. Kent spent enough of his life back in Juniors trying to stay quiet while having sex on roadies. He's done with that.

Plus, a separate room means Antwone'll get a morning ant-free, even after Kent has to bail to begin tomorrow's game day schedule.

He shuts his door as quietly as possible; but it's not enough. Kent's barely started for the elevator when the door to Vichy's room opens and Scrappy bellows, "Have fun on your DATE, PARSE!"

"Yep," Kent mutters, bypassing the elevator and sprinting for the stairs. Vichy drags Scrappy back into his room, laughing his head off.

Kent barely makes it inside the stairwell before other guys' doors start opening.

He's a little winded by the time he reaches the third floor, which is just sad. But whoever's
following him wasn't willing to go as fast--probably because "fell on my face down a flight of stairs while trying to chirp a teammate" isn't an explanation they ever wanna tell the Aces' trainer--so he's got that going for him.

Antwone comes out of the elevator bank while Kent's heading for their room. He raises both eyebrows.

"Long story," Kent pants, pulling the keycard out of his pocket as he reaches the door. "One sec."

He manages to get it open and dart inside the room before the stairwell door opens. Antwone heads in behind him and lets the door swing shut as Kent ducks into the bathroom and out of sight.

"Dude," Antwone says, one eyebrow still up as he flips the locks. "What the heck."

Out in the hall, muffled, they hear, "He's gonna be in the lobby."

"Bro, you think he didn't plan this?" Chazzer replies gleefully as they pass. "It was this floor, he's here somewhere."

Antwone looks away from the door to Kent, who's sitting on the edge of the tub and laughing silently. He mouths, "What the fuck?"

"Long story," Kent repeats, nudging his suitcase away from where he dropped it at his feet. "I told Anatoly I had a date so he'd leave, and fuckin' Jeff called me out on it to the whole floor, so I uh. Had to book it down here."

Antwone looks back at the door, and then at him. "Is this...normal?"

"Nah. But...." Kent pushes back to his feet and gets a glass of water from the sink. "You're, uh. The first person I ever really dated during the season. I don't think they know how to handle it. Eight years of chirps're built up. So." He waves a hand toward the outside hall. "That."

"...You've gone eight years without dating anyone?" Antwone says, looking like he must've heard Kent wrong.

"During the season," he agrees, lifting his shoulders. "It's...there's all the other stuff I gotta do first. Adding in one more thing's. . . . I just. Never had a reason before."

Antwone's still watching him, mouth twitching.

Kent drains the glass and then rubs the back of his neck. "I know it's dumb."

"No, like," Antwone replies, still holding down a smirk. "In context? That's probably the most romantic thing anybody's ever said to me."

And then he finally can't keep from laughing anymore.

Kent huffs, but half-smiles as he gets another glass of water.

The next morning, he showers and gets dressed and then retrieves his phone from the dresser drawer he shoved it into after silencing it and wrapping it in a towel for extra measure. The battery's died; he'll have to charge it later. Those dicks.

And then he stares at the door, trying to work up the will to go down to breakfast and face the
hours of non-stop chirping that he knows is coming.

"It really gonna be that bad?" Antwone asks from the bathroom, rinsing off his toothbrush.

"Yep," Kent says dryly.

After years of dragging other guys, now he's gone and exposed a major weakness that they can come at him for: liking somebody enough to mess up his usual habits and meet up with them while the team's in the middle of a roadie.

Even the teammates who're new or don't know about Antwone or think Kent's straight are still gonna give him a little shit. The guys he's known for years are gonna chirp him straight into the grave.

But sometimes Antwone takes stuff Kent says about the team more seriously than Kent meant him to. So Kent exhales, and then shrugs his shoulders and gives him a smile.

"Nah, not really," he walks back. "They're just gonna make fun of me for a while for answerin' a booty call on a road trip. Then they'll get bored."

"Alright," Antwone says, coming over and giving him a hug. Kent turns into it, and then wraps an arm around his shoulders to kiss him.

Several moments later, Antwone breaks it off with a sigh and rests his forehead against Kent's. ". . . Probably oughta go, yeah?"

"Yeah," he agrees, without moving away. Team breakfast isn't optional.

The part of Kent that's been getting a little bit better at thinking about Jack Zimmermann with less reflexive anger and sadness and resentment over the last few months thinks wryly, Smart move signin' close to your new guy, Zimms.

And then he huffs out a breath and pushes that thought out of his head. He tilts up to kiss Antwone again, briefer this time.

"We'll be back in December," Kent offers. "And I can come down for New Years. Bye week's in February, I'll have the whole week free. I gotta go home for Thanksgivin' and Christmas, but I can tell Mom I wanna stay here then."

Antwone squeezes him a little tighter. "Okay. . .Yeah."

"I can fly you down a weekend. If you got the time," Kent offers.

He gets that Antwone doesn't like Kent spending too much on him. He only agreed to let Kent book a hotel room for them after Kent explained the curfew rules and fines that barred him from leaving the hotel to spend the night at Antwone's place.

But seriously, those flights are pretty cheap. And it's gonna be a long time 'til mid-December. "I miss--"

His voice cracks on the words. Kent blinks, and then swallows hard as he realizes why they felt weird.

He hasn't said that in almost two years.

Or. He's told his mom and his little cousins and other relatives that he misses them, offhandedly in
phone calls or when they meet up during the holidays. Sure. But that's not the same.

That's not like this. Alone in a room with someone else, somebody he's told real things about himself.

"I miss you too," Antwone says, hugging him tighter for a moment. Kent lets out a long, slow breath, and tries to relax the sudden tension in his shoulders. "...Yeah. Maybe. Once a couple projects wrap up. I wanna just spend time with you."

"--Fuck it, I can eat fast," Kent says, before urging Antwone down into a deeper kiss.

He arrives at breakfast with less than twenty minutes remaining. Kent scraps together a plate from what's left at the buffet, and then eats it one-handed so he can hold up a middle finger to all the guys dragging him for being a tool who didn't even comb his sex-hair before finally getting his ass down here.

*

In late October, the Aces' oldest defenseman, Sunny, is scratched from the lineup for five games straight and then finally placed on waivers.

No other team in the league takes the opportunity to acquire him. Twenty-four hours later, Sturluson is reassigned to the Aces' feeder team in Reno.

Kent goes by the older man's house after practice that day to see if Sunny needs any help packing for the move, because he figures it's the least he should do. The man was his alt for five years, and a member of the Aces' organization from its first year in Vegas. Sturluson's wife answers the door.

"Thank you, but no," Ingrid tells him. "His pride is very . . . insult...no. Injured, right now. We will manage this."

"Okay," Kent says, shifting awkwardly on the front step. "...Will you tell him thanks for me? It was a good run we had. He's a good guy. A lotta Sovereigns are gonna be lucky to learn from him."

"Thank you," Ingrid repeats. "I will tell him."

"Thanks. Good luck. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

She nods once, and starts to shut the door.

Kent raises a hand in farewell and then leaves. He lets out a long breath once he's turned away from the house.

It's pretty obvious by now that the front office knows about Sturluson's painkiller abuse problems.

Kent's almost surprised they didn't just cut his contract, instead of burying him in the AHL. But if Sturluson's been with the club for so long, maybe he knows enough about the silent investors that they want to keep him within reach.

It'd be a lot like what happened to Kent's other former alt. Waller went straight from retiring as a NHL defenseman to taking a player development position for the club's European prospects. He's doing a good job there--Kent'd never say Waller isn't earning the spot, given the quality of prospects the club's been bringing in recently--but it doesn't change the fact that it means Waller's
still bound by the Las Vegas Hockey Club's non-compete and non-disclosure restrictions.

Kent drags a hand over his hair, and then exhales harder before shoving it into his pocket.

...It's not Vegas' immediate problem anymore. The front office in Reno'll decide what to do about Sturluson now. Kent's job is with the Aces.

"That fifth d spot's cursed," their goalie says the next morning, when he and Kent are working on the ice before breakfast. Boxy squirts water over his face. "It's like DADA for defense."

"Like what?"

"The Defense Against Dark Arts position. Everybody that takes it leaves Hogwarts a year later?" Boxy says. "Same here: first Waller, then Fils, now Sunny."

Kent stops collecting pucks, and props his stick on the ice and looks at him.

"No, fuck you," Boxy retorts. "You don't get to give me that face, this is *Harry Potter*. Everybody knows Harry Potter. You don't live under a rock."

"Whatever you gotta tell yourself, Boxy," Kent drawls.

"Ta gueule," Boxy grunts. "You are **hopeless**, Parse."

"Block more of my shots, then you can say that."

Boxy shakes off his blocker glove to give Kent a middle finger as he sticks his water bottle back in its holder behind the net. Kent smirks, and resumes herding the rest of the pucks to the left circle.

*

In early November, after the election results look conclusive, Kent's on the phone listening to Antwone when he gets a text from one of his teammates. Korsy wrote, *Parse you still live in Soho?*

*Yeah what's up* Kent answers, because he doesn't really want to split his attention but it's strange for Korsy to contact him alone rather than text the team's group chat.

*Can you come to that bar?* Korsy replies. *Millennium fandom*

Kent vaguely recognizes it: the bar on the ground floor of his apartment complex reopened under that name a while ago. *Not tonight. I'll be at the rink at 6 tomorrow, we can meet there*

Korsy sends, *Cat and I'm kinda drunk I don't think I can get him out myself. I need help*

"Shit," Kent says in horror.

"--You okay?" Antwone asks.

"Sorry, sorry, *fuck,*" Kent says, texting back *Don't write anything more texts are stored* as he scrabbles across the apartment to grab his wallet and keys. "I'm sorry Antwone, I gotta go, I got--one've the guys texted, Catsb--Arath's drunk in public I gotta--I'm so sorry man, I'll call back as soon as I--"

"It's okay," Antwone interrupts. Kent heads out, striding down the hall toward the elevator. "It's okay, Kent. He alright?"
Sometimes it's weird to be dating a guy who works with the sister of a teammate; but sometimes it makes things a lot easier. "I dunno, but--I gotta."

"Okay," Antwone repeats. Kent hears him breathe out on the other side of the line, long and shaky. 
"...I'm gonna call my sister, she's been texting."

"Okay," Kent says, smacking the elevator button. "I'm sorry, Antwone, I know it's shitty but I can't--he asked for help, I gotta--"

"Hey. It's your team. I get it," Antwone tells him.

Kent swallows. "I'm sorry. Thanks. --I'll talk to you--later? Tonight? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Fuck," Antwone mumbles. "Yeah. Tomorrow. ...Maybe it'll be--fuck, I shoulda known this'd..." he hisses, before letting out another long breath.

"Yeah. Good luck," he adds. "Lemme know if you need help, or--somethin'."

"Okay," Kent agrees, as he gets in the elevator and hits the button for the lobby. "Tell Ella hi for me."

Antwone sounds like he's forcing a half-smile as he says tiredly, "Okay."

They hang up. Kent jams his phone into his jeans pocket and drags his hands hard through his hair, jaw clenched tight.

And then he exhales slowly.

Kent looks back up at his reflection in the elevator door. He pats his hair down, shifts his body language, and puts on a casual smile.

When the doors open to the lobby, he slides his hands into his pockets and drags his hands hard through his hair, jaw clenched tight.

He notes that there's no bouncer as he heads inside the bar. One problem resolved.

It takes him a while to spot Catsby and Korsy: they're sitting on a couch in the corner, at the back of the place. Kent mentally maps the most effective route from there to the exit, and heads to the bar to order a beer.

Once he's got the can, he carries it to Korsy and Catsby's couch and settles down onto a chair across from it. "Man, this place's changed a lot."

Catsby lifts his head from his phone to look at him, one arm still over Korsy's shoulders. "What're you--?"

"Don't talk 'til we're outta here," Kent smiles.

Catsby stares at him, eyes narrowing. Korsy reaches up and thumps a hand against his shoulder. "Don't."

Catsby looks over at him, pulling his arm away. "--You jerk. You called him?"
"I'm tired," Korsy replies; and Kent pauses and gives him a longer look.

Catsby spits a breath out through his teeth, but drops it.

A second later, Kent waves a hand vaguely at the space. "Used to look super different. Except a lotta the furniture's still here, that's weird."

Kent spends a few more minutes talking about the one and only time Vichy dragged him and Scrappy here, years ago when it had a different name and a super pretentious library theme. Scrappy and Kent chirped the other man so hard for picking the only bar ever full of books that Vichy was never willing to go there with them again. Or at least not with Kent. Wuss.

Soon enough, he's been able to look around enough under the guise of pointing at stuff that he's got a good read of the room. Nobody's recognized them; nobody's really paying attention.

Christ, but Kent has never loved living in a non-traditional hockey market as much as he does right this second.

He asks Catsby quietly, "How you doin'?"

Catsby jerks a hand at his shut mouth, and then raises a mock-questioning eyebrow, looking Kent straight in the eyes.

Kent refrains from returning the sarcasm because this isn't the time. He looks over at Korsy instead. "You okay?"

"No."

He makes a mental note of that. "Y'think you can walk?"

"Yeah."

That's better than nothing. Kent stands up and tilts his chin at the displays closer toward the door. "What's that stuff from?"

Catsby starts to stand, urging Korsy to his feet as well and sliding his arm down around his waist. When Korsy just looks blankly in the direction Kent indicated, Catsby finally says, "Link's shield."

Kent further revises his estimate of which of the two of them is more drunk. Fucking awesome.

At least Korsy was still rational enough to contact him. Instead of clearly spoiling for a fight, like Catsby. Awesome.

Whatever. Kent has to get the three of them out quietly first. Everything else can wait.

They wander steadily back toward the exit. Catsby keeps an arm around Korsy's waist; Kent walks close to him on his other side to help him stay steady, occasionally pointing at stuff and keeping up the meaningless chatter and the slow pace. It'd be easier if either Korsy or Catsby would do more than one- or two-word answers on their ends, but Kent works with what he's got.

He ditches his full beer can on a table next to some other emptied glasses, and steers them toward the door. "It's pretty cool, I guess."

"Yeah."

Once they're out, Kent jerks his head to the right. "This way."
Frank looks up when the three of them come back into the lobby. Kent waves at him without breaking off his one-sided conversation at Catsby and Korsy, now talking about the increasing rumors of Vegas getting an NFL team because he ran out of nerd shit to discuss without props around.

Once they're finally in the elevator and out of the public eye, Kent drapes one of Korsy's arms over his shoulder but keeps his smile in place. Just in case somebody else gets on, or shows up in the hall to his apartment.

"I'm fine," the other man says.

"Gotcha," Kent agrees, without dropping Korsy's arm. He's way past the time of his life where he's dumb enough to argue with drunks.

When they get to his apartment, Kent finds out he forgot to lock his door. He pushes it open and herds the guys inside. Kitt starts to come around the kitchen island toward them; and then she freezes and stares, before doing that low-to-the-ground run into Kent's bedroom, because she is literally the worst guard cat in the world.

Kent flips the locks with a long exhale. "What the fuck," he demands, shoulders sagging, "why?"

"Screw you," Catsby bites out, as he pushes Korsy at Kent's couch.

Kent writes off getting any real response until they get over their hangovers tomorrow.

"Who'd you vote for?" Catsby asks.

"Nobody," Kent replies, heading into the kitchen. "I vote in municipal stuff."

It's important to keep in power the politicians in Las Vegas and Clark County who're willing to support the needs of a major league team. Kent votes in state elections sometimes, if Vichy's up in arms enough about some law or politician that Kent knows he'll hear lectures for months if he doesn't send in his ballot; but once it gets to the federal stuff, there's no point. Those people're all the same.

"Vete pa'l carajo, so cabrón," Catsby sneers out. "You fuckin' pato."

Kent tightens his jaw and writes off the entire night. He fishes an unopened container of coconut water and a jar of pickles out of his fridge. "Who'd you."

"Not that scum."

"Then you did what you could." Kent dumps some pickles into a bowl.

"You fucking cynic coward."

"Good. Stick with the appropriate insults," Kent replies, getting a couple glasses out of the cabinet.

Catalano scowls. "What?"

"I know you called me a faggot, Catalano," Kent says, looking him in the eyes.

He made Nino tell him what "pato" was slang for a couple years ago, when he noticed Nino smack Catalano on the bench during a playoff game and warn him about cameras. "Stick with the appropriate insults. You get pissed and use that in a game again and get caught on mic, someone's gonna translate it and come at you. Aces don't need PR hits three years straight."
Catalano looks away at the floor, clenching his jaw.

Kent pours the coconut water into the glasses. He sets one down a little too hard in front of Catalano, and then brings the pickles and other glass over to where Korsy's slumped back in his couch. "Eat this."

Korsy blinks his eyes open and then makes a face at the admittedly gross combination. "Why?"

Kent pushes the bowl and container into his hands. "Electrolytes. You're gonna be pissin' all night, you need 'em. Don't spill on my couch."

Korsy takes the stuff. "I'm okay."

"Sure," Kent replies. "I'm gonna go get some food. You have Mexican preferences?"

"I'm not hungry," Korsy says, slowly putting the bowl and container down on the floor. Kent watches the over-careful gestures and revises the level of drunkenness the other man's at. How'd he text so well? "I'm okay, Parse. It was just a...few--look, we'll go."

"There is no way in hell either of you are drivin' right now," Kent says flatly. "Quit arguing with me and drink the water, Korsy. Y' need it." He looks over his shoulder at Catalano. "You too."

"I'm fine," he mutters.

Kent asks, "You ever been blackout drunk before?"


Korsy's gripping the knees of his pants tight. "It's okay, Parse. I shouldn't've texted, we're not--he's not an alca--alcoholic, I promise," he says, more panicked now.

"I have," Kent says, and Korsy blinks at him. "Twice."

"I know you guys don't get loaded like this," he continues, picking up the coconut water and holding it back out.

Korsy was a rookie during the season Tobin overdosed. If Kent handled that situation as bad as a couple of his friends've told him he did, then it's not a surprise Korsy's starting to freak out now, probably thinking that Kent's going to treat him and Catalano the same way that he treated Tobin and Robber back then.

So Kent says, "I'm glad you got me, but you're gonna be sick as hell if you don't get more food in you. Eat this. I'll be back soon. Don't fall asleep, or you'll puke."

Korsy takes the water. Kent turns for the door, looking at Catalano. "Don't fall asleep, understand?"

"Yeah," Catalano replies. He's still not looking at Kent.

"Good." Kent jerks his head at the TV. "Remotes're in the same place, watch whatever. Don't turn it loud. I'll be back soon."

Once the elevator doors are shut behind him, Kent slumps against the side wall and thunks his head against it. "God dammit."

And then he tugs his phone out of his pocket and calls Robber.
The man doesn't answer the first two calls. Kent calls Robber's girlfriend's phone instead, even though Laia lives in a different state. It'll make it clear he's serious.

That call gets ignored for several seconds before it's interrupted with a notice that Robber's finally calling him back. Kent hits accept while crossing the parking lot to the Mexican restaurant by his apartment; Robber demands, "What the fuck is it?!

"Korsy and Catsby are at my place and pissed," Kent says tersely. "I need somebody t' keep 'em calm and drive 'em home when they're better. Get over here. You need my address?"

There's a pause as Robber almost audibly struggles between his knee-jerk urge to tell Kent to fuck off and his concern about his friends. "What happened?"

"I'm not talkin' 'bout it on the phone," Kent replies. "You need my address?"

"Jesus fuckin'--fine. No, I know how to get there."

It's five minutes to close when Kent gets into the restaurant. He gets his order to go, and gives the waitress who was mopping the floor a fifty dollar tip in advance for the inconvenience.

He hands her another fifty along with the money for his bill when she brings the food, and asks her to break it into change and give it to the people in the kitchen. And then he swings by his car in the covered garage, and gets the bottle of activated charcoal out of the glove compartment before heading inside.

Robber lives down in Enterprise, and the restaurant moved pretty quick on Kent's order because they wanted to finish closing, so Kent frowns when he sees the other man come into the lobby while he's still waiting on the elevator.

Once he's in hearing, Kent asks, "Did you speed?"

"It's a highway," Robber says flatly as the elevator doors open. "What the hell already, Parse."

Kent hits the door close button and waits until it shuts before answering. "They're drunk. They'll probably be fine in couple hours, but they're gonna need rides and they're pissed at me."

"Christ," Robber says, looking away at the doors and exhaling through his teeth. "I shoulda known. ...What'd you do?"

"Answered a call for help even though I had somebody more important to take care of tonight," Kent says icily.

Robber side-eyes him at that. They don't say anything else as the elevator heads up.

Kent offloads the bag of takeout onto Robber so he can unlock his door. When he gets inside, he finds Korsy and Catsby standing at the kitchen island, and Kitt curled up on top of the upper cabinets and glaring down at them.

"Dude," Kent says, letting himself really feel pissed for the first time tonight. That's his cat.

"I didn't do anything!" Catalano swears, raising his hands in the air. "I just tried to pet her, and then she jumped up there."

Kent looks back at Kitt, like she's gonna somehow collaborate the story. She hisses at him.
Kent spreads his hands at her in a "what do you expect me to do?" gesture. Robber snorts as he dumps the food on the island.

"You dummies," he tells the other guys with resigned sympathy. "I told you so."

"Not in the fucking mood, Peter," Catsby bites off.

Robber slugs him on the shoulder. "That's your fault," he replies, popping open one of the containers. "You rich white-lookin' dumbass, you don't know shit." He jerks a thumb at Korsy. "They elected Ford, Brexit, I fuckin' told you so. What're these?" he calls to Kent.

"I didn't elect Ford," Korsy--who was born, raised, and still lives in Toronto during offseason--says, low and harsh.

"Beef and chicken tamales," Kent replies, still wiggling his fingers at Kitt in an effort to coax her down.

"Shoulda got eggs," Robber replies. Which, yeah, no shit--but the place doesn't serve those except at breakfast, the fuck was Kent supposed to do?

Robber rips open one of the foil packages before pushing it at Korsy. "Better eat, Saul."

"How're you so..." Korsy mumbles, digging his thumbs against his temples. "...Why'd I expect better. Jesus. Why?"

Robber comes around the island and throws an arm over his shoulders. "The world's gonna get shittier," he says honestly. "And then a whole lotta assholes are gonna die and get up to the gates, and Peter's gonna go 'So I see here you're claimin' to follow Him and voted for an adulterer. Explain that. Real fast, 'cause I got a lotta you hypocrites to get through."

Korsy barks out a laugh and then digs the heels of his hands against his eyes. "God."

"Can be an asshole," Robber replies, and Korsy stifles another laugh. "Just gotta keep goin' anyway. This too shall pass."

Korsy scrubs his hands over his face for a few more moments. And then he drops them and picks up a tamale.

Kent gives up on Kitt for now, and works the bottle of activated charcoal out of his pocket. He checks the expiration date, and then says, "Here, take one of these too. Both of you."

He tosses it at Catsby. The other man fumbles the catch, but manages to get a hold of it before it falls to the countertop. He makes a face as he reads the label. "For real?"

"Just in case."

"Better safe than sorry," Robber agrees, before patting Korsy on the back. "You're gonna have a hell of a stomach-ache tomorrow, light-weight. I'm not lifting the fine when you stink up the shitter."

Korsy makes a muttered comment through a mouthful of tamale.

"Oh yeah," Robber adds, grinning wider as he pulls out his phone. "You're apologizin' to Laia for hauling my ass off the call. Both of you."

"What?" Catsby replies, and Robber hits the speaker so they can hear the phone ringing. " Fucking-
A woman picks up. "They all right?"

"Yeah. Here babe, Cat's got something to say to you," Robber says, tilting the phone at him.

"Oh my God, Pete you dick," Catsby's sister replies with a stifled snicker. "You weren't really supposed to do it!"

"Seriously?!", Catsby demands at the phone. "Him?"

"Get over it already," Laia replies, before saying more stuff in Spanish.

Catsby punches Robber hard in the side. Robber drops the phone and headlocks him; Korsy picks it up and says, "Sorry, Laia."

"It's okay. It's okay, I get it," she says.

Kent leaves behind the wrestling match/soap opera going on in his kitchen, and goes to wash his face. He feels exhausted.

The guys spend a few more hours at Kent's place. Robber goes through Kent's Netflix account, and chirps him on all his recommendations. He chirps him again for not having Hulu, and demands Kent's wifi password so he can stream some show with drunks talking about history on his phone, while ragging mostly Catsby for not being as funny as the people on it. And then he goes into some imitation of a drunk history story about a potato famine and "fuck all government"--and then into another story about some time in the 1800s when a bunch of Irish Americans from Buffalo invaded Ontario to like, hold Canada hostage until England released Ireland? Which maybe wasn't a great plan but whatever, fuck all government--until Korsy's slumped over on the couch crying and laughing.

Kent leaves Robber to it. He texts Antwone for a while, before the man has to go to bed because there's still work to do tomorrow.

Glad everything's okay there. Antwone sends, as they're saying their goodbyes.

Yeah Kent agrees.

And then he spends a long time writing the next message, deleting chunks and rewriting parts until finally he's sick of it and it looks good enough, so he hits send: I might of overreacted and it was fine, but I used to know a guy who drank a lot and it feels like if I don't look out for whoever and they get sick or something I shoulda been there

But I feel bad ditching you like that and I'm sorry

There's no replying text bubble. Kent figures it probably took him too long to write one stupid sentence and Antwone went to bed like he needed to, and pushes his phone back into his pocket.

It took a while for him to think about why he initially freaked out so much about something that feels a lot less important now. Like, yeah, there's the Aces' brand to look out for--but it's not like either Korsy or Catsby were being sloppy drunks.

Korsy mostly seems like one of those guys who just gets sad after a few drinks too many. And Catsby might've been angry earlier, but he still had the sense to keep his mouth shut until they were
out of public. It wasn't really a crisis.

Kent was talking with his mental therapist about one of the EEG trainings they're doing to help him increase his impulse control, back a couple weeks ago in the first session he had since returning from their game in Boston. Dr. Fisher told him that intense experiences could create routes into the brain, and that if future situations felt similar to those past intense ones, sometimes the brain immediately shifted back into that route because it was carved so deep. Like how they do drills in practice, in order to get so familiar with their systems that they can execute them in games without over-thinking.

Or like how Scrappy told Kent he's always an irritable bastard when they fly into Boston these last couple seasons.

Or how Coach Moss kept giving him warnings on the bench to stop chirping the Bruins' players during their last game there, even though Kent's usually got his shit together anywhere else in the eastern conference.

Well. They haven't played Providence yet. They fly out to Rhode Island in late December.

Kent's been trying not to think about it. There's almost two months of other games to focus on first.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. Kent pulls it out again and opens it up to find another text from Antwone.

*That makes a lot of sense.* Antwone wrote.

*Sucks about the situation, but I'm glad they're okay. I mean it Kent, it's alright. I know how important the Aces are to you.*

*You are too though* Kent replies.

Antwone sends him a heart emoji.

Then he adds, *For real I gotta sleep tho*

Kent texts back a heart followed by a bed and those snooze Zs.

"You look like a fuckin' dork," Robber says. It's a less kind tone than the one he's been using with Korsy and Catsby all night; when Kent looks up, he isn't surprised to see Robber eying him.

"Whatever," he replies, dropping his smile and locking his phone. He slides it back in his pocket.

Robber snorts and turns back to his own phone.

But then, without looking up but with a little more decent tone, he adds, "...Antwone feeling better?"

Kent looks at him narrowly in silence.

. . . Fine.

Whatever. Robber's girlfriend works with Antwone, so it's not like Kent hadn't half-expected this, sooner or later. And Catsby's a motormouth. Who knows which one of them it was that blabbed to Robber. Whatever, fine.

"...Maybe," he replies. "We'll see, I guess."
Robber makes a vague noise and nods once. Catsby pulls his legs up to his chest.

Kent almost tells him to get his shoes off his couch, and then thinks that maybe caring about furniture is too gay, and then thinks *it's his own goddamn house* and he only invited these jerks in under duress. "Take your shoes off."

Robber rolls his eyes exaggeratedly. "Really?"

"We work in the same place, I know how gross those floors are," Kent replies.

Catsby toes his sneakers off. Robber shakes his head at him, but lets it go and starts playing a new episode on his phone.

Kent goes over to where Korsy's slumped heavily against the side of the couch and prods him in the arm. "Sit up, man. You don't wanna fall asleep yet."

Korsy groans, but does. "'M fine, I'm just--"

"If you say you're 'resting your eyes,' I'm gonna make you stand again," Kent interrupts dryly.

Korsy grumbles a lot, but he rubs his face and opens his eyes. Robber tilts the phone toward him.

Around midnight, Korsy and Catsby both still look pretty faded. But they seem like they'll be fine tomorrow, aside from the inevitable hangovers. Robber muscles them out of Kent's apartment.

Kent locks the door behind them, and then rests his forehead against it for a long time.

Finally, he pushes away and starts for the bathroom. "You can't stay up there forever," he tells Kitt as he passes by.

She swishes her tail once, but otherwise doesn't move from where she's still curled up on the cabinets.

"The food's down here," Kent points out.

By the time he's washed his face and changed into clean boxers, she's still up there. Kent gives up and just goes to bed.

*

He still feels exhausted when he wakes up tomorrow morning. Kitt's come back down, but she keeps walking away whenever he tries to pet her.

Kent stares into his fridge for a while and thinks about making breakfast, and then he decides to just go to the clubhouse instead. There'll be food and coffee there. He can skip his usual pre-practice skate for once, the world won't end. There's no game until tomorrow. He's tired.

When he arrives at the clubhouse, Vichy's car is in its usual spot, down the lot and under the shade.

It's a good two hours before the other man normally comes in. Ever. Vichy doesn't fuck up his habits.

Kent parks near the entrance, and then braces his elbows on the steering wheel and rests his face in
his hands, and wonders what the fuck he's done wrong with his life that he's surrounded by all these idiot optimists.

But then again, Kent grew up hearing more dressing room comments about not being or acting like a girl or a fag than he ever bothered to keep track of, until these last few years in Vegas. The only surprising thing about last night was how many people are apparently shocked that most human beings are, in fact, assholes.

A guy shot up a gay club just a few months ago, because he was an asshole. What the fuck better was Kent supposed to be expecting from people?

And then he thunks his head back against the headrest and breathes out slowly.

And then he gets out of his car and goes inside to deal with this.

He eats a quick breakfast in the kitchen first, though. He's not gonna try tackling any more of this shit on an empty stomach.

Vichy's on a bike in the exercise room when Kent finds him, earbuds in and head down. He's been at it long or hard enough that his shirt's already sweat-stained.

Kent goes over to the mats. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Vichy says shortly, without taking out his earbuds or looking up.

--If this is how Kent gets when he's being an avoiding dumbass, he probably owes a lot of people apologies. Yeesh.

He doesn't know where to start with this. Or if he even should. Trying to get Vichy to talk about team-related stuff when he doesn't want to is hard enough; trying to get him to talk about personal shit is like a bag skate.

...But the longer the silence keeps dragging on between them, the more it feels weird. Or...wrong. Kent doesn't like it.

He doesn't know where to start, and he doesn't want to insult Vichy by circling around things like the other man isn't smart enough to know what Kent's doing, so he just gets to the point.

"How're your parents?" Kent asks, as he stretches.

"Not surprised."

"Yeah, but, they're citizens now," Kent confirms. "They're okay?"

"They're not 'the Mexicans."

Kent owes so many goddamn people apologies. He needs to make a list. "I know man, but I like them. They okay? Or, gonna be okay?"

Vichy decelerates slightly, and takes a long breath before letting it out even slower.

"...Yeah," he says, pulling out his earbuds and shoving them down the collar of his t-shirt. "Yeah, naturalized, they...they're gonna be okay."

The corner of Vichy's mouth twists up in one of the meanest sneers Kent's ever seen from him.
"Not like he's gonna be comin' for them."

_Not until some asshole decides they're doin' too well and he deserves it instead_, Kent thinks; but he's nowhere near enough of a dick to actually say that out loud right now. "Good."

Vichy exhales hard once more. "...Yeah."

"...How's Nadiya's green card goin'?” Kent asks carefully. "Any closer?"

Vichy's shoulders tighten again. "Workin' on it."

There it is.

"...You know they're keepin' her in limbo on purpose, right?” Kent says, because Vichy's _gotta_ know that. There's no other solid blackmail the silent investors could have over him. "They're not gonna let--"

Vichy punches the screen on the stationary bike so hard it cracks.

Kent goes still as Vichy clutches his fist to his chest with a snarled "Fuck!"

And then he shoves up off the mats and leaves.

He strides down the hall to the kitchen, and goes into the freezer and tries to open the ice maker. It keeps sticking when he tugs, so he just rips the whole thing out.

Something snaps when he does, but he'll deal with that later. Kent kicks the freezer door shut and starts back to the exercise room.

He sees Mitts at the other end of the hall, heading for the room too. He forgot the man comes in earlier on non-game days. Kent calls, "Stay out."

Mitts pauses by the door and gives him a weird look. "What? --What's that?"

Kent hip-checks the door open. Inside, Vichy's curled forward on the bike, sobbing.

Mitts freezes. Kent pushes the door shut behind him with a foot and then locks it.

He grabs a towel out of the bin by the trainer's office and scoops a bunch of ice into it. Kent leaves the container sitting on the rest of the pile, and folds up the icepack as he brings it to Vichy. "Here."

Vichy takes it, jaw clenched tight. He's still shaking; he keeps his face turned away.

Kent says, "I wasn't--"

"I know," Vichy interrupts, hiccuping as he tries to get control over himself. "I knew. I knew they--" and then his voice cracks again.

He presses the ice pack to his knuckles with another strangled noise, and Kent goes along with the pretense that that's what really hurts right now. He wraps an arm around Vichy's shoulders.

Eventually, Vichy's shaking starts to ease up. He's still crying, but not as bad.

Kent tugs on his shoulder. "C'mon. Go sit in Ell's room, yeah? I should call him, he's gotta look at that."
Vichy hisses out a shaky breath. But he jerks his head in a nod.

Kent's walking with him to the office, arm still around his shoulders, when somebody tries to shove open the door. And then they start pounding on it hard. "Vich!!"

Scrappy. Mitts must've gotten him. Called? Kent looks the wall clock and notes the time. Elliot should be here by now, up in the front office.

"I'm gonna let him in," Kent says. "I'm gonna get Ell."

"Fuck," Vichy grits out, struggling to hold the ice pack on his hand as he tries to scrub his eyes dry with his forearm. Kent squeezes his shoulder and then goes to unlock the door.

"What the shit--" Scrappy starts when Kent opens it; but then he looks past him and drops it. Scrappy shoulders around him and heads for Vichy. Kent shuts the door again and goes upstairs, to admin.

He finds Elliot in the coaches' office, in their usual early morning meeting. Kent knocks once on the door and then walks into the room without waiting. "Ell, can you come t' the workout room?"

Kent's not sure what his face looks like, but Elliot's on his feet before he finishes the sentence.

"What happened?" the man asks, coming over.

"Accident," Kent says, moving out of the doorway.

He forgot that that's the worst word to use to a trainer. Elliot breaks into a sprint for the stairwell.

Kent almost calls that it's okay, except it's not. Vichy's hand was bleeding. The screen was broken. Are those things glass? Were pieces missing? He didn't see. He wasn't looking.

"Kent," Coach Moss says, and Kent looks back into the room. All the coaches are standing. "What happened?"

"Vichy hurt his hand," he answers, and the assistant coach in charge of the forwards starts for the door. Kent gets further out of the way as Kurlansky goes past.

"How bad?" Moss asks, coming around his desk. "What happened?"

Kent hesitates, because he doesn't know how to explain without making Vichy sound bad.

"I'll be down in a moment," Moss says, after a couple seconds of silence.

"Okay," Kent nods, before leaving.

Wait, maybe that wasn't a dismissal? It sounded like it, but--

Whatever. He's already left.

Kent goes back to the exercise room. The door to Elliot's office is shut.

He picks the ice container up out of the bin, and drapes a couple now-damp towels over the broken screen on the bike. Then Kent takes the container back to the kitchen, to see whether he can get it back into the freezer or if it's broken-broken. He needs to do something.
Vichy goes on the injured roster with a broken knuckle, two stitches, and a bad bruise as the result of a "workout accident," which. Could've been worse.

Could've been better.

*

The next morning, Catsby comes into the practice rink while Kent and Boxy are prepping for their early-morning skate.

Kent assumes he wants to get in more practice too, since the coaches've tapped him to center the second line while Vichy heals. But Catsby asks if he can talk to Kent. "Yeah, sure."

After Boxy heads out to the rink and leaves them alone in the dressing room, Catsby says, "I'm sorry. About what I said the other night."

Kent looks at him for a long moment. And then he says, "Okay."

"I mean it," Catsby tells him. "With everything yesterday, I didn't--but I mean it. I shouldn'ta called you that, Parse. I'm sorry."

Kent shrugs. "You were drunk, I know you didn't--"

"That doesn't make it okay!" Catsby interrupts; and Kent raises an eyebrow at the excessive emotion.

Catsby drags a hand through his hair. "I don't--that's not a fucking excuse. It wasn't right. It wasn't cool. I'm sorry."


Catsby clenches his jaw.

"I dunno what you want from me, Arath," Kent tells him, because all he wants is to get on the ice and just be able to focus on his stick and a puck for a while. To get away from thinking about what a fucking hot mess things've been the last couple days.

He generally likes Catsby; but Kent's already drained from being there for Antwone and Vichy and Showy. If Catsby needs more from him right now than what Kent's obligated to give as team captain, then Jesus, that's what the guy's supposed to have friends of his own for, isn't it? "I'm not pissed at you. You were drunk and talked some shit, fine. If you feel bad about it, okay. We're cool."

"It's not...." He makes a sharp, agitated gesture. "There's enough assholes out there as it is, Parse. I don't wanna be another one of them."

"Then don't be," Kent says.

Catsby huffs out a laugh, and glances away to the side.

"... Yeah," he says, quieter. "Okay."

"We're cool," Kent repeats.

This whole conversation's kinda weird because no one's ever apologized to him for calling him a fag before, but Kent guesses there's a first time for everything.
After all, it's not like anybody ever knew that was an accurate insult before. "You wanna hit the ice with me and Boxy?"

"...Yeah."

"Alright." Kent nods at the duffel Catsby dropped on one of the benches. "See you out there."

"Okay."

* 

After Thanksgiving, they start a three-game roadie through Arizona and Texas that ends up being the shittiest point of the season.

Phoenix goes okay. They win; but the game goes into a shootout, giving the Coyotes an overtime loss point and adding more competition in the Pacific division's standings. During the Aces' final game of November, Kent's sitting at the bench in Houston when it happens.

Houston's goalie blocks Catsby's shot at the net and then kicks the puck away from the mess of guys around him. Mitts chases it toward the boards, trying to collect it for a rebound shot; one of the Aeros' defenseman follows to shut him down.

Mitts is turning from the boards and trying to twist away from Skalski's incoming hit when something goes wrong with his skate.

It stutters his stride, keeping him against the boards as he hunches forward and drops his position a few inches. Skalski realizes something's wrong and tries to pull his hit, breaking his speed and shifting his shoulder.

But there's just not enough time. Skalski manages to drop his shoulder enough that he hits Mitts' chest instead of his head, but their angles are a mess. Skalski's stick catches Mitts' own while he's trying to get his balance back after the awkward half-stopped hit, jerking it in Mitts' hands. The handle of Mitts' stick gouges up his face and catches against the rim of his helmet.

There's no visor to stop it sooner. Those are only mandatory for new players into the league; older guys can still opt out. Mitts goes down to the ice with a short scream.

Which is a terrifying sound to hear from one of your team's tough guys. Kent shoves up off the bench and leans over the railing. "Fuck!"

The puck's still beside them. But then Skalski shoves it up against the wall and behind Mitts to force a technical whistle, and crouches next to him. Mitts has a hand over his face. Blood's starting to drip onto the ice.

"Fuck!" Kent leans out far over the rail. Another guy yells, "Ref!! Fuckin' blow it!"

Tommy jumps the bench and starts at Skalski. Trojan follows him a second later, swearing. And then the benches start to clear.

At this point, the game's chaos. The puck's technically not visible to either ref, requiring one of them to whistle the play dead; there's blood on the ice, requiring a break in gameplay to clean it up; and there are way too many players out here, requiring the officials to regain control of a bunch of young men running high on adrenaline and armed with clubs.

Tommy wrenches Skalski away from Mitts, grabbing the front of his jersey with both fists and
yelling in his face. Skalski swears back at him; and then they're dropping the gloves and fighting.

The officials let it happen, for the same reason Skalski was goading Tommy in the first place: the sooner steam's let off in this pressure cooker situation, the better. One of the refs and a linesman just herd the two of them toward the center of the ice, out of the way, so the Aces' trainer can get to Mitts.

Somebody grabs the back of Kent's jersey as he's heading for Mitts. He turns around and slugs the Aeros' player in the chest.

"No, dammit," Scrappy says, coming up on his other side and grabbing Kent's shoulder. "You know the rules, Parser."

--Everybody on the ice's gotta get ahold of somebody on the other team during a fight. That's why the Aero next to Scrappy has a token hold on his jersey.

It's supposed to stop guys from trying to jump in and make the fight worse, even though they'd get slapped with an instigator penalty if they did that. "Stupid fuckin' rule," Kent growls.

Scrappy doesn't bother replying. He looks at the Aero alternate captain who's still got a fistful of Kent's jersey and who's rubbing his chest, and jerks his head at the group around Mitts. "C'mon, skate there."

"Yeah, alright," Rakes replies.

The four of them get over to where Elliot's trying to get Mitts onto his feet. The towel Mitts is holding to his face is soaked red around his hand.


"Fucking good game, Smitty!" Trojan yells, banging his stick against the boards. Mitts, hunched over, gives a brief thumbs up in the direction of Trojan's voice as Elliot steers him toward the bench.

Scrappy and Aeros' 14 and 62 are rapping their sticks on the ice also. Kent recognizes the injured-in-game ritual to see a player off the ice; but he's struggling to even out his breathing.

"Fuck," Scrappy repeats, quieter. And then he's pushing Kent away from the crowd, out toward the empty center of the ice. The Aeros follow, still trying to pretend they're all following the rules.

"Calm down, Parse," Scrappy says lowly. "He fine. He's fine. Face bleeds a lot. You know that. He's fine."

Kent shuts his eyes and grinds his teeth against his mouthguard and tries harder to count his breaths. Five in. Five held. Five out.

Scrappy wraps an arm around his shoulders, pulling Kent in closer and blocking the expression on his face from the camera in the corner. "Gonna be fine."

Pretty soon, they hear a ref announce the penalties: five minutes each for fighting to Tommy and Aeros' 28, a two minute bench minor to the Aces and Aeros both for too many men on the ice.

Kent opens his eyes, and realizes that the fight's ended. A couple ice technicians are scraping away the blood in the corner. Over by the net, Short's trying to get to him and Scrappy, but a linesman's
pointing him at the benches.

He exhales hard, and then shrugs off Scrappy's arm. "C'mon."

"Yeah."

As they're skating to the bench, Kent kicks something with his blade. He looks down and sees a tooth.

He picks it up. Scrappy looks over at it in his glove, and then huffs. "Skalski's. Tommy's got a bitch of a hook."

"Language," Kent replies reflexively, before picking up speed. He catches up to Short before he reaches the benches. "Short."

He turns to face him. Kent holds out the tooth.

Short makes a face as he takes it. "Coulda given it to a ref."

"Not gonna help him."

The other man blows out a breath. Kent turns toward the Aces' bench; Short catches his sleeve. "Hey. Kent. It wasn't on purpose. Skals's not that kinda guy."

"I know," he says. "I saw." He tugs his arm; Short lets go. "Still not gonna help him."

"Text me when you hear 'bout Mitts, yeah?"

Kent nods once. "Yeah."

"Thanks, Parse."

One of the officials skates in closer. "Back to the benches, boys."

Kent goes. Short gives the ref the tooth; the man tells him the penalties are already set.

There's only two guys in the penalty boxes, not four. Kent looks up the clock and realizes there's less than five minutes left in the period. The officials must've sent Tommy and Aeros' 28 back to the dressing rooms.

It might be the kindest thing Kent's ever seen a referee do. Even if the doctor doesn't allow Tommy into the room while they're working on Mitts, at least he's not stuck out here.

Coach Moss talks to them as the ice technicians finish cleaning up, telling them to focus on the game: don't get angry, don't take stupid penalties. "Four more minutes, men. Play it clean."

During intermission, they learn that the in-house doctor sent Mitts to the hospital because the stick scratched his eye. Moss says there's no word back yet, but he'll let them all know as soon as he hears anything.

"We've all seen bad injuries before," Moss tells them. "You all know he's a tough motherfucker. He's gonna be fine."

"There's twenty more minutes of hockey, men," the coach says. "It's our responsibility to see it through, and play the best we can. I need twenty more minutes of focus from you. And then it's
"Yes sir," Kent replies, because somebody's gotta say it first and he's the captain. Most of the guys agree or at least nod.

Coach Moss tells them all, "Thank you."

And then he closes the dressing room door and heads to the whiteboard. Even with the door shut, they can still hear the equipment manager down the hall, screaming at another one of the equipment guys. Kent's never heard Nick get so angry before.

The Aces've never had an equipment malfunction end this bad before.

He tunes it out and focuses on the whiteboard.

Coach Moss holds Tommy and Trojan back as the the guys return to the ice, talking to them quietly for a few moments.

They were a goal behind Houston at the start of the second period. By the end of the third, they've pulled ahead by one, mostly by crashing the Aeros' net like they have something personal against the goalie in it.

(Kent will listen to a repeat of the Aeros' postgame interviews the next morning as he does pushups in his hotel room in Dallas, because he'll have woken up from stress dreams too early to go down to team breakfast or to text Antwone.

One of the reporters'll ask the Aeros' goalie about the last period of that game and get the response, "For sure, it was a little intense," which is interview-speak for Jesus Christ, those motherfuckers.

It'll be too soon after the fact for Kent to feel bad about it.)

It was never just going to be twenty more minutes. Once the game's over and they're off the ice, there's still interviews to do.

Kent pulls the dressing room doors shut once everyone's in, and tells the guys that whoever doesn't want to deal with the media vultures should hit the showers and then head to the bikes for cool down. The rest of them'll cover it.

Trojan stays. Tommy leaves.

Kent doesn't think less of him for it. Having to talk about starting a fight with the captain of your former team because he put your friend from Juniors in the ER is a narrative nobody oughta have to struggle through immediately after the fact.

Kent showers rapidly and then texts Showy that there's still no word yet once his hands are dry. When their backup goalie asks if they're ready to open the doors, Kent yanks on his workout shorts and a shirt and looks around the room. Once all the remaining guys've nodded, he tells Arno yeah, go for it.

The media throws softballs, because they can read the room and see the empty stalls; but they have
to talk about it.

He finds out that either the league is considering giving Skalski a suspension or else fans are just yelling about wanting one when a newspaper reporter raises the question: "Do you think it was an illegal hit?"

"...No," Kent has to say, because this'd be easier if it was. There'd be something to be angry at.

"No," he repeats, because Collins is actually giving him a breath to think about his answers. He's glad she took over as the Review-Journal's beat reporter. "Skals's not that kinda guy. You could see from the bench, the vid. It wasn't intentional. It was just...."

Kent pauses, trying to find the right word. Vichy'd know. Or Showy. But Vichy's still out with his hand injury, and Showy's not here anymore.

"...Bad," he finally says. "Bad luck."

After they land in Dallas, they learn that Mitts is out of surgery, but not much else. The coach says he got stitches along his cheek, but doesn't have any more news about his eye other than Mitts's being recalled to Vegas once he's released from the Houston hospital. The club's gonna put him through more tests with the team's eye doctor.

It's past one a.m. and there's no real update, but Kent texts Showy the info anyway because he promised he would. And then he has to send it again, because autocorrect turned the first message into gibberish. Now that his adrenaline's finally worn off, he's dead tired.

Showy immediately texts back Thanks, Parse.

Yeah is all Kent can manage, as he drags his suitcase out to the hotel bus with the rest of the guys.

* * *

They lose the next day in Dallas, which is just fucking shameful considering how bad that team's been this season.

Mitts sends the guys a bunch of chirping texts from Vegas, telling them the airport's not gonna let them back in after doing that lousy. You're all dead to me now im ashamed to wear the same jersey.

The next morning, the front office has to release the news that the doctors already told Mitts yesterday: the damage to his eye is severe enough that he's going to be permanently partially blind in it.

More blind than the league will allow a player to be, and still permit them to play.

* * *

In December 2016, former Las Vegas Ace Brandon Smith retires from the NHL.

* * *

Losing Mitts wreaks hell on their lines.

The second line's now down two-thirds of its players, and Catsby was already struggling to center it.
in Vichy's absence. The GM calls up a few different guys; Coach Moss keeps blending the lines, trying to find the right combinations to plug the holes in the Aces' roster.

At one point, when they have a three-day break between games and they have enough time to get some real practice in, Moss has Kent play center each day in the morning skates and then sends him out in that role on the second line for a few games.

Kent makes Chazzer and Catsby and Robber practice face-offs against him until they're all sick of each other, but it's still a weak spot of his. Kent's a playmaker, but he has to be able to get the goddamn puck to his own teammates first before he can start setting things up.

Once Catsby gets steadier in his new top-six center role, Moss moves Kent back onto wing.

Kent keeps making the other guys--and the newest called-up center--practice face-offs with him anyway. It pisses him off to be bad at something.

"Fuck you, bro," Chazzer snorts, when Kent tells him as much while they're hanging back on the ice one day. "You know perfection's not humanly possible, right? Somebody has told you that before, yeah?"

"No excuse not to try," Kent replies. Chazzer laughs again and mock-spears him in the stomach with his stick.

Things start stabilizing on their third and fourth lines first. One of the call-ups, Spencer, proves to the coaches that he can compete in the major leagues, so the coaches break up the long-running fourth line of Kirbs and Robber and Scrappy and reassign Robber to center the third.

That's probably the best thing to come out of all the chaos.

Kent has to admit that Showy was right: Robber's a damn skilled defensive center. He devours his increased ice time, and busts his ass to develop chemistry with his new linemates Tommy and Willy. The Aces' checking line becomes an even bigger shut-down threat to their opponents.

"Fuck was all this before?" Kirbs rags Robber after one game. "You just takin' it easy, makin' me and Scraps do all the work?"

"Did the best I could with dead weight draggin' me down, Carly!" Robber grins. Kirbs headlocks him with a snort and starts nooging him.

Vichy finally returns in early-ish December. He's probably coming off the injured roster too early; but the club's desperate, and Vichy's lied about being ready too soon before. Kent grills him about it until Vichy threatens to prove his hand's fine by punching Kent in his goddamn annoying mouth already.

The Aces finally have more depth at center again. But there's still problems.

Without Mitts, Vichy's out the winger he's played with for most of his NHL career. And he's out the guy who always held back the opponents who targeted Vichy because they knew that despite how big he is, he's a shit fighter.

The coaches try moving Catsby and Boar onto Vichy's wings. On paper, it's a good line: Vichy and
Catsby've played together enough over the last couple years to have some pre-existing chemistry, and Catsby and Boar spent most of last year together on the third line.

That change lasts for one morning skate before Coach Moss calls Kent alone into his office and asks him for his honest understanding of the situation between Vichy and Boar.

Kent shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He gets why the coach is asking, but still....

"I'm working with the roster the GM's given me, Kent," Moss says, folding his arms on top of his desk. "If there's more information the men would prefer to keep in the dressing room, but will help me put together better lines, I need to know it."

"...It's better than last year," Kent says, because at least that's true.

It's not like Vichy doesn't understand why Boar distrusts Russians. He's just reactionary-pissy in response to someone who doesn't like him. And he's been a lot quicker to get angry since the election, and all the following media hype about Russian meddling.

It's starting to become a real problem. Vichy's anger is just feeding back into Boar's negative opinion of him.

It doesn't help that the coach keeps cutting Vichy from practice and putting him on maintenance days instead, to take care of his hand. Kent's pretty sure that's the right choice, but it's further limiting the amount of time Vichy and Boar spend around each other.

But Borislavvshyn's the one who started this shit last year. He can live with the consequences.

--No, that's thinking like Vichy's friend. Not the Aces' captain.

Kent huffs. "If they'd just friggin' talk to each other, they'd get this crap sorted out. They don't like who they think they are."

He lifts his shoulders and looks back at Moss. "They're both professional. They know they can't let this carry onto the ice. Give 'em enough time, that'll force 'em to talk and get over it."

But if Moss was gonna do that, he should've started forcing the interaction in training camp and preseason. Trying to do it two-plus months into the regular season, under the already-frustrating circumstances of losing Mitts....

. . . Kent knew that Vichy never really thought much of Mitts.

Kent was the one centering that line, interaction-wise off the ice if not literally while they were on it.

Sometimes guys just don't like each other. Mitts and Vichy didn't let it affect their chemistry; and after so many years, Kent was just used to having lineys like that. They all dealt, and kept playing their best together. It was fine.

Mitts' absence isn't really affecting Boar either, beyond how the sophomore's getting shuffled around on the lines. The two of them hadn't known each other that long.

But it's gonna affect how much patience other guys have to put up with Boar and Vichy's shit.

Kent can already feel it affecting his own.
He misses having Mitts around. He could be a dick, but you never had to be some smart college
guy to get his jokes: when one of the rookie defensemen, Hogge, showed up for pre-camp scrim, it
wasn't two minutes before Mitts re-nicknamed him "Bacon" and then stuck with it so hard that
everybody else just went along.

Dumb shit that was so lame it was funny. Not super insider jokes on books or podcasts or
whatever.

"Hm," Coach Moss says, and Kent focuses. The man's silent for a few more moments, before
telling Kent thanks and dismissing him.

The head coach moves Trojan onto Vichy and Catsby's line, and puts Boar on Kent and Chazzer's.

It puts Chazzer in the awkward position of interpreter between Kent and Boar sometimes, during
really tight moments like when they still haven't broken the tie against Calgary and the end of the
third period's coming up in three more shifts.

No matter how much language training Kent watches, in the clutch the best he can manage is still
just grammatically-broken groups of key words in Ukrainian, or equally choppy Rusinglish.

But Boar was working even harder on his English over the offseason. And it's easy enough for him
and Kent to just point at whoever they're going to cover, or to bang their stick on the ice to show
they want the puck. Most of the time, they're fine. Their line works.

Boar also tends to take it pretty personal if opponents try to get into Chazzer's head with chirps or
slashes. He's not a big guy like Trojan or Mitts; but after the third time Kent watches Boar start a
shoving match as if he were, he figures the sophomore's fine with being the muscle on their line.

At least the Aces' defense has its shit together this season. The team's managed to lose fewer games
than they really ought to've, mostly because of those guys.

Kent makes sure to give the defensemen the credit they're due in postgame interviews. Especially
since their defense third pairing this season post-Sturluson has been a sophomore and a rookie. Pits
and Bacon are just more proof what a good future the Aces have coming up out of their feeder
team.

Kent works hard with Chazzer and Boar on the ice, and actively hangs out together with them more
off it, trying to shore up familiarity that they can turn into chemistry on the ice.

He tries not to think about their first game against Providence, coming up in a couple more weeks.

Things finally stabilize again for two games.

And then Kent goes onto the injured roster with a severe concussion.

* 

They're playing another game against Edmonton when Lucic starts really coming at Kent every
time he chirps the Oilers' brand-new, really young captain: McDavid, 2015's first pick in the draft.
The chirping's easy--Kent just pulls on all the stuff he remembers feeling stressed about back when
the Aces made him their new captain in his sophomore year, too.

Or maybe Lucic's using the trash-talking as an excuse to hit Kent hard for past years of insults. Or
both, whatever. The "why" behind the hits doesn't really matter to Kent; he just has to survive them.

Boar's been trying to get Lucic to step off all night, to the point of even starting a fight early in the second period. But you can't ask the impossible. Kent skates hard and avoids the boards.

As much as he can. He's waiting to the side as Chazzer battles for the puck in one of the corners, trying to get a hold of it through a mess of sticks as a couple other Oilers try to claim the puck themselves, so that he can send it out and over to one of the Aces. With so many Oilers in the corner, Kent and Lean'll have a lot of open ice to shoot at the net.

Chazzer finally gets it away from the corner and partially out of the scrum. Boar grabs it and clears it further, passing it to Kent. And then he looks behind Kent and yells his name.

Kent one-times the puck at the goal. Someone slams into his back, driving him into the glass; Kent cracks the side of his head hard against the edge of the boards as he goes down.

It hurts.

It hurts bad.

His ears are ringing. Loud. He can hear yelling nearby, but he can't understand it.

Kent pushes himself up onto his knees. The ringing shouldn't be this loud. He's hit his head before, it wasn't this loud. Fuck.

Kent grabs at the rim of the boards to pull himself to his feet. He catches air instead and slips back onto his knees. Everything's blurry.

Kent shuts his eyes and shakes his head to clear it. When he opens them again, everything's still blurry.

"Fuck!" Kent gasps.

Brownie says something. He grabs Kent under the arms and helps him to his feet. He says Kent's name again, loud enough that he can make it out over the ringing: "Parse. You good?"

"I can't see," Kent says, voice cracking in fear.

Brownie says something too low for Kent to hear. His ears are still ringing. It's not stopping.

Brownie gets a handful of his jersey and starts steering Kent across the ice. "C'mon, Parse. Gonna be okay."

"I can't--!"

Brownie wraps an arm around his waist as Kent wobbles on his skates. His head hurts so bad. "Hang in there, buddy. Gettin' ya to the bench."

"Fuck," Kent chokes out. "Fuck!"

Elliot comes up in front of them. He drapes Kent's arm over his shoulders. He and Brownie say something.

"I can't hear," Kent tells them, shaking. "It's ringing."
"Okay," Elliot says, louder. "Come on Parse, this way."

They reach the bench. Kent can see it, but not the lines where the door is. He fumbles at the top of the ledge for a second before one of the guys pulls the door open. Kent isn't sure who it is. His number and face are blurry.

"Come on," Elliot repeats calmly, leading Kent out into the hallway and down it toward the quiet room. "This way, Parse."

He fails the concussion test. They send him to the hospital.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains symptoms of depression, and non-POV references to suicidal thoughts as a consequence of traumatic brain injury.

The hospital keeps him overnight.

After his CT scan, Kent's forbidden to watch TV or get on his phone. He doesn't want to, anyway. His head hurts even more any time he moves; he sure as shit doesn't want to look at stuff. He even puts off going to the bathroom for as long as he can. When he has to open his eyes to navigate to it, he can't ignore that his vision's still blurry-ish.

They put a fall hazard bracelet on him. And some leg circulation things, to make up for how he went straight off the ice and into the quiet room and then out to the hospital without cooling down his muscles. Kent has to fumble the leg things open and off his calves before he can get out of bed. And then the pain in his head makes him slow enough that he's still in the middle of pissing when some high-pitched alarm they're connected to goes off. Kent shoves the door shut to cut the noise off; but he can still hear it screeching, and now it's too dark so he has to turn the light on to make sure he's not getting pee on the floor, and then somebody's in his room to check that he didn't flat-line or whatever and they're knocking on the door to make sure he didn't fall and at this point Kent's head hurts so much he's sure he's going to puke.

He doesn't. The nurse cuts off the alarm when he manages to crack the door open enough to ask. She waits for him to finish and then guides him back to the bed, before strapping the leg things back on his calves. Then she leaves, closing the door again behind her. He keeps his eyes shut against the stab of bright light from the hallway.

Kent spends most of the night lying still and alone in his dark hospital room.

The ringing in his ears is gone when he wakes up after a shallow, brief sleep. His sight's better. His head still hurts. He still feels nauseous. He doesn't sleep much more for the rest of the night.

* 

The Aces' GM and their team doctor come by early the next morning, getting in before visiting hours.

The first thing Kent says when he makes himself open his eyes at their voices is "My cat." He can't remember if he topped up Kitt's food and water yesterday before leaving for the game.

The GM tells him somebody'll check on her. Kent tries to sit up to go figure out where his keys are--in his suit jacket?--but when he winces Dr. DeFranks tells him not to push himself.

Kent caves in and uses the button to push the bed up instead after that. It's too weird to talk to the
two of them while lying on his back. He's not in the quiet room any more.

His CT scan results weren't great, but the concussion isn't as bad as it could've been. Kent's scheduled for more neurological and cognitive tests today. Depending on how those go, he might be released this afternoon.

Dr. DeFranks gives Kent a business card for the specialist he's going to see with the appointment time written on it. He hands Kent a map of the hospital complex, too, with the specialist's office highlighted. There's a route drawn in pen from his current building to there. It feels a little overkill; but Kent's head still hurts enough it's hard to focus. So he just says "Thanks, Andy" instead.

The GM lingers behind after Dr. DeFranks leaves. Kent's keys were in a bag he doesn't recognize, one of those cheap giveaway drawstring ones that're always lying around. Somebody must've put some of his stuff in it for him: keys and wallet and phone, a razor, soap, and clean socks and underwear. He doesn't remember the trip to the hospital. Who drove him? Jesus Christ.

"Kent?" Impey repeats.

He blinks, and then closes his eyes again for a long moment and forces himself to concentrate. "Sorry. Yeah?"

Impey looks concerned. "How are you doing?"

"'M good. Just hurts some," he says. "Sorry, what'dja say?"

"I called your parents last night, so they know where you are. And I'll give them an update today," Impey tells him, "so they won't be worried until you can make calls again."

"Thanks," Kent says sincerely.

"And," Impey hesitates for a half-second. "The guys send their well-wishes. Same for everyone on staff. And--Arath said he let Antwone know you're all right."

"Oh," Kent says.

Good. His parents and boyfriend were the only ones he had to update last night. But he couldn't as long as he was forbidden to use his phone. If they know, then that's that taken care of. And if someone's gonna check on Kitt, that's all the immediate stuff dealt with.

"Are you out to--?" Impey starts to ask.

And then he pauses. He purses his mouth, and shakes his head.

"No. Never mind. We can discuss that later. I'll come by this afternoon to see if the results are in," he says. "If they clear you to use your phone, let me know, but don't push too hard. If you need to stay here another night, do that. Your health comes first."

Fuck but Kent hopes he doesn't have to go through another night of that BS bathroom ordeal. "Kay. Uh, you don't hafta. I mean--thanks for comin' by. But I know yer schedule's--"

"You left your family and moved across the country at nineteen to play for my team, Kent," Impey tells him. "I know you're a grown man now, but I still have a responsibility to you and your parents. Same as I do to all our players. I'll come by again this afternoon."

"...Okay," Kent agrees, because that's the easiest response.
Belatedly, he finally figures out what Impey was asking earlier. "Uh, 'm not. Out t' the team," Kent says. "Like, in general. If that's whatcha meant.

"Like, some guys know, but--it's just Vichy and Catsby for sure. --And uh, Robber," he adds. "Catsby's sister works wi' Antwone, and she's datin' Robber, so. They know. Scrappy's gotta. Maybe Trojan and Tommy, I dunno. Didn't ask. --And Boxy. Maybe Korsy?" The man was pretty drunk and tired when Robber brought up Antwone at Kent's house a couple months ago. Kent's not sure if Korsy heard any of that talk. "Uh, and Showy an' prolly Mitts. If they count."

"Ah," Impey says with a slow nod. Despite the dimness of the room, Kent can see him making a mental note of the updated relationship connections between his talent assets. "Okay."

Impey tells him again not to push too hard too fast. He also tells Kent to order breakfast when he finds out he hasn't eaten yet. Then he leaves.

Kent still feels too nauseous to have any interest in eating. But it's a GM order. He struggles through reading the menu lying on the sliding table for a couple minutes. Finally, Kent decides fuck it and just calls the nurse. He names the first things on the drink and food lists, and winds up with apple juice and some kind of pureed soup.

* 

He goes through more tests. They reinforce the original "not great but could've been way worse" diagnosis.

By late afternoon, fluorescent light isn't making him wince any more. Kent's released from the hospital with a handful of paperwork and a pair of cheap sunglasses. He calls the GM briefly to let Impey know that he's out, so the man doesn't have to come by the hospital again.

Afterward, Kent sits in a chair in the lobby, trying to work up the will to go out into the sunlight and also trying to figure out how he's supposed to get a Lyft or taxi without using his phone. Find a nurses' desk and see if someone will call a taxi for him? He really doesn't wanna walk anymore than he's already had to today. Or move. Or open his eyes.

Vichy calls. He tells Kent to find out what building he's in. Kent finds the lobby guide and tells him. Vichy says to stay where he is and hangs up.

Several minutes later, Vichy finds him in the lobby and says he's driving Kent home. He's got a new black eye.

Kent almost asks him about it. He wants to know a lot of things: did they win last night? None of the guys did anything stupid, right? And what fucking asshole boarded him, even though Kent's pretty sure he knows the answer to that one.

But he doesn't want to talk. He knows he's not gonna throw up at this point, but he still feels like it.

"Head still hurtin'?>< Vichy asks, once they're in the other man's car.

"Yeh," Kent agrees, readjusting the wide wrap-around sunglasses that Vichy handed him before they left the building. They're effective, but heavy. The weight on the bridge of his nose makes it feel like the headache's getting worse there.

Vichy pauses in the middle of reversing out of the parking space. And then he pulls forward again,
and rests an arm over Kent's shoulders.

"It'll go away in a couple days," he promises. "Mine did. It's gonna be okay."

Kent swallows hard. "Yeah."

Vichy starts to pull his arm away; but then he hesitates, before squeezing Kent's shoulder.

"...It's scary as fuck," he says, quieter. "I know.

"I was terrified. After mine," Vichy admits. "But it's gonna be okay. Promise, Parser. It's gonna end and you'll be fine and back again."

Kent swallows again, and tells himself he's not gonna fucking tear up in a goddamn teammate's car. Things're gonna be okay.

Concussions aren't rare. Other guys've had them and been fine, sooner or later. Kent's own isn't that bad. It's gonna be okay.

He nods once gingerly. "Yeah. ...Thanks, man."

Vichy squeezes his shoulder again, and then pulls his arm away and backs the car out.

The setting sun reflecting off of windows makes Kent grimace. He spends most of the car ride leaning back in the seat with his eyes shut, tense in an effort not to get jostled too much even though Vichy's driving carefully in the slow lane.

It takes Kent a while to realize that they've been driving for way too long, even if Vichy is going under the speed limit. Kent doesn't live this far away from the hospital.

He blinks his eyes back open. Are they still on 515? "Where we goin'?"

"Waller's place."

That's down in Henderson, way away from Kent's apartment. He frowns. "Why?"

"'Cause Marlene said if I actually drove you home to an empty apartment she'd kick my ass," Vichy replies. Kent's not sure if he's joking. "She said if you try to argue, she already made up the spare bedroom last night and hung the blackout curtains, so you better not waste her effort."

Kent exhales heavily through his teeth. "Waller back fr'm Finland yet?"


It's real fuckin' bad optics to stay overnight in the same house as Waller's wife while the man's away.

But Kent spends several minutes trying to figure out a way to say that without making Vichy tell him he's being a dumbass, and he can't think of one. So finally he gives up.

"I gotta check on Kitt," Kent says instead. If he can just get into his apartment--okay, no, Vichy could probably actually carry him back out to the car if he wanted to be stubborn. But maybe Kent could just shut and lock the door on him fast. This is so stupid. He's sick of how this headache makes it hard to think.
"Chazzier got her after practice," Vichy tells him.

"Oh." That was cool of him. "He get her toy?"

"Does she have one favorite toy outta the half-million in your apartment, Parser?" Vichy drawls. Kent makes a face. "Ain't that many."

"Uh-huh."

"Shuddup," Kent grumbles. "S not that many."

"There's enough catnip in that place you probably qualify as a dealer," Vichy replies. He keeps smirking even as Kent socks him in the shoulder. "Kent Parson: head of the supply. Kingpin of catnip."

"'M too shitty to put up wi' yer crap chirps," Kent mutters, closing his eyes again.

Vichy thumps him on the thigh a couple times. He snorts when Kent tells him to get his hands back on the wheel.

By the time they reach Waller and Marlene's house, the sun's lower. Kent keeps the sunglasses on anyway as they pull into the driveway.

Vichy drags a bag out from behind the seats. Kent hadn't noticed it. "They pulled your stuff from laundry."

"Oh." Nice. Workout clothes are better than nothing. He's getting pretty tired of his current suit. He struggled into the majority of it last night, after they decided to send him to the hospital, and he'd still been sweaty because he failed the protocol so fast. It's starting to smell kinda ripe. He doesn't remember where he left his tie. He really wants a shower. "Thanks."

"Yeah."

Marlene's not alone in the house: her and Waller's daughter is back for Christmas break. As soon as Kent sees Julie come into the entryway while Marlene's still fussing at Kent for trying to take his bag from Vichy, some of the tension in his shoulders releases.

Okay. This is fine.

Kent still feels like crap, residually nauseous with a constant throbbing ache in his head. He didn't really want to go home alone and try to deal with dinner and Kitt and. Fuck. Laundry? Emptying the dishwasher. He wants to sleep, even if he knows that's probably not in the cards until the pain eases up more.

But he also didn't want to risk starting rumors. But if Julie's here too, it's fine.

It's not like Waller would ever believe Kent was trying to put the moves on his wife. Kent's an asshole, but he's not that kind of asshole.

And. He and Waller've never talked about it, beyond that one conversation years ago where they skirted at the edges of it, but Kent's pretty sure Waller suspects he's gay. Or, now that the man's part of the organizational staff, he probably knows it.
Kent knows Waller would never think he's trying anything on Marlene. The problem's that other people might. Or they'd try to stir up rumors just to fuck over the Aces or sell ad-clicks.

Kent took away the important lesson from that meltdown in Chicago a while ago: the rumors of one of the Blackhawks sleeping with a teammate's wife before he was traded out of the organization. Chicago lost a good prospect to Dallas as part of the deal, forced to sweeten the pot so they could offload their latest PR bomb for a while until the bad press faded out. Rumors damage more than individual brands.

Kent knows Waller would never think that of him. It's just maintaining optics.

But as long as there's a third person in the house, it's fine.

Anybody that's actually had a concussion'll know that Kent's in no shape to get it up for anything right now. Which still isn't protection against most speculation, but whatever, Kent's sick of thinking about this.

Marlene makes him eat a bowl of chicken broth. She sits quietly at the kitchen table with him, while Julie watches TV on mute in the next room.

Kent finishes it, even though it takes him a while. He knows some of the nausea and and headache has to be his lack of food all day, but it's hard to separate it from the concussion-induced headache and nausea.

The Aces' trainer comes by to photocopy the recovery paperwork Kent was released with.

Kent fishes it out of the drawstring bag and hands it over to Elliot. He finally gets a shower while Elliot uses Waller's fax/copier.

Elliot piles more restrictions from the team doctor on him. Kent still can't watch TV, or read articles, or really text. Dr. DeFranks didn't even want him listening to radio broadcasts of the Aces' games, although Elliot said that if Kent's cleared to fly home for Christmas, they could talk. As long as Kent promised to turn the radio or TV off if he began getting aggravated.

Kent makes a face. "I ain't gonna get that worked up."

"Parse. I'm serious," Elliot tells him, and Kent blinks at the sincerity in his tone. "One of the long-term symptoms of concussions is difficulty regulating emotions. That's why you hear about guys sometimes goin' off and shootin' somebody or themselves."

"--Jesus," Kent says, pulling back in his chair. They're in Waller's study, with the door shut and all the lights off except for a tiny lamp Elliot dragged over to the copier. Kent's sitting with his back to it.

"I'm not worried about that," Elliot tells him. He leans back enough to get into Kent's line of sight, and holds up a hand, overtly calming. "That's an absolute worse case scenario. And usually you only hear about it with guys that've taken way more damage. That concussion at sixteen's the only other one you had, yeah?"

"Yeh," Kent agrees.

That concussion that was nothing like this. He'd had a headache for a couple days, but his eyes were fine and he was never nauseous. He took a maintenance day and then he was back in practice.
But when he told Elliot that earlier, the man made an irritated face before telling Kent he wasn't mad at him, he was pissed at Rimouski's doctor and trainer. Kent wasn't sure what to say to that, so he just went "Ah."

"I'm not worried about you," Elliot repeats. "But if you feel like you're getting more emotional than usual--angry, sad, whatever--I want you to tell me. Remove yourself from whatever's causing it, and then tell me. Call me any time, I don't care when it is. Got it?"

"...Yeah," Kent says. "'Kay. Gotcha, Ell."

He heads to bed pretty soon after that, even though it's still mid-evening. The normal curtains in the guest room've been replaced with heavy brown ones that leave it really dark.

Kent sleeps more than he did last night. He still doesn't sleep well.

*  

After 24 hours and no signs of getting worse, he's allowed to use his phone to talk again. He calls his parents first and then Antwone.

Kent starts making his way through the rest of his voicemails after that, returning calls to other relatives and teammates and friends from home or his conditioning camps. Antwone mentions in his second, later voicemail that both Catsby and Antwone's coworker who's dating one of Kent's teammates called to let him know Kent's health status, after Robber texted Laia and asked her to. Antwone still sounded a little freaked out, but way less than he did in the first voicemail he left.

Kent scowls faintly as he writes down a note that he has to thank Robber for giving Antwone a heads up, too. The GM only mentioned Catsby.

A guy he used to play with on the Océanic--someone who's had a couple concussions himself during his years in the ECHL--checked in on him out of the blue. Kent calls Cartier back and tells him thanks, and then finally tells the man thanks again for pushing him to quit screwing around with drugs back in Juniors and to get focused on his goals.

"I mean it, Stevey," Kent says, when Cartier starts to shrug it off. "Y' did me a solid, man. I 'preciate it."

"All I did was tell you you could be usin' your time better," Cartier tells him. "You're the one who chose to quit, Parse."

"...I guess," Kent says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Still. Y' talked t' me about it. You didn't hafta. I appreciate it."

"Sure thing."

The conversation lapses for a couple awkward moments; they haven't talked in years. And then Cartier shifts to some advice for handling the concussion aftermath.

*  

Antwone offers to come visit him for the weekend when Kent calls.

Kent thinks about what Elliot said, about concussions leading to anger problems and violence, and turns him down.
He's currently staying with his old billet family. That's a dozen layers of awkward right there. And Kent's not sure he can convince Marlene that he'll be fine at home until at least Monday.

...And anyway. He told himself, years ago, that he should never seriously date anyone again.

After the first time he visited Jack at Samwell and left so pissed off, Kent told himself to always keep things casual. As long as he never dated anyone for real again, he'd never have to find out if the reason things went to such shit between him and Jack was because they both just sucked for each other.

Or because Kent was just the kind of asshole who couldn't keep his temper under control and his fists in his fucking pockets.

... It's something he's still afraid of learning about himself. The longer he and Antwone spend together, the more it keeps creeping back into Kent's mind.

Especially since he and Antwone've been experimenting during sex a little more, in the times they were able to hook up since coming back from Australia. Kent tried to get into it, because Antwone clearly liked it; but he's starting to feel kind of weird and skeevy about the way it makes him feel if things are rougher.

"Or, would later be better?" Antwone asks, after a long stretch of silence. Kent quits zoning out and focuses back on the phone.

"Uh," he says lamely. "I don't....

"I still feel like shit," Kent tells him, because at least that part he can be honest about.

The nausea's mostly worn off, and the headache's easing up, but it still gets worse whenever Kent over-exerts himself. And sometimes it feels like "over-exerting" is doing anything more intense than breathing. "I don't wanna make you come out here and then I'm just a dick the whole time."

"Okay," Antwone tells him. "I don't wanna wear you out. But--lemme know if you start feeling better? I know you said it's gettin' better, but.... It's not the same as being able to see you. I can take time off, I've got it."

"...Okay," Kent agrees, scratching his arm. "Yeah."

After they hang up, Kent goes back and forth for the rest of the night, trying to figure out if it's safe to have Antwone over or if Kent's potentially putting the man at risk because he just doesn't want to be alone.

The Aces are flying out to the Metro division tomorrow. The bulk of the club'll be gone for several days, as the guys play Providence and then New York and Long Island.

... He really doesn't want to be alone. The last couple days've been bad enough.

And the team was still here for those, wrapping up their long homestand of playing games in Vegas.

Once Kent's been literally left behind....

He finally calls Antwone back that evening, and says he'd be glad to see him if he's still up for it.
Antwone tells him yeah, of course.

"Kay," Kent says. "...Y' sure?"

"Yeah, Kent," Antwone says, tone soft.

"...Okay." Kent scratches his bicep. "Cool. Thanks, Antwone."

"Yeah."

They only talk for a little longer before it starts getting too hard for Kent to want to maintain a conversation. He hangs up and then lays down for a while until the headache reduces, and then goes downstairs to see if Julie's still up. He needs somebody to book Antwone's flight for him.

Julie's not there, but Marlene is, watching television in the living room. Which. Well, Kent had to tell her he was heading home early eventually.

Marlene glances over when he comes into her periphery, and then immediately mutes the TV even though the sound was already really low. "I'm sorry, was it too loud?"

"'S cool," Kent says, and Marlene gives him a "don't bullshit me young man" look. Kent holds up a hand. "Promise. Uh, e'n I ask a favor?"

"Of course," she replies, pushing up out of the recliner and heading over to the light switch. "What is it?"

"I gotta get a flight--" Marlene arches an eyebrow high as she turns the lights off. "Not fer me. A friend's comin' over tomorrow. I gotta get him a ticket."

Marlene still looks suspicious. "And why can't he pay for it himself?"

"It ain't like that," Kent promises her, because the Aces' front office clearly warned Marlene and Waller about Kent's Juniors reputation before he moved in with them. The first six months of his rookie year, Kent couldn't leave the house to go to a club or a non-team party without first getting a lecture about how to recognize gold-diggers and entourage leeches.

It made a great excuse for not dating that first season, at least. That and the whole "be a good role model for twelve-year-old Julie" thing. Kent says, "I told him I wanna pay it. He's savin' to start a business, I don't wanna be takin' money outta that."

"...Mm," Marlene says after several moments; but then she nods. "All right."

After Marlene books the flight, Kent tells her thanks again and heads back to his room. He calls Antwone once more, half to make sure he got the email with the boarding information and half because Kent forgot to warn the man earlier that one of the things he's currently banned from is having sex. Normally he wouldn't care; but it makes having his long-distance boyfriend over for the weekend kinda awkward.

Antwone tells Kent dryly that he's not a Selina Gomez song and he can keep his hands to himself. Kent snickers.

"You're sure 'bout stayin' to Monday?" Kent adds, adjusting the pillows behind him as he stretches out on the bed. "I know you got work."
"I got the vacation time," Antwone promises. "Blake told me yesterday I could take a couple days once I heard from you. --And, he figured out who you are. But he's not the kinda guy who'll go around running his mouth. I'll vouch for him."

"'Kay," Kent says. "Thought he knew yer datin' a hockey guy?"

"He assumed it was somebody in the minors here, and I let it go," Antwone replies. "Then yesterday afternoon, he must've put it together about the injury, 'cause he came storming into my office like 'Are you dating Kent motherfucking Parson?!'"

Kent pulls the phone further away from his ear, even as he has to laugh.

"'Kay, but like, 'motherfucking like good?' Kent asks, grinning. "Or 'motherfucking like he's a Kings fan?'"

"'Nah, he likes...whoever used to be the Whalers," Antwone says. "Since he's from East Hartford. Them and Providence."

"'Kay, yeah, he hates me," Kent agrees. "He's a nutmegger?"

"'Wow," Antwone drawls, "you have never sounded more New York than that moment. Is this some New England feud thing?"

"I mean, I c'n call Evanston part'a Chicago 'cause it's close enough," Kent shrugs, and Antwone goes "Hey, hey."

Kent snickers quietly. Then he tilts the phone closer again when Antwone grumbles something, and hears the other man add, "Yeah, alright. Serves him right."

Kent pauses. He's been shit at reading people the last couple days with this headache eating up all his focus, but that still didn't sound a hundred percent joking. "...Everythin' okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just still kinda pissed at him, even though he apologized," Antwone replies. "He started to say some shit 'bout how Lucic was an ass but you still probably deserved it, and then I told him to shut his fucking mouth and get outta my office with that shit."

Kent pulls the phone down to stare at it. "... That's your boss."

"If he fired me he'd lose his in-house mastering engineer," Antwone says. "He's no fool."

"S not that big a deal," Kent tells him. "We're not real people to fans, just athletes. He's just trash talkin', it don't mean anything."

"Kent," Antwone says seriously, "I looked like a wreck comin' into work 'cause I was awake all night fantasizing about curb-stomping that asshole for what he did to you. If somebody thinks they can say you deserved that to my face, especially knowin' who you are to me, it is a big deal. He fuckin' knows better."

Kent shifts uncomfortably on the blanket, and then reaches back to readjust the pillows again.

"I don't mean...." Antwone exhales. "I'm not--I'm done with that time in my life. I mean it. I wasn't serious."

"No, 's cool," Kent says, as he figures out that Antwone's walking it back because he misread Kent's silence.
He doesn't care about the implied violence. He plays hockey; guys're expected to start a fight if somebody on the other team goes after one of your own guys too much. Not defending them's a sign that something's real fucked up in the dressing room.

Antwone shouldn't be putting his career at risk for Kent over the kind of comment that people make all the time. But still, he appreciates the sentiment. "For real, it don't bother me. Yer pissed 'cause you got my back. I 'preciate it."

He doesn't audibly reply at first. Kent adds, "Hearin' that means a lot. Thanks, Antwone."

After another breath, Antwone chuckles slightly. "Yeah. Okay."

"S cool."

"Heh." Antwone lets out another, slower breath. It comes out a little relieved this time. "Gotcha. ...That a hockey thing? Or a you thing?" he adds, sounding like he's smiling again. "Or they one and the same?"

"... Yeh," Kent says, tightening his grip slightly around the phone. "Guess so."

"--You okay?" Antwone asks, abruptly concerned again. Kent didn't do a good enough job keeping his voice from shaking.

He tries harder this time. "M good, 's just--" and then he almost fumbles the phone because his hands are trembling.

He's been playing hockey since he was like. Five. He figured out early it was his best chance for a future that wasn't going into the military or working for the prisons or the cargo freighters like the rest of his family. It was his way out, his best chance for real money and the security of success, so Kent poured everything into it.

He made his reputation as a playmaker: a player who set up his teammates to score, who could read the ice and the opposition, who could think as fast as he could skate--a lethal combination of abilities.

But if his head's fucked up, that's all gone.

All he's left with is speed that he's gonna age out of sooner rather than later. He's already twenty-six. He's gonna be past his prime in a few more years.

And if his own damn brain starts betraying him, if his head's been screwed up bad enough that it starts fucking him up, then. Once his speed's gone, that's it. And.

And then it's just declining ice time, and getting sidelined for longer and longer with injuries, and endless speculation on how he's lost a step and passed the torch and when will he retire and.

And.

Once he's not a hockey player anymore, what is he?

Kent's spent the last couple days and nights running away from that thought.

But he can't sleep, and he can't do anything to distract himself, and it keeps being right fucking there, on his heels and breathing down his neck.

"Kent?" Antwone says, louder and more worried, and Kent wrenches one of the pillows over his
face to stifle his crying.

He spends too damn long at it. He finally manages to make himself get it together after a while, mostly because Antwone's starting to sound genuinely panicked on the other end of the line.

Kent drags the pillowcase off the pillow and scrubs his face with it. It's already super-gross anyway. And then he fumbles the phone back up off the blanket, and says, "M alright."

"Kent, dude," Antwone replies. "Shit. I'm so sorry, I didn't--"

"S alright," Kent interrupts. "M good, 's just--" and then he has to hack out a cough because he's got a bunch of snot running down the back of his throat. "Fuck, Jesus.

"C'n I call y' back?" Kent asks.

". . . Yeah," Antwone agrees, sounding like he really wants to say the opposite. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just gotta--" he swipes the pillowcase over his nose and mouth again. "Wash my face, gimme five minutes."

"...Okay."

"I'll call y' back," Kent promises. "I don't wanna, like. Hock a loogie on the phone. I'll call. Five minutes."

"Okay," Antwone tells him. "--You don't have to, if you're not feeling good. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeh. See ya then," Kent agrees. "But I'll call in a few."

"Okay."

He balls up the pillowcase after he hangs up and then makes his way carefully toward the door. He thought he'd left it open a little--Waller and Marlene've redecorated the room since Kent last stayed in it, and he's stubbed his toe twice already on a trunk he's not used to being at the foot of the bed--but it's closed now. He must've shut it. God, this fucking shit memory is--

*Quit thinkin' 'bout it*, Kent tells himself harshly, as he covers his eyes before opening the door.

The lights in the hallway are off. There's a faint light coming from down the stairs, and the lights are on behind the shut door to Waller and Marlene's bedroom, but he can handle that. Kent drops his hand and heads down the hall for the bathroom.

A couple moments after he's done washing his face, there's a soft knock on the door.

Kent swipes the towel over his face one more time, and then he throws it back over the bar and opens the door. Marlene's standing there, looking concerned.

"Hey," he says. "Uh. The laundry basket moved?"

It's a dumb question, because it obviously did. It used to be in bottom of the linen closet, but now that space is full of suitcases and Christmas presents. But Kent's too worn out to care about sounding stupid right now. "I was gonna put this in," he adds, picking up the pillowcase off the
"I'll take it," she says.

Kent hesitates. "It's gross--"

"It's fine." Marlene takes it from him before he can argue; but then she wraps a hand over the back of his. "Kent. You know you can stay here. You don't have to leave."

He pauses, trying to figure out where this is coming from.

"If your--your boyfriend's coming over, that's fine," Marlene says. "You can both stay here. I'm glad you have someone, Kent. You don't have to leave."

Kent's still for a long moment, trying to figure out how to react.

Marlene squeezes his hand briefly. "You're always welcome here. You know that."

Kent finally gives up on trying to figure any of this out, because he's fucking tired. He drops his shoulders and lets out a long breath instead, and then rubs an arm against his eyes.

"...Thanks, Marlene," he says sincerely. "I didn't. It ain't like that, I don't think...."

Kent drops his arm again. "I just wanna feel normal. Y'know?"

She nods, making a brief expression that says she very much gets it.

Kent's been trying not to think about it, but Waller's house is set up really well for someone dealing with concussions.

There's dark curtains over all the upstairs hallway windows, not just in Kent's room. There's a nightlight in the bathroom, but it's been turned off; there's a candle lit in there instead, which is a lot easier to handle than a LED. Marlene was using a tiny flashlight to navigate the dark hall, and she immediately turned it down and away when Kent opened the door.

Belatedly, Kent wonders if he really did leave the bedroom door open, and Marlene's the one who shut it. If she heard him bawling earlier, shit, no wonder she seems so worried.

"Thanks," Kent tells her again. "'M alright. I really do 'preciate it. Thanks. I just...." He huffs out a breath. "...Wanna feel normal."

"Okay," she says slowly. When Kent gives her a smile, she squeezes his hand again briefly before letting go.

"I'm going to heat up some more broth," Marlene tells him. "Do you think you can come downstairs? Or do you want me to bring it up?"

"Nah, I'll go down--oh." Kent looks back down the hall at his room. "Uh, I said I'd call Antwone back. C'n you gimme, uh. Ten minutes?"

She nods. "Of course."

"Thanks, Marlene," Kent tells her. "I mean it. Thanks for all'a this."

She pats him on the shoulder before heading for the stairs.
Marlene drives Kent to the airport to pick up Antwone the next morning. Julie tags along for some reason.

And then Marlene insists on driving them both back to Kent's apartment, since "It's not that far away, there's no reason to take a taxi." And then she insists on taking them both out to eat first before dropping them off, which is when Kent finally figures out what's going on. He shoulda lied that his head hurt more, yeesh.

When she steps away from the table to wash her hands, Antwone looks over at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout this," Kent says. "I shoulda guessed."

"Okay, so I am basically meeting the parents," Antwone replies. "Just checking."

"Sorry." Kent gives Julie an annoyed look over the table. "I coulda warned ya if somebody'd warned me."

"Ohhhhhhh, poor baby," Julie smirks without looking up from her phone. "Who was the guy who brought a didgeridoo to my graduation?"

"Mitts."

"Who was the guy that sweet-talked security long enough for him to hide it?"

"I dunno what yer talkin' about," Kent replies pleasantly.

"Uh-huh," Julie drawls, as Antwone stifles a chuckle.

"Gimme your phone number," she tells the other man. "Has he been able to fake being, like, some Ferris Bueller cool guy to you this long? He's totally not, I got so many stories."

"This is so great," Kent says, as Antwone tries not to openly laugh. "This is how I wanted breakfast t' go. Can't wait 'til you graduate college, Jules. I'm gonna call in the whole roster. Whole decade's worth."

"Don't you dare."

"Don't listen to anythin' she says," Kent tells Antwone. "She's a goalie, can't be trusted. I dunno where your parents went wrong," he adds sadly to Julie.

She sticks out her tongue and flips him off. Kent says, "Manners, young lady," and gets an disgusted groan in response as Julie rolls her eyes.

They ask to have their food boxed up halfway through the meal. The restaurant's filled up, raising the noise level too high for Kent to fake his way through it anymore.

Once Marlene drops him and Antwone off, Kent has to get the building management to let them into his apartment. He's not sure who has his keys anymore. The GM still?

Kitt's not there. Kent knew she wasn't, but it's still really weird to come back to the place empty
now. He texts Chazzer to let him know that he can pick up Kitt whenever, and then finally remembers to call his cat sitter and let Susan know he's not away on the roadie before she shows up at his apartment.

"--Aw, shit," Kent says once he's off the phone with her, after canceling his appointments for the next few weeks. He looks over at the bedroom, where Antwone's unpacking his suitcase. "I didn't vacuum, gimme a sec."

"It's cool," Antwone tells him, holding up a box of allergy meds. "I am armed with Claritin D. Purrs can do her worst."

"No," Kent replies dryly, on principle. Even though he gave up on getting Antwone to use her real name after the eighth Skype call where Kitt shoved her face at the camera because Kent was daring to pay attention to someone other than her.

Chazzer soon texts back that his neighbor's watching Kitt while the team's away, but he'll let her know she can bring the cat over. Kent sends an okay, and tells the man thanks again for watching her the last couple days.

Two minutes later, his phone starts up with Vichy's ringtone.

"God dammit, Prochazka," Kent mutters into Antwone's chest without surprise.

The call ends, but it doesn't switch over to voicemail. A couple seconds later, his phone pings with a text. And then Vichy calls again.

"So..." Antwone says, audibly smiling.

Kent makes the most theatrically exasperated groan he can manage. And then he pushes up off the couch and goes to get his phone.

He carries it back to the couch and flops down on top of Antwone again before finally hitting accept. Antwone wraps his arms back around his waist as Kent asks, "Didja duct tape curtains t' my wall?"

"Fuck you," Vichy retorts. "You're a goddamn adult, why don't you have curtain rods?"

"Y' push-pinned curtains t' my wall and duct taped 'em," Kent says dryly, because there are new, MacGyvered curtains currently blocking out all the sunlight into his apartment. "Wouldja even know what t' do with curtain rods if I had 'em?"

"Fuck off, ingrate," Vichy grumbles. "Why are you home alone? Go back to Waller's place."

"'M fine," Kent replies. "Tell Chazzer mind his fuckin' business fer once."

"Alright, I don't have time for this," Vichy says wearily. Kent blinks and tries to remember if this is a game day. Must be. Who're they playing? "You're an idiot, I'm callin' your mom."

"Jesus," Kent replies. "Y' turned thirty and into a dad, piss off. 'M fine, I'm not alone."

"Kitt doesn't count," Vichy replies. "See ya."

"Vichy fuckin' don't--goddammit." Kent shifts and hands the phone to Antwone. "Tell 'im."

Antwone takes it and hits speaker. "Uh. Hi?"
"--Oh thank God," Vichy replies. "Okay. He's an absolute idiot who'll always claim he's 'good' no matter how bad he's hurt. Don't let him do anything stupid."

"Gotcha," Antwone says, eyebrow raised. Kent calls, "The fuckin' irony, look who's talkin'."

"Takes one to know one."

"Seriously, turned thirty, became a dad."

"Fuck off," Vichy retorts; and the low-grade headache Kent's been dealing with since waking up isn't distracting enough that he misses the sharper edge in the other man's tone.

Kent makes a note that apparently that chirp cuts deeper than expected. "Thanks fer the curtains, man."

"Yeah," Vichy tells him. "Don't push yourself, Parser. I know it sucks, but rest. You're gonna set yourself back otherwise."

Kent exhales in frustration. But he knows it's true. "Yeah, alright."

"Get better."

"Kill 'em tonight."

"We will," Vichy replies, sounding slightly off again. Who're they playing? Which roadie was this one, again? Jesus.

If his short-term memory doesn't get better soon....

"Hey, uh, Antwone?" Vichy adds. "I mean it, he's got an insane pain threshold and he's a liar. Look up 'Kent Parson broken ankle skate time' and don't trust him."

"I'm right fuckin' here," Kent drawls. "Yer on speaker."

Vichy ignores him. "Don't let him be stupid. Friggin'--tie him down if you gotta, don't let him make himself worse. Those headaches are horrible and painkillers don't help."

"...Okay," Antwone agrees. He sounds like he's having one of the odder conversations of his life.

Kent adds loudly, "We ain't hit that on the sex list, but we c'n bump it up."

Vichy says "--Oh my God" and hangs up.

"I win," Kent tells the phone, as Antwone shakes with laughter.

"Dude."

"He should know better'n try to troll me now," Kent replies. "It's been like. Eight years. I'm gonna win."

Antwone sets the phone on the back of the couch and drapes his arm over Kent's waist. "Dude."

*

It's not a good weekend.

Kent keeps having to spend long chunks of it lying down in his bedroom with the door shut, while
Antwone works as quietly as possible in the other room. Kitt spends most of her time either crying and clawing at the bedroom door whenever it's shut--no matter what side she's on--or constantly trying to sprawl out over Antwone's lap.

Antwone ends up sleeping on the couch. It's partly to give Kent as much quiet as possible, and partly because days of forced inactivity is starting to make Kent incredibly restless. Antwone's a lighter sleeper than him.

Kent cleared out most of the perishables in his fridge last week, expecting to go on the roadie, so there's not much easy food in his place. The grocery store in the building’s ground floor closed a while back, so Antwone ends up getting several meals from the Mexican place across the parking lot.

Kent offers to get him a ride to wherever he wants by the second day, since that's gotta be getting old. But Antwone says he'd rather spend his time in the apartment. Just in case.

Kent makes a note to sock Vichy when he sees him again for over-exaggerating, and promises it's getting better.

It is. The headache's still there, but it's not as intense as it was the first couple nights.

It's getting better.

Whenever Kent can handle sitting in the main room and hanging out with his boyfriend like a normal person, he and Antwone spend most of the time talking about work and family and friends.

It's not a good weekend, but it could've been a lot worse.

*

Monday evening, after Antwone's finished lint-rollering everything he brought and headed back to L.A., Kent calls the Aces' doctor and says he's feeling a lot better.

Dr. DeFranks says he'll get Kent an appointment tomorrow to check on his status. Once the man's back in Vegas with the rest of the team, they'll map out his recovery process.

*

The nausea eventually goes away for good. The headaches start to fade for longer and longer periods, as long as he's careful. He finally starts being able to sleep for decent stretches again.

He keeps the blackout curtains up anyway. Just in case.

The doctors clear him to start extremely limited physical activity again, once Kent begins passing their tests at last.

He's getting better.

*

The list of restricted activities Kent's given is basically "Don't be an athlete."

He can't play, or practice. He can't do serious workouts. No aerobic bike, no treadmill. He spends a stupid amount of time juggling a puck on some sticks in the middle of his living room, because
Jesus he's bored.

His mental therapist says they have to cancel his EEG training until he's fully cleared.

Kent gets it. Sticking those needle-pads into his head while he's got a fucked-up brain is probably bad medicine.

But it means that now when he goes in to visit Dr. Fisher, he has to talk, instead of being able to just work.

After his first session like that, Kent really doesn't want to go in for any more until he's cleared to resume the EEG training.

The Aces' trainer asks if he wants to start skipping his physical therapy sessions too, and see how well that goes for him. Kent makes a face, but he can't really argue with Elliot.

* * *

By his second week out injured, Kent's completely caught up on Catsby's podcast and bored out of his mind. At least he's been allowed to resume off-ice stick drills.

Chazzer gives him a ride to the clubhouse early that morning, so the two of them could do some pre-practice yoga together. Because that's how desperate for activity Kent's gotten.

He did one hot yoga class with Chazzer a couple years ago, after the other man kept pestering him to try it. Kent hated it: the room was sweltering, the music was instrumental, and nobody talked. Kent spent the class stuck in his head and struggling with weird, unfamiliar poses like a dumbass. He refused to go back again, no matter how much Chazzer chirped him for being a coward.

But he can't deny it's working for the other man. Chazzer's gotten a lot better over the last couple years, even if he still has a shorter fuse than he oughta on the ice. Or after a loss.

Chazzer's stepped up a lot in the dressing room since they were rookies. His anger issues are the reason why the club still doesn't trust him enough to assign him an A, but Kent knows he can rely on Chazzer to handle leadership stuff.

When Korsy started consistently going to church on road trips after the latest election, Kent finally mapped out all the Methodist churches closest to their usual roadie hotels and shared the doc with him. It was just easier to know where Korsy'd be, and how long it'd take him to get back to the hotel for team breakfast.

Kent tagged Chazzer on that too, since Chazzer's had years of experience trying to fit in mass on roadies. He figured the man could give Korsy some advice.

He needed somebody who could do that. Both of Kent's current alternate captains, Brownie and Trojan, aren't church guys any more than Kent is. And while the club tends to make Scrappy a temporary alt if injuries take one of them out, Scrappy usually doesn't bother going to mass on roadies unless it's Christmas Eve or Easter.

Kent didn't bother considering Vichy. He's not even a live-and-let-live atheist like Showy; Vichy's parents raised him to distrust organized religion as a tool of oppression that either colludes with or gets used by authoritarian governments.

Which is why getting into arguments about religion has been a club fine pretty much since the middle of Kent's rookie year. And the fine's triple if it's about the Russian Orthodox Church,
because back when Patsy was on the Aces and their fines master, he didn't fuck around. Robber thankfully tacked on "or evangelicals" to that sub-rule back in November.

Their goalie's not as bad as Vichy, but Boxy doesn't do religion either. Chazzer was the leadership group guy for Kent to go to.

Kent's pretty sure Chazzer's in line to eventually become a temporary or rotating alternate captain, if he can just prove to the club that he's got a handle on his temper and that he won't take stupid penalties on the ice or smart off to the referees if he gets mad. So if yoga helps, whatever.

And Kent really is pretty desperate for activity.

He's doing one of the dumb-looking breathing exercises Chazzer showed him when the other man remarks, "Y'know Parse, this works a lot better if everything about you isn't screaming 'This is total bullshit.'"

Kent just grunts. He switches his hand so he's pinching his other nostril shut, and exhales.

Chazzer snorts at him. "Try."

"I look like 'n idiot," he mutters.

"You get over it," Chazzer says, before glancing past Kent's shoulder.

A second later, Kent hears a phone camera click right before someone runs off. He doesn't bother turning his head. "Who was it."

"Nope," Chazzer smirks.

Kent pulls his hand away from his nose long enough to huff out a breath. "Asshole."

"Try this one," Catsby tells him later, messing around on Kent's phone in the kitchen. "It's the same guys. Minus their dad. They take questions and give joking answers and shit. No D&D. It's funny."

"Alright," Kent agrees. Might as well. He's still forbidden from watching TV or listening to games, but Elliot okayed podcasts after listening to a couple episodes.

*  

A few days before Christmas, Chazzer picks Kent up earlier than normal.

Kent makes a note of the weirdness, and shoves his half-finished breakfast into the fridge before heading down to meet him. "Practice get moved after the loss?"

Chazzer side-eyes him as he pulls away from the curb. "You're watchin' games again?"

"Not yet," Kent answers. "I got a friend that does and tells me what happened."

"Bro," Chazzer says, snorting out a laugh. "Parse."

"Shuddup," Kent replies, making a face. "I'm workin' with what I got."

What he's got is a boyfriend who laughed himself hoarse the first time Antwone heard a guy say the team was gonna "ride our goalie" to mean Boxy kept being assigned as starting netminder because he was on a hot streak shutting down the opposition.
Or who describes goals as "Oh, the other team just scored. Uh, they said top shelf," which leaves Kent with at minimum fifteen questions: who scored, from where, who assisted, what was the play that got them to the net, what went wrong with the Aces' positioning that the other team had a lane, where the fuck were the Aces' d that the other guys reached their goalie--except if he forgets to explicitly call them the Aces' "defense" or "defensemen," Antwone snickers again, which is around the time Kent gives up because the game's already going forward and instead just grumbles, "Why you gotta sex up my sport so much."

"Have you seen your gifs on Tumblr, dude?" Antwone replies, still chuckling.

But if Kent's not supposed to be watching TV or reading papers or listening to games because he's not supposed to be overtaxing his brain, he guesses that the telephone-style play-by-play probably helps avoid that.

"Christ Almighty," Chazzer laughs. "You're hopeless, Parse."

"Yeah, yeah."

They start for the kitchen. Halfway down the hall, Kent hears the yelling.


Kent makes a mental note to chew out Chazzer later for not giving him advance warning about whatever problem he obviously picked Kent up early to deal with, and heads for the room.

"--fuck were you thinking?" Vichy snarls. Kent gets through the door and sees Brownie in-between Vichy and Korsy, holding them away from each other--no. Holding Vichy back. Scrappy has an arm wrapped around Vichy's chest, looking tired. "Are you fucking retarded, why'd you bring that shit into--"

"Anatoly Ivanovich, control your shit," Kent says flatly.

He yanks the exercise room door shut. Chazzer catches up and comes inside before closing it again behind him. Kent demands, "What's goin' on."

Vichy finally steps off, lips still peeled back from his teeth. Scrappy drags him a little further down the room, away from Korsy. Brownie stays between them, but he drops his arms.

Korsy looks over at Kent. "I'm not walking it back. I'm done bein' a coward. Charity without justice doesn't glorify God."

"Seriously, this fuckin' bullshit?!" Vichy demands. Scrappy socks him in the shoulder, before rubbing his fingers against his eyelids.

Kent is going to kill Chazzer for not giving him any warning beforehand. "What. The fuck. Is going on."

"--Ah. You still on the online restriction?" Brownie asks.

"Yeah."

"Alright." He looks over at his stall where his phone and watch are sitting, and then glances back at Vichy, clearly gauging if the other man's calmed down enough yet.
"Here," Chazzer says, holding out his phone to Kent. It's open to Korsy's Twitter account.

Kent decides the Aces' trainer can just get mad at him later for not following orders, and takes it.

Apparently what's happened is that some asshole brought back a week-old post of Korsy's--where he retweeted without comment a The Undefeated article about Colin Kapernick's parents talking about how they supported their son's Black Lives Matter/national anthem protest cause after praying and talking with him and whatever--and started trying to stir up shit for the Aces last night.

And Korsy fell for it, reposting un-edited screenshots of several angry/violent comments and a death threat that he got, heading each one with the same line of *You can delete your post but you can't hide from God.* until his account abruptly went silent. Somebody from PR must've finally gotten to him.

Kent gives the phone back to Chazzer, and then sits down on a weight bench and rubs his face with his hands.

"Dude," he says.

"They can be held accountable for their behavior," Korsy replies.

"They're not gonna," Kent says wearily. "They're fuckin' randos who're gonna delete their accounts an' make new ones an' keep doing this same shit and never change. *You're* the one's gonna take all the backlash."

"Then I will," Korsy says. "If I know somethin's wrong and I keep ignorin' it to save my own skin, the fuck am I supposed to face God? I'm sick of being a coward!"

*Christ,* Kent thinks, and also *Fuck you,* because he's picked up the undercurrent to Korsy's words and he's getting a little pissed at the challenge there. "Dude."

"I'm not walking it back," Korsy repeats flatly.

Fucking awesome.

Kent rubs his face harder and makes an aggravated note that he's gonna have to sit down and talk to his dad during Christmas break. No. He's gonna have to call him today, once the man's off work.

The Aces're gonna have to do another press release. If Korsy's gonna defend this shit coming from a moral obligation standpoint, Kent's gonna have to pull on a lot of his dad's church terminology and lean into it to cut off anyone that tries to counter this crap.

He's gonna murder Chaz for not warning him.

"Fuck," Kent grits out. "Fine. Christ. --You still doin' that homeless charity work? The ones in the tunnels?"

Korsy pauses.

"Y' are, right? The thing they did after that guy did the book?" Kent asks, dropping his hands and looking up.

"Yeah," Korsy agrees.

Kent nods once shortly. He figured as much. Korsy's been on that charity since his sophomore
year, but the club doesn't publicize it for obvious reasons. Talking about a charity meant to help the broke people and drug addicts and alcoholics that squat in Las Vegas's sewer tunnels isn't Jumbotron-friendly, the way Robber's work with kids in the Summerlin hospital is.

"Okay," Kent says. "Bring that up first. Every fuckin' time somebody tries t' make this about Kapernick or the flag or the anthem, keep talkin' about morals and the homeless, and then shooting. The more y' make your opponents into monsters if they argue, the more yer gonna get through this okay."

Korsy shifts on his feet. "I'm not--"

"They c'n fuckin' be accountable for their behavior," Kent says in aggravation, because if Korsy's gonna own this then he needs to fucking own it. "Make 'em. Talk about homeless first, then Jesus, shootings after that."

Vichy stares at Kent, looking betrayed. "Are you fucking serious?"

"How do you do this?" Korsy asks.

"The fuck d'ya want from me, Okori!?" Kent yells with more emotion than he intended.

Yes. Fine. Kent isn't fucking throwing his career on the goddamn line lately like a bunch of other idiots, because he'd rather be remembered as a great hockey player than as a gay hockey player or a hockey player dating a black man.

If that makes him a coward, then why the fuck should Kent treat whoever's throwing that insult at him as any different from the people who've called him scrawny or glass-jawed or a fag? It's still fucking trying to take his own story away from him and warp it into the one they want to tell, and fuck that!

"We don't need this shit!" Vichy says angrily.

"Quit fuckin' gettin' pissed," Kent bites off at him. "It's yer own fuckin' fault买in' that American Dream bullshit. Y' wouldn't be betrayed if y'ed fuckin' known better, I thought you were smart."

Vichy turns fully away from Korsy and starts for him. Scrapp grabs him in a half-nelson, swearing in Italian.

"Okay," Brownie says loudly.


Brownie throws an arm over Korsy's shoulder and starts to steer him toward the door. "C'mon Saul, I wanna hear more about this. Alright? I ain't been in Sunday school since--like, eighteen. Tell me some of this stuff you're talkin' 'bout."

He's talking to Korsy; but he's looking at Scrappy. Scrappy nods, still holding onto Vich.

Chazzer grips Kent's shoulder as Brownie and Korsy leave. "Yeah--anyway. Parse. There was a thing I was gonna--"

"Don'tcha fuckin' treat me like I'm too stupid to know whatcher doin'," Kent snaps, wrenching his shoulder free.
"Fuck you, you fuckin'--golden boy spoiled brat," Vich snarls.

Kent says icily, "You want me t' believe anythin' yer sayin', say it t' my face when you ain't fuckin' emotional like fuckin' always now."

"All right," Chazzer mutters, before physically hauling Kent to his feet and dragging him out of the room.

Kent tries to break free, but this time Chaz isn't fucking around. Behind them, Kent hears Scrappy tell Vich, "One of these days I'm just gonna let you kill someone. See how that goes. I won't post bail."

Kent plants his feet and manages to half-throw Chaz forward a couple steps, but he still can't get loose. "You sonuva--fucker, you didn't fuckin' warn me?!

"I didn't want it to go like this!" Chaz yells back, which.

Fair.

Kent growls in the back of his throat, but he quits struggling before he just punches Chaz in the stomach. "Fuckin' let go."

Chaz does. "You idiot. He's gonna murder you."

"No he ain't," Kent says disdainfully, stalking for the kitchen. He doesn't have anything to fear from Vich; Vich always flinches first. He's the better man. "Fuckin' warn me next time, Prochazka."

"I told you, I didn't fuckin'--!" and then Chaz stops in the middle of the hall. He braces his hands on his thighs, exhaling hard.

"Take five," Kent orders. "I'll see ya."

Chaz grunts without looking up. Kent leaves before the situation devolves further.

He ends up in the kitchen. Kent gets coffee and a protein bar, and then sits down at the table where Korsy and Brownie are at, and listens.

He makes another note that for all that Korsy seems serious about taking this heat, he's still freaked out over the implications. Korsy's tell is that he jiggles his leg a lot before actively stopping it and fidgeting with the knee of his pants instead, before starting up again; and Kent watches Korsy do that pretty much the whole time he and Brownie are talking.

So after Kent gets off the phone with his dad that evening, he tosses the now dog-eared and highlighted Bible his parents made him take to Vegas when he left home in his rookie year across the kitchen island to deal with later. And then he calls Showy.

When the other man acknowledges that he checked in with Korsy last night after his Twitter blew up, Kent pushes down the urge to tell Showy he's an asshole for not giving him advance warning.

"He okay?"

"I dunno," Showy says, exhaling slowly. "I know he's got the whole Christian thing, I think that's a good support. But I dunno how it's gonna go in the long run. Those were some pretty shitty comments he was gettin'."
Kent refrains from pointing out how some supposed Aces fan posted a comment in the NHL article on Mitts' retirement saying that he hoped Showy and Rakes--the Houston Aeros' top defenseuman and leading scorer, respectively--both tore their ACLs, as if they'd had anything to do with Skalski's hit, and how that was pretty par for the course for fans' online behavior. Maybe Showy didn't see that; if not, Kent's not gonna tell him about it.

Instead, he says, "Guy that made the death threat deleted his account. Dunno 'bout the others yet, but Grace said a lotta the online response's been supportive."

"Fuckin' good riddance," Showy mutters.

Kent makes a noncommittal noise, and also doesn't point out that the guy's just gonna make a new account.

"--You know I support Korsy with this, right?" Showy asks dryly. "Do we really need to establish that first?"

"What a fuckin' shock," Kent drawls, because yeah, sure, he never would've expected the liberal arts college actor guy to be all pro this anthem protest stuff.

"Listen to half the shit stereotype comments I've heard since marrying Rie and then try that 'Republicans buy sneakers too' tack with me, Parse," Showy replies, a little flatter.

Kent exhales; but he's not gonna pick this fight. "I'm not coming atcha, Zach. But people're never gonna stop bein' assholes. All this is doin' is fucking up his life for something that ain't--that's not gonna change."

"It's not--" and then Showy stops and lets out a long breath. "...Can you put on video, Kent?"

Kent eyes the phone slightly. "I'm not supposed to yet."

"Are you--no, okay, yeah. Don't fuck with the restrictions," Showy says. "Okay."

"Okay. What I'm gonna say to you, it's 'cause I genuinely believe you want to be a good captain," Showy tells him. "I don't always agree with how you go about it, but ever since they sewed that C on your jersey, I never doubted you're tryin' your best to do it right. Okay?"

Kent shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

And then he leans back against the counter and hits FaceTime on his phone. "...Okay."

"Nah, Parse--"

"It's prolly okay for a few minutes," Kent says. "I talk to people in person, I don't get how the phone's different."

"...Did Elliot say not to use vid chats?" Showy asks. "Or...."

"He told me I can use the phone to talk."

Showy doesn't reply.

"Shuddup," Kent mutters.

"Literally didn't say anything, Parse."
"Whatever, just--pick up already."

Showy does. Kent scratches the back of his neck as the call switches over, and makes a mental note to check with Elliot tomorrow about whether vid calls are okay. It'd be nice to see Antwone again. He drops his hand once the video connects.

"Alright," Showy says. "The best advice I've gotten the last month is 'cynicism is an avoidance tactic.'

"I'm not doubtin' that it got you through some shit situations, Parse," he adds. "Or that it had genuine, valuable use in them." The video tilts as Showy shifts his phone from one hand to the other. "But I dunno if it's a crutch you can keep usin' much longer, and still keep growin' and improving as a captain. Or a person."

Kent exhales inaudibly.

"Yeah, see, like this I can still see that," Showy says with a small half-smile. Kent makes a face.

"I mean it, Parse," Showy tells him. "Especially since you're captain in Vegas. Like, Houston tries, but this club's still a white sausage factory compared to there. And I know you know the GM's habit is to grab up overlooked players, 'cause the friggin' money's there somehow."

"Yeah, yeah," Kent says, cutting off anything else about the weirdness in the Las Vegas Hockey Club's financials that lets them do things like spend a decade donating floor-hockey equipment packs to all the local schools. Or have a Spanish broadcast for all their games. Or offer really nice scholarships for their youth hockey clubs.

Like, really nice. Kent would've killed for a chance at that much money in mites.

There's no denying the school partnerships and the scholarships draw in a lot more kids, though. Kent's seen several with real potential in the youth clubs during the Aces' promo days.

And really, if Kent were managing a deep-rooted and complex business like a hockey club for investment, betting, and possible money laundering purposes, and if he was committed to running it for the long term, then. Operating in the red the arm of the club that increases its supply pool for its primary business, in order to potentially keep other aspects in the black, could be worth the risk.

Especially if a portion of those talented kids develop enough lingering loyalty to the Aces' organization that they might sign into one of its minor league teams, if they don't get drafted. That could definitely be worth the risk.

Especially if the most-talented kids grow up loyal to the Las Vegas Hockey Club because it's clear in that club, non-traditional players are welcome. That in the Aces' organization, they'll get a fair shot to fight for ice time.

In that case, even the drafted players might be more receptive to trades or free-agent signings in the future. Or you could pick up the guys who stay in college after being drafted, until their original contract runs out and they go back on the market. If you were playing the long, long game.

You could even start looking at the cost-benefits of putting up a stake in one of the new women's league clubs, if you had an idea what kind of players you could sign into it. There's casinos out in Jersey, too.

There's so many variables and risks in the idea that it's almost completely ridiculous.
But. If someone had enough money and patience to try, well....

Somebody investing in the Aces seems to think it's worth a test.

"...Yeah," Kent repeats. He rubs a hand over his face. "Christ."

"I'm not sayin' it's easy advice," Showy tells him. "Thirty minutes after I left the therapist, I remember reading some new article and falling right back into that trap, and then thinkin' 'Ah fuck, goddamn, now I gotta deal with this shit, son of a fuck. Great.'"

Kent snorts out a laugh.

"The unexamined life may not be worth living, but livin' the examined one's got its shit moments too," Showy grumbles. Kent snickers more.

He trails off a few moments later, and then exhales tiredly through his teeth. "...Lemme think about it."


Kent slumps heavier against the counter.

"...They cleared me to fly home for Christmas," he finally says. "It's gettin' better."

"Good." Showy taps his screen with a knuckle. "How you feelin' about it?"

"Bored outta my fuckin' mind," Kent says dryly, making Showy half-smile.

"...I dunno," he adds a little later, when Showy hasn't said anything else. "Just.... I wanna get back. I'm barely gettin' to do drills, don't see the guys, can't watch stuff. It just.... Sucks. Y'know?"

"It sounds really lonely," Showy agrees; and Kent flinches hard.

He feels completely isolated with this injury. Separated out from the team. A state away from his boyfriend. Unable to follow his own damn sport on TV or radio, or even just in the papers.

It's just him, and Kitt, and endless fucking recovery work.

He hates it.

"Call me if you ever wanna talk," Showy tells him. "Or text. It may take me a while to get back to you, but I will, Parse."

Kent shifts on his feet. "It's okay."

"If you don't feel like it, it's cool," Showy says. "But if you're bored or anything, offer's there."

Showy adds with a half-smirk, "You been listening to me kvetch about this new bathroom bill for months and you managed to restrain yourself to only tellin' me 'You moved to Texas, what'd you expect?' once, so. I can return the favor."

Kent snorts in amusement. Showy shifts to a full but more serious smile. "We're friends. Hit me up."

"...Alright," Kent says. "Thanks, man."
"Sure thing, Parse."

*

The next day, Kent ends his stick drills early and grabs Scrappy after the Aces' practice. He harangues the other man into going out to Sergei's bar with him.

They both order nonalcoholic beers. The bartender brings them a couple barely-chilled cans several minutes later; Kent checks the canned-on date on the bottom and then sets it aside without bothering to open it. Scrappy does the same, and then makes an exasperated noise and finally just gets a real beer.

"How you doin'?" Kent asks, after Scrappy brings it back from the bar.

Scrappy side-eyes him as he scoots into their booth against the back wall. "This about Vich?"

"No," Kent says. "I know he's not takin' things well. But it sucks to deal with someone who's stressed out all the time. Even if you're friends. How're you doing?"

Scrappy studies him for a long moment.

Then he looks away and takes a long breath, popping open the can.

"...All right," he says. "I saw it comin', I figured he was gonna be like this."

Kent raises an eyebrow briefly.

Scrappy shrugs a shoulder. "I heard enough of Movimento Cinque Stelle's shit when they were still northern," he replies. "A populist starts talking, you know 'em. It was coming."

Kent makes a "huh" noise and a mental note to look up whatever that group is later.

Scrappy shrugs both shoulders this time. "Everything goes in cycles," he says. "We believed Mussolini, then we hang him, then we start all over with new men. You keep your head down in bad times, make sure your people are okay. Live good while it's better. Be ready when it goes bad again."

After a moment, Kent shakes his head. Finally, another pragmatist. "Why don't we hang out more?"

"Because you're an asshole," Scrappy drawls, and Kent laughs out loud.

"Fair," he agrees. Scrappy smirks against the rim of his beer, and then takes a sip and makes a face.

"So you're alright?" Kent confirms.

"Yeah," he answers, setting the beer down to the side. "...Thanks."

Kent lifts his shoulders. "It's rough dealin' with someone like--helping somebody dealing with stress. Like that."

Scrappy makes a vague noise in the back of his throat, but nods once.

A couple seconds later, he starts tapping his fingers absently on the table.

Kent waits. It'd be easier if he had a prop; but he's not drinking expired beer, so he just readjusts his watchband instead.
"... He'd be better if the consul would quit dicking around and just do Nadiya's paperwork," Scrappy says finally. "He wants her off the work visa and outta that casino before she gets worse."

The first part of that statement raises a whole lot of complicating questions about what silent investor is holding Vichy's leash, if Nadiya's green card is getting blocked at the Russian consulate level.

Kent puts those questions carefully out of mind. "Wait, she okay? She looked fine at family skate."

"Yeah. But he's worried about secondhand smoke," Scrappy shrugs.

Kent's spent more than enough time in Vegas casinos to get that.

Plus, Vichy met Nadiya when they were working for the same casino the summer after Vichy graduated high school. She's been a full-time dealer for as long as Kent's known her. "Shit, yeah. Makes sense."

Scrappy nods again. Kent blows out a slow breath.

"... They got any idea why the consul's hangin' it up?" Kent asks, nonchalant. "He tried a different lawyer?"

"You tell me," Scrappy says bluntly.

Kent raises an eyebrow.

"You know more than me, Parser." Scrappy looks him in the eyes. "Whenever people hear 'mob' they immediately think 'Italian,' so he never tells me shit."

"--huh," Kent says quietly.

When Scrappy keeps giving him an expectant look, Kent shakes his head. "I dunno anything."

"Go fuck yourself," Scrappy says in annoyance. "Don't lie to my face."

"I don't know anything." Kent replies. "I just made some guesses." Because Vichy's slipped up enough over the years that it got pretty easy for Kent to narrow down his original broad suspicions to a specific multi-corp.

He doesn't say that. "But I don't go asking 'bout them. You shouldn't, either."

Scrappy gives him a much more aggravated look. "This 'it's for your own good' bullshit you two pull. You know you're being dicks."

"It's still true," Kent says. "We already lost Showy 'cause of this shit. Don't ask questions."

Scrappy goes still, narrowing his eyes. "--What?"

"He learned too much and didn't wanna put his family in their grip," Kent says, voice low. "You got a wife and kid too, Jeff. Don't ask questions. Got it?"

After a long delay, Scrappy finally exhales through his teeth. "... Yeah."

Kent nods.

Several moments of awkward silence later, Scrappy scrubs a hand over the back of his head and
then finally points at his beer. "Anything else? Because I'm not drinking more of this crap unless
you do."

"Can't," Kent says. "Ell made me take another painkiller before."

"Okay," Scrappy replies, starting to shift out of the booth. Kent follows. "...Still gettin' the
headaches?"

"Sometimes," Kent admits, as they head out. "He said I just...gotta quit pushin' too hard."

"Cold day in hell when that happens, Parser," Scrappy deadpans. Kent huffs.

* The Aces handle the fallout around Korsy as well as anything political in the conservative sports
world can be managed lately.

If Korsy'd just blacked out the account names before reposting the screenshots, they could've done
a brief press release and then treated the situation as addressed. The newspapers probably wouldn't
have even bothered to put it in print--it could've been an online article.

But since he didn't, they have to talk more. Because people're trying to whip up outrage and rewrite
the narrative so that the assholes who made threats are now victims of not having their privacy
protected.

Kent's still banned from television and reading, but he gave Antwone the passwords to his cable
apps and newspaper accounts, and the other man tells him the broad arc of the story. There's a
couple follow-up articles in the local papers: the Sun talks mostly about politics, while the Review-
Journal leans on the morality angle and includes a link to the donations page of the charity Korsy
works with, since the R-J's beat reporter knows her editorial board.

There's an official statement that says while the Aces organization had a discussion with Korsy
about the appropriate tone it expects all of its players and staff to use on social media, the club also
respects all its players' and staff's First Amendment rights.

The team puts out its own statement that opts for the "a player did something heated in a moment
of high emotion" script, reiterating that the guys consider Saul Okori to be an excellent teammate
and a man of upright moral standing who acted out of sincere, faith-based frustration. Kent
harangues Vichy into doing it when the man initially says to leave him out of that church excuses
crap, because if Vichy didn't wanna be the go-to guy for writing the team's press releases, he
shouldn't have gotten that English degree in the first place so fuckin' suck it up. Vichy gut-punches
him almost hard enough that Kent has to take it seriously, but he writes it.

PR rides herd on a short interview session the day of the Aces' next game, allowing two questions
about all the political hoopla before making the media focus on actual sports again. Antwone
mentions that he could see the Aces' head of PR drain an entire venti-sized coffee off to the side in
the about five minutes the interview took.

Kent makes a mental note that the team's going to have to throw an even better than usual end-of-
season party for all the club's staff after everything that's happened this year.

And its not even January yet. Awesome.

*
Christmas break goes like usual, mostly. Kent fits himself back into the behaviors and way of talking that won't make his relatives rag him about getting full of himself after becoming a hockey superstar, and pretends that it doesn't feel more irritating this year.

It shouldn't. It doesn't. It's no different from any previous year; he's just already aggravated because he's been out of the game the last couple weeks, and he was just finally remembering to consistently talk right again without having to concentrate on it. It's all normal. He just has to deal.

When people start breaking out the beer and talking shit about sports teams and politics, Kent tunes it out. He spends a lot of time playing with Kitt, and also saving her from his littlest cousin, who doesn't yet understand "gentle pats." He talks with Antwone when the other man's off work.

He's drinking a beer in his aunt's kitchen after Christmas lunch--it's one of the good ones he brought, and he doesn't feel like taking shit for drinking it in a glass instead of out of the bottle--when a couple of his cousins come in. Still talking politics. Kent thought the clubhouse was bad, but Jesus. When's this shit gonna get old? Their guy won, fucking move on already.

--He's just. Already aggravated. Deal.

He's gonna be back in Vegas the day after tomorrow. He missed being around other people, didn't he?

It's his family. He just--has to deal with it.

"Right, Kenny?"

Kent looks up from his phone. "Huh?"

Doug snorts. "I said, most'a the guys in football are Americans, and they don't get it, and most'a the guys in hockey aren't and they do. Yeah?"

Kent looks back at his phone with a shrug and keeps scrolling through his photos. "Guess so."

Bob grabs another beer out of the fridge, laughing. "Hockey robot. Y' ain't gonna get a straight answer outta him."

Kent shrugs again. "Don't really care 'bout politics."

"No excuse," Doug tells him, leaning against the counter and pointing his can at Kent. "It ain't about politics, it's about respect."

Kent decides to ignore that. Neither Doug or Bob are military, but Bob did ROTC in high school until a car accident screwed up his leg enough that he failed the medical in his application. Kent's better off letting this conversation die before it starts. He nods once.

That's apparently not good enough. Doug frowns at him.

"No excuse, Kenny," he repeats. "You gotta be a leader, speak up. Do somethin' about that black who's tryin' to start shit for your guys. It's making y' all look bad."

"Korsy's one'a my guys," Kent replies evenly. He swipes back to the latest photos and hits replay on the video he took this morning, of Kitt going wild playing in all the wrapping paper. That's gonna be popular when he can finally update her Instagram again. "Some internet troll tried t' make us look bad by targeting him. It's happened before."
Bob shakes his head, and then leaves the kitchen when his son calls for him. Doug frowns harder.

"You gotta speak up," he insists. "You don't put him in his place, people're gonna think your team's okay with that shit. It makes your guys look bad."

"Back off my team, Doug," Kent says flatly.

His cousin, who's never played professional hockey against Kent and doesn't recognize that tone as the warning that if he doesn't quit chirping he's gonna have to pay the consequences, leans forward intently. "I mean it, Kenny. Fuckin' step up! At least one'a the Mexicans you got knows to just play hockey. You finally got rid of that liberal, you're becomin' a real team. You gotta make it clear where you stand. Lead your team already!"

Kent thinks, Alright then.

The glass he's holding belongs to his aunt.

He sets his phone on the counter behind him, puts the glass inside the sink where it'll be safe, and rounds on his cousin.

Kent Parson is a bad fighter for multiple reasons. He's smaller than most guys on the ice; he weighs less than the majority of them; and he's paid to make plays and score, not to take himself out of the game with fights, meaning he has minimal experience with them. Five fights in an eight-year career is high for the type of player Kent is, but that says more about the Aces' physical style than it does about Kent himself.

But Kent Parson is a professional athlete who's been playing the incredibly physically demanding sport of hockey for over four-fifths of his life, and his cousin is a prison accountant.

It takes two military relatives and one uncle who's a cargo freighter deckhand to finally rip Kent off of Doug and keep them separated.

"Fuck you, fuckin' asshole!" Doug yells, holding a hand around his broken, bleeding nose.

"Back off my team, cockstain!" Kent snarls. "I know 'em better'n you!"

"Stand down, Kent," his lieutenant cousin--the only commissioned officer in his family--repeats. Kent grits his teeth, but steps back further.

"Fuckin' faggot," Doug growls, staggering to his feet. "Shoulda known--"

His cousin Danny punches Doug in the back of the head. "Quit bein' a fuckin' cunt," he says. "You fought a fuckin' hockey player, you got what you deserve. Fuckin' get outta here and clean up, quit bleedin' on Mom's floor."

Doug goes, still spitting insults under his breath like a coward. Kent watches him silently until the lieutenant pushes him back further. "I'm not sayin' it again, Kent."

"He fuckin' started it, I just finished."

"I don't give a shit," Annie replies. "Clean up the floor."

Danny points him to the bleach and extra rags under the sink. Kent cleans the blood off the linoleum, and then finds Aunt Jenna and tells her sorry for messing up her place.
"Eh," she says. "It's not Christmas without drama."

He shifts his flight around to leave a day earlier. Kent lies to his parents that it was planned and for physical therapy, and he just forgot and said the wrong date; and then he checks with Antwone about the other man's schedule.

And then he changes his flights more, and spends the day after Christmas in L.A.

"Whoa," Antwone says reflexively, when he picks Kent up at the airport.

"I don't wanna talk about it," Kent mumbles, putting Kitt's crate into the back seat. His new black eye's really obvious.

Antwone pauses, and then rests a hand on his shoulder. "Family?"

Kent exhales, still not looking over as he adjusts the carrier on the seat. ". . . Yeah."

Antwone squeezes his shoulder for a moment before letting go. Kent shuts the back door and gets into the passenger seat.

As Antwone starts to pull into traffic, Kent hesitates for another moment while putting on his seat belt. "...Thanks."

"Yeah, dude. It sucks sometimes."

Kent hasn't said anything because the other man doesn't seem to wanna talk about it, but this is the fourth year in a row Antwone's worked through Christmas without going home.

Kent reaches over and rubs Antwone's back for several moments as he steers their way out of LAX. "Yeah."

* 

Antwone offers to drive him back to the airport the next morning for his 5 a.m. flight to Vegas. Kent initially turns him down, because that's ridiculously early and way out of Antwone's route to work; but when Antwone tells him he'd rather spend the extra time with Kent and just take a power nap under his desk at lunch, Kent agrees. He'd rather ride with Antwone than in a taxi, too.

His flight's still delayed despite being the first one out, so Kent doesn't arrive in Vegas until after 6:30. By the time he makes it home, he's gotten a text from Chazzer asking why he's not answering his doorbell already.

Kent considers juggling around Kitt and his luggage in order to reply, and then decides screw it and just heads for the elevator.

Chazzer's leaning against his door, texting, when Kent gets into the hall. The other man glances over, and then he does a double take and straightens up. "What the--?"

"I just got back," Kent replies. "Lemme take care of Kitt and we can head out."

"Bro," Chazzer says flatly, pointing at his own eye to indicate Kent's bruised one.

Kent dumps Kitt's carrier into Chazzer's arms, making her yowl in protest.

"So this's what we're doin', huh?" Chazzer drawls, as Kent ignores him and unlocks his door.
After Chazzer's driven them to the clubhouse, somebody must rat Kent out to the trainer--and by that Kent means the goddamn dressing room mole eating his eggs at the table past the counter absolutely ratted him out to the trainer--because Kent's still pouring his coffee when Elliot comes stomping into the kitchen. "What the hell, Parse!"

"Not here," Kent says tersely.

Elliot gives him a narrow look, but then he jerks his head at the doorway. Kent wedges the cap onto his thermos and grabs a protein bar, and follows him out.

He veers over to the table and socks Chazzer in the back as he leaves. The other man makes a noncommittal noise through a mouthful of eggs and doesn't look up from his phone.

Kent doesn't give Elliot the whole story, because you don't sell out family even if sometimes they're douchebags. He keeps the details vague as he tells Elliot enough for the man to be able to do his job.

Elliot toys with a pen as he listens. Once Kent wraps up and falls silent, Elliot keeps flipping it between his fingers for a while without talking.

"Did you lie about your symptoms back in Providence?" he finally asks.

Kent blinks, because that wasn't the response he was expecting. "Huh?"

"When we put you through the concussion protocol last year in Providence, did you lie about your symptoms in order to pass it?" Elliot repeats.

"No." Kent straightens up slightly from his slouch. "No Ell, that'd be stupid. I didn't do that."

"Mm," he replies; but he looks like he believes Kent. "It didn't seem like you. But I had to check.

"Alright." Elliot sets the pen down. "Clear out your schedule, I'm gettin' you another doctor's appointment for more tests. I'll let you know when it is."

Kent shifts uncomfortably in his chair. "Ell, I swear I didn't lie."

"I don't think you did," Elliot tells him. "But I'm wondering if you were hurt bad enough it just barely went under the radar. This ain't like you, Parse."

"Do the tests. When we get the results, we'll see if we gotta revise your recovery timeline," Elliot says.

Kent tightens his jaw and looks away.

The club put him on the long-term injured roster the same night he had to leave the game with his concussion, so he's already been barred from playing for almost a month. How much longer--

"I know you wanna get back," Elliot says. "But if you gotta miss a chunk of this season so you've got another decade left in your career and you're still healthy when it's over, that's what we're gonna do," the trainer warns him. "I am not fuckin' gonna be a man who sees a championship player I was responsible for be fucked up and supergluin' his teeth after retirement because I didn't handle his head injuries right. Got it?"
Kent exhales slowly.

But he knows that football concussion horror story about Webster, too. And yeah, no shit, that's not a future Kent wants. "...I got it."

But still. Kent adds, "I get--I get pissed a lot, Ell. It don't feel like it's anything new."

"You don't act on it, though," Elliot points out. "You have good impulse control. I've heard you chirp like a motherfucker, but there's a difference between words and hitting."

Kent scratches his arm and shifts in the chair again.

"Finish breakfast," Elliot tells him. "I'll let you know when the appointment is. Then head home until it's time."

"Okay," Kent mumbles, pushing out of his chair.

"I'm gonna look out for your best interests no matter how much it pisses you off, Parse," Elliot tells him dryly. "That's my job."

"No, I know," Kent says, rubbing the heel of his hand against his temple. "I'm not pissed, Ell, I just...."

"Wanna get back," Elliot finishes. "I know. You and every other player that's ever been injured. We're gonna get you back, Parse. But we're gonna do it when you're healthy."

"Okay," Kent makes himself nod. "I got it."

"Good. Me or Andy'll let you know about the appointment."

"Okay."

Kent starts to head back to the kitchen; and then he leaves the clubhouse area and goes into the arena instead, and finds a seat at the top of the nosebleeds.

Kent props his feet up on the chair in front of him and slumps deep into the seat, arms folded against his chest as he blankly watches the Cirque du Soleil people doing prep work in the catwalks. Eventually he gets a call from Dr. DeFranks, telling him that he's got a 2 p.m. appointment that afternoon.

"Gotcha," Kent replies. After he hangs up, he scrubs an arm over his eyes yet again and tells himself to quit this crap already, this is stupid. The world's not gonna end because of one concussion.

* 

An upside of Kent's significant time and money donations to a local neuroscience center that treats sports-related concussions for the last few years--ever since Waller was forced to retire because of his head injuries--is that the place keeps finding available appointment times for him.

The fast-tracked results from his additional neurocognitive tests show he's no worse off than the doctors determined from his initial CT scan.

Kent goes back to his abbreviated workouts and off-ice stick drills the next day. He's also finally allowed to go out on the ice again, but he's forbidden do any on-ice shooting or power skating drills yet. Elliot threatens to set all his sticks on fire if Kent even *tries*, or if he doesn't quit skating as
soon as he feels a headache start.

Kent's pretty sure that threat isn't professional, but he figures Elliot's earned it after years of dealing with him.

Later, he's allowed to resume watching TV and to go back online. It happens just in time to watch the Bruins' tough guy/"real man's hockey player"/rat Marchand set the internet on fire by calling out some dick's homophobic tweet at him and then reposting an unedited screen cap of it when the guy tries to delete his post to escape the backlash that just got turned on him.

Catsby retweets Marchand's post in the same Spanish/English style he's been doing everything online with lately: Crecí como fan de los Bruins por una razón -- el hockey sobre hielo es para todos and then Grew up a Bruïns fan for a reason. #HockeyIsForEveryone

Kent thinks that's overkill, but whatever. It's a good alignment with the Aces' diversity PR.

He personally stays out of the mess, and decides to wait a few more days before finally updating Kitt's Instagram and doing a couple posts thanking fans for all the well-wishes while he's been out injured.

"Maybe I should start writin' everything French first," Boxy says the next morning, during the few minutes of overlap between the end of Kent's personal skate and the start of the optional practice. Boxy's stretching on the ice near him, while Kent slumps against the bench rail and thinks that it is total bullshit he's already this winded after just being off the ice for a couple weeks. Jesus Christ. "At this point, betcha nobody'd even blink an eye."

"No," Kent grunts, fumbling over the rail for a water bottle. "We got enough distractin' bullshit goin' on already. PR's gonna mass quit soon."

"Whatever you gotta tell yourself to pretend you're not a bad ally, Parse," Boxy comments.

Kent side-eyes him narrowly.

Boxy lifts the corner of his mouth in a smirk. "I could finally start talking about how separating's in Quebec's best interest."

"I will burn your helmet," Kent says flatly, because up to now Boxy's had the sense to keep his separatist opinions offline, limiting them to conversations with Kent on the plane and far away from the media staff. "That'll be the last straw. Don't you dare."

Boxy just keeps smirking. "Sure, I don't agree with FLQ's terrorism, but you gotta admit they paved the way for PQ to--"

Kent squirts him in the face with the water bottle. Boxy snorts and slaps his stick against Kent's skates.

"One sane person left in my life, Box," Kent says. "That's all I'm fuckin' askin'. Don't you fuckin' dare, Jesus, please."

Boxy snickers as he wipes off his face. Kent growls in the back of his throat and downs some water.

*
After he's showered and changed, he heads for the video room, only to find Coach Graves already in there. The man checks his watch when Kent pushes open the door.

"I interrupting anything?" Kent asks. It's so weird to be on a different schedule from the rest of the team. He's tired of it.

"No," Graves answers, so Kent comes into the room and heads over to one of the TVs. "Just impressed I beat you in. Even with Ell warning me you were off restriction."

Kent makes a face. Graves lifts the corner of his mouth, and adds, "The phrase 'head him off at the pass' was used."

"Sheesh," Kent says, settling in the chair. "It's been two weeks, I wanna catch up."

"It's been five games," the video coach replies. Technically it'll be six with tonight's. "You can't watch that much tape, Parse."

"Not with that attitude you can't," Kent deadpans.

Graves pauses in the middle of pulling up a video, turns his head, and gives Kent a long stare. Kent cracks up.

"Sorry!" he manages a second later. "Sorry, sorry. I had to."

"Glad you're feelin' better, Parse," Graves tells him dryly. "You're not watching that much tape. You can watch forty-five minutes of what we're working on right now, and you're taking a break after thirty."

Kent shifts in his chair. "...Am I supposed to be restricting anything I watch like that?" He needs to double-check with Elliot. Kent'll quit using Netflix for background noise/visuals again if that's gonna eat into his tape-watching allowance.

"There's a difference between television and tape," Graves says, queuing up the video as he pulls a chair over by Kent's. "You're thinking a lot harder watching this."

Okay, yeah. It doesn't take a lot of brainpower to watch car shows or cop procedurals. "Okay."

"And I know you're gonna watch tonight's game," Graves adds. "I'm subtracting time because of that."

"Not all of it."

The coach gives him a "don't bullshit me, Parse" look.

"No, uh, I." Kent shifts in his chair. "A friend of mine's comin' over for the weekend. He's not a big hockey guy, so I wasn't gonna be a dick and like, make him watch it right off the plane."

Graves eyes him, considering. "Really?"

"Yeah." Kent shrugs. "I'll probably just watch some of the first period, unless the flight's delayed."

"Hm." Graves thinks for a moment, and then says, "You're still taking a break after thirty. You feel okay after forty-five, we'll see. But no more than an hour and a half."

"Is it like this for any guy that has a concussion?" Kent asks, because some days it feels like the staff is being way more paranoid with him than they've been with other players in the past.
"I've spent the last few years having to chase you out of the vid room, Parse," Graves tells him dryly. "You break into the rink to skate before morning meetings."

"I don't--technically--"

"I know you'd go overboard if you had it your way," the coach interrupts. "No more than an hour and a half."

Kent exhales, but he can't really argue.

*

The former Aces' defenseman that Kent boarded with in his rookie year drops by his apartment that afternoon. Kent invites Waller in, since there's still plenty of time before he has to get a taxi to the airport to pick up Antwone for the New Years' weekend.

Waller looks up at the scuff marks on the ceiling while Kent's grabbing them a couple drinks. "Lemme guess," he says. "Dickin' around with a puck while you were stuck at home?"

"Yep," Kent agrees, handing him a glass of water.

Waller nods knowingly. "Been there."

Kent pauses. "--That why that chunk of your living room ceiling's painted different?"

Waller snorts as he sits down on the sofa. "You noticed, huh?"

"Took a lotta naps on that couch," Kent shrugs, sitting at the other end.

Waller shakes his head. "Swear the color looked the same in the can," he says. Kent chuckles.

"How you doin', kid?" he asks.

Kent slumps back into the couch and drinks half his water before huffing out a breath.

"Better'n I was at first," he replies, since there's no point in bullshitting Waller. The other man had multiple concussions during his own career. "Still sucks, but. It's better."

Waller had a lot of concussions in his career. Probably more than anyone knows--the league didn't have to pay any real attention to brain injuries until football's PR got so bad that it trickled over into the NHL. Waller first started playing back when older guys could still opt out of wearing helmets and did, because you looked tougher without them.

Kent hesitates, scratching the knee of his jeans. "...When's it get better?"

"Depends on how bad it is," Waller tells him. "That was a real shit hit you took. Somebody's gonna take out Nutcracker in the last Oilers game, he knows he better be on watch."

Kent shrugs abortively. "I was really rippin' their captain, he was just makin' a point."

"Sure," Waller agrees, "but ain't like he was takin' out a real rat. You can be real little chirpin' shit, but that hit broke the code."

"Only to somebody lookin' from our side," Kent says. Waller tilts his head slightly in agreement and takes a sip of water.
"It oughta be better soon," the older man promises him, shifting the glass to his other hand. "They handle head injuries a lot better these days. Ell's not gonna fuck around with it."

Waller makes a wry, sympathetic face and adds, "It's gonna suck when you get back in games, though. No matter what you tell yourself, you're gonna flinch the first buncha times you bang your head." He thumps Kent a couple times on the shoulder. "There's no gettin' over losin' trust in your body at first. You just gotta go forward and do it, learn it'll really be okay."

Kent lets out a long, frustrated breath. But that's pretty much what happened to him after he broke his arm, so. Yeah, alright. He figured. "Yeah."

"I know you already know that, but try and remember it while it's happenin'," Waller tells him. "Knowin' you, you're gonna get pissed at yourself for doin' it even when you know better. But don't. Alright, Parse? Pushin' too hard too fast, it ain't..."

Waller rests the glass on his thigh and twists it in his hand, looking at it instead of Kent. "Everything we do, it's ultimately just a game. It ain't worth fuckin' up your life for."

"... You doin' okay, Walls?" Kent asks carefully, because something's off here.

"Yea--" and then he stops.

Waller takes a long breath, and then rubs his mouth for a moment, still looking away.

"...This shit never gets easier," he mumbles.

He exhales again before pushing back his hair, and finally looks up at Kent. "No. I ain't."

Kent sets his glass on the floor and shifts to face him, leaning forward.

Waller huffs out another breath. He stays tilted toward Kent, but he's not meeting his eyes anymore. He's looking over Kent's shoulder instead, out the windows. "...It's better. Now. The docs put me on some stuff for the mood swings, that's helped a lot. But--"

Waller breaks off, and then clenches his jaw and swallows hard, and makes himself keep talking. "But it's still 'untreatable' and 'degenerative,' so. It's still knowin' eventually I'm not gonna be me anymore. That's the worst...."

He trails off again, and looks away, around the room, before almost looking back at Kent and then staring out the windows again instead. "Learnin' to live with that's the hardest part."

Kent, caught flatfooted and at a loss on what to say, scratches his wrist uncomfortably. But it clearly took Waller a lot to talk about this--he was always one of those old school guys, somebody who didn't talk about feelings and shit. Kent doesn't wanna be a dick leaving him hanging.

So he swallows to fix his dried mouth and fumbles for something to say. "Are--I mean, did--have you thought about talkin' to somebody? I know, like, everybody says that shit, but I'm--I been seein' a guy, and it's been helpin'--" Kent's fucking hangups over an ex-boyfriend are nothing like having to deal with the long-term consequences of debilitating brain trauma, what an asshole statement. "Or--is there anything I can do?"

Waller nods slightly. "I been seein' a guy. McDuffie sent me to him, after I.... And he found Marlene one'a those support groups, it's been helpin' her a lot. Not feel so...alone, I guess."
"Good," Kent says. "I'm glad--I'm glad you got that. Both of you. It's...I know it's hard and shit, but I'm glad you're doin' it." Kent gives him a smile, even though it feels off with all the tension. "You're brave, man. It's hard."

Waller's mouth twitches in a grimace before he pushes it away and shakes his head.

"No," he replies, folding his hands together. It still doesn't hide how they're shaking. "I ain't."

"I put it off and put it off, even when I knew things were gettin' real bad. If Marlene'd left me, she'da been right to." Waller swallows again and clenches his hands tighter, rubbing his thumb hard against a finger. "I only went to McDuffie 'cause I was plannin' how t' kill myself without it being so obvious insurance wouldn't pay out, and I finally fuckin' had a moment'a clarity."

"Jesus." Kent grabs Waller's shoulder. "Karel."

"It's all right," Waller tells him, holding up a hand. "I don't--I ain't doin' that to Marlene and Julie, makin' them go through that shit. We're gettin' help. Marlene and me, we sold the guns. And the other car. She keeps the keys now." He folds his hands back together. "The club upped my travel stipend so I can do taxis, if it's a bad day. And the meds.... It's better, Parse," Waller says, finally looking at him again. "I mean it."

Kent squeezes his shoulder hard. "Good. --Tell me if there's anything I can do, man. I mean it. I got your back."

Waller hesitates, and then thumps Kent's arm briefly. "Thanks, kid. It...that means a lot."

"You done a lot, Parse," he adds. "Knowin' Marlene and Julie had some stability with you, it meant a lot."

Kent quit doing his monthly dinners with Waller's family after Julie left for college, unless the man was in town. He still checks in on Marlene with a phone call at least once a month, and he runs some errands for her once in a while if she asks, but that's not really anything. "It's nothing--"

"It meant a lot," Waller repeats, slapping his arm again. "I mean it."

"...Okay."

Waller shifts back slightly on the sofa, and Kent lets go.

"Anyway," Waller says. "Didn't mean to make this about me."

"Nah, man," Kent tells him. "I'm sorry you were goin'--you're goin' through that shit. That--it fuckin' sucks. I'm sorry."

Waller chuckles faintly.

And then he exhales, and pushes his hair back again before looking at Kent once more. "Anyway. I mean it, Parse. It's just a game. Don't let it wreck you, it ain't worth it."

"I won't," Kent promises, because there's nothing else to say.

Waller nods. "Good."

They talk for a little while longer: mostly Waller giving him some more advice for Kent's long-
term recovery, and about the kind of drills that'll keep up his conditioning while he's not playing games.

Kent's gotten a lot of advice from different guys now. Some of it's been contradictory, but at least that taught him there's multiple ways to deal with a concussion. It helped him freak out a little less about some of his symptoms.

After Waller heads out, Kent brushes Kitt until she bites him twice before running off to hide under the bed. And then he re-vacuums the apartment yet again, because if he's doing something physical he can keep himself from connecting the dots between Waller telling the Aces' trainer what was happening with him and Elliot's paranoia about managing Kent's own concussion.

"One of the long-term symptoms of concussions is difficulty regulating emotions," Elliot said.
"That's why you hear about guys going off and shooting themselves."

"That's the worst case scenario. You only hear about it with guys that've taken way more damage."

Waller's had probably more concussions in his career than even he knows.

Kent swallows and tightens his jaw, and turns up the TV before thinking better of that and turning the volume back down. He focuses on vacuuming.

*

One of Antwone's coworkers--Laia, the sister of one of Kent's teammates and who's dating another one of them--flies into Vegas too for the long weekend. Antwone asks Kent if he wants to share a ride to Vichy's New Years party with her, Catsby, and Robber.

He doesn't explicitly say that doing so would give Kent a reasonable excuse to show up at the party with Antwone. He's still on the no-driving ban, so it'd make sense for him to grab a ride with a couple of the guys, as long as nobody thinks too hard about how far apart their homes are.

But Antwone doesn't have to say it. Kent knows that's what it is.

He feels a little guilty about wanting to accept it, but. There's a big difference between being out to the front office, who'll put up with it regardless of their personal feelings as long as he keeps his numbers high and brings in trophies for the Aces, and being out to all his teammates.

Not just the ones he trusts, but to everyone. To all the guys he's gonna have to share a dressing room with for the rest of the season, once he finally gets back.

The past month's been shitty enough as it is. Kent just. Doesn't want to deal with however that'd go, too, on top of everything else.

So he's being a coward. Fine. He still doesn't want to do it.

Not--

. . . At least, not yet.

There's been enough strife between the guys lately as it is. Even if things've been calming down again.

Most of the guys either understand that Korsy's taking his pro-Kaepernick/protest stand for moral reasons, or at least get that if they try and argue with him about it he's just gonna keep talking
about God, and then Robber'll come around hounding both of them to pay the "arguing about religion" fine. Kent's been checking in with his alternate captains and the team's leadership core, and they all feel that situation's pretty much dealt with internally.

The club flew Boar's dad in from the Ukraine for the Aces' annual dads' trip, and apparently they actively got him and Vichy's dad to hang out together, forcing Boar and Vichy to spend time around each other. It didn't fix all the problems between the two of them, but Boar's noticeably chilled out some. Kent guesses that if Boar's dad spent enough time with Vichy's to decide that his parents were legitimate Soviet defectors, and no fan of Putin's politics either, then maybe he talked to Boar about it. It'd make sense for Boar to trust his dad on the issue, Kent guesses. Whoever in admin organized that stunt is a mastermind.

His first alternate intercepted a call-up who drove down from Reno and forgot to swap out his MAGA hat before getting out of his car at the arena, and got through to the guy that Vegas is way too much of a tourism-centric town to risk getting caught in a photo that could potentially alienate ticket-buyers. Brownie told Kent that he mentioned the conversation off-hand to the GM afterward, to let Impey know that the Aces need to clarify their dress code.

Which. Man, but it's nice to have reliable veteran presence in the dressing room again.

Kent'd be even more stressed about his time away, if he didn't know he could trust the rest of the leadership group to keep things running as smoothly as the circumstances allow.

But still. There's been a lot of circumstances in the last couple months. A lot of the kind of shit that severely tests teams' bonds.

Kent's not gonna add one more thing into the mix that could potentially poison the dressing room. Not when things are just *finally* starting to calm down.

"Or, d'you wanna do something else?" Antwone asks, propping himself up with an elbow on the mattress.

Kent shakes his head and focuses. "--No. Sorry I keep zonin' out," he mumbles, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Just--poke me or somethin' if I do."

"Okay," Antwone says, giving him a concerned look. He brushes his fingers over Kent's temple. "You okay? Another headache?"

"Nah, those're pretty much gone," Kent promises, shaking his head again. "I just...zone out sometimes. A couple guys told me they did the same thing, it oughta stop soon."

"Okay," Antwone agrees; but he still looks kinda uneasy as he pulls his hand back and settles his arm over Kent's shoulder. "You sure you're up for this?"

"Gotta go," Kent replies, half-shrugging as much as he can lying on his side to face him. "I been away from the team for too long. And Vi--Anatoly always has a open bar. So this is like, the best day'a the year if you wanna learn what guys *really* think."

Antwone chuckles. "Alright."

...But still.

It's been a year since he and Antwone got together at Vichy's last New Year's party.

Kent needs to start thinking about...something already. To say about their relationship. How to deal
with it if anyone asks. So he's prepared, at least. Instead of freaking out in the moment again.

He's gonna have to deal with this eventually, sooner or later, so he needs to just do it. The Aces' game tonight made that clear.

Kent's cleared to watch TV and games again, but Dr. DeFranks still doesn't want him attending any live ones at the arena or flying out with the team yet, because of the noise risk.

Which meant Kent didn't have to decide between spending tonight at home with Antwone, or going to the game.

But what about the future? He's gonna get sick or injured again eventually. Even if it's hopefully never as bad as this damn concussion. Is he going to have to make that choice every single time?

The obvious answer's yes, because the alternative is bringing Antwone to the games with him. And that....

Kent's gone over all the possibilities there, and they all suck.

Watching the game from the press box like usual would mean having to buy Antwone a separate ticket and ditching him for the whole game, like an asshole.

Kent rents a suite at the arena, but it's reserved for his charity work that brings injured veterans and the local air base's staff out to games. That'd never work out, for multiple reasons.

Neither would renting a separate suite. Kent has to be tight about his budget lately--all these brain tests and ER bills have eaten up most of the money that he set aside for inevitable injury expenses during the season. And Antwone probably wouldn't agree to let Kent spend that kind of money on him, anyway. Not without getting really uncomfortable about it again.

And then there's the fact that this is Vegas. The arena's premium seating, its suites and boxes, are designed to be conspicuous--the opposite of what Kent wants.

And then there's the cameras. The club's camera-people would probably leave Kent alone, or at least keep a quick shot for the Jumbotron focused on him and off of the lone other guy with him; but Kent can't do anything about all the fans with phones.

And how would they even get there? Go through the main hallways, with Kent getting recognized constantly and stopped at least some of the time? Use the staff tunnels, like Antwone's some dirty secret to be hidden? At this point even Kent can't ignore how much bullshit this is anymore.

Expecting Antwone to be satisfied with sneaking around all the time, just because Kent'd rather have things easier, is. . . .

Occasionally, Kent's wondered if what Jack has now with his new guy is what he always really wanted: to just be out, get it over with, so he could continue on with his life.

To just be with somebody like all the other guys, only he happened to be dating a man instead of a woman. To have a normal relationship, instead of always hiding it.

If that was what Jack wanted, then.

Even if all the other shit had gone differently, it probably still never would've worked out between them.
But that's who Kent used to be. He's not seventeen anymore. Not nineteen, not twenty-one. Not twenty-four. Kinda different even from who he was at twenty-five.

There'll always be another excuse to stay closeted if he wants to find one. There's been enough strife between the guys as it is lately. It's close to playoffs and he needs to concentrate. He's got all his off-season events and camps and promos to manage. It's a new season and a slightly new team, and he doesn't want to start off the year making things weird in the dressing room. There'll always be a reason to hide behind.

And. He doesn't want to wreck another relationship.

Antwone's starting to become a big enough part of his life now that Kent knows from past experience what kind of void will be left if the other man walks out of it. Kent doesn't want to lose him.

He squeezes his eyes shut and exhales slowly.

"...How 'bout we go there with 'em, but leave together?" Kent asks. "I mean, I dunno how long I'm gonna be able to stay. The last party I was at didn't end so great," he adds wryly, gesturing to his mostly-faded black eye.

Antwone chuckles, but keeps watching him. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Kent says, shifting a little further onto his side to fully face him. "Yeah. Let's do that."

And then he re-remembers that it's been a year since they got together.

Kent pushes up onto an arm. "Or, did you wanna do something else? Is--like, is this our anniversary?"

Antwone starts to say something; and then he pauses, pressing his lips together to hold down a smile.

"I mean," Antwone begins--and okay, yeah, Kent knows that tone. Chirps incoming. "Depends on if we're countin' from when we hooked up, or when we figured out maybe we might actually be dating?"

Kent makes a face. Antwone smiles wider.

"Yeah, yeah," Kent mumbles, sinking back down onto the mattress. "I ain't smooth, I know."

"You got your moments," Antwone grins. "That just wasn't one've 'em."

Kent makes a "hrumph" noise, but he can't really argue. Antwone drapes an arm around his waist.

"I gotta know, though," Antwone adds a couple moments later, pulling Kent out of his new last-minute-anniversary-date planning. "Did you know I wrote my personal number on the back of that card I gave you, before you gave it to Arath?"

Kent blinks. And then he sits up and stares at him.


"Uuuugh," Kent mutters, rubbing his face. "...That why he was tryin' to set us up last year?"

Antwone shrugs. "Guess so. I almost didn't go," he adds, wedging a pillow against the headboard
and sitting up himself. "I was like, 'Dude, I was flirting with him before and nothing. And he
already had a woman with him. I'm pretty sure he's not into guys.'"

Antwone's mouth twitches again. "His response was somethin' like, 'Okay, but did you, like, get up
on his dick? 'Cause I don't know he'd know you were flirting otherwise, he's pretty dumb at this.'"

Kent purses his mouth in annoyance.

"In his defense," Antwone half-grins, folding his arms behind his head, "was he wrong?"

"Sheeeeze," Kent mutters, dragging his hair back from where the sweat plastered it to his forehead.
"Alright. Alright, we're definitely riding to the party with them. That little shit."

Antwone chuckles again. "I need to call Laia and warn her the ride's gonna be non-stop chirping?"

"Maybe," Kent says darkly.

*

That evening, he and Antwone listen to some musical while they're making dinner before the
party.

Kent initially makes himself pay attention to it because Antwone says he really thinks Kent'll like
it, especially the main character. Kent's figured out that he's not into a lot of the music Antwone
listens to for fun--that stuff mostly sounds like a bunch of angry dudes scream-singing about
politics and screeching their guitars--but he's willing to try things once.

Plus, it's the same musical Showy's been raving on about for a while--even though he told Kent he
probably wouldn't like it. Kent figures he might as well find out which of them is right.

The first song is pretty cool, even if it gets hard for Kent to follow the fancier words when the
tempo picks up. He makes a mental note to tell Vichy that Showy might not actually be talking out
his ass about this show being alright.

But then the second song in makes it pretty clear who the villain of the story's supposed to be.

Even though that's the guy actually giving realistic advice, instead of the main guy who's going
around showing off the chip on his shoulder to everybody he meets.

Kent shrugs that off. Nobody likes pragmatism; it doesn't make for a good story. Whatever.

He starts focusing more and more on prepping the food as the soundtrack goes on, because some of
the songs are starting to get under his skin--like the one about not throwing away your shot, or
about never being satisfied--and he doesn't want them to. Antwone likes this album; Kent doesn't
wanna be a dick about it.

But then the villain gets his own song.

Kent makes Antwone replay that one about four times, and then he excuses himself in the middle
of sautéing the garlic and onions and hides in the bathroom until his hands quit shaking.

He thought he'd be alright after that. But while he's rinsing his face to brush this all off as just a
delayed reaction from cutting the onions, those goddamn lines keep coming back: *He has
something to prove, he has nothing to lose--Hamilton's pace is relentless, he wastes no time.*

Kent tries to shove away again the thought of how Zimmermann won the Stanley Cup in his rookie
Won it after years of clawing his way back up from rock bottom, after that accidental overdose.

If it was an accident.

Won his first Cup. There'll be more.

Won it the year of Kent's career-worst season.

What was his career-worst season, until this year. Assuming he's not just gonna keep plummeting downhill as this fucking concussion strips away the only long-term skill he had, since you can only get a lot farther by being a lot smarter if you've actually got a working brain to do that.

And by that point Kent has to flip on the vent and then wash his face for real, because he's fucking crying yet again.

By the time he gets his shit together, the music's been turned off and Kitt's started scratching at the bathroom door. He hears Antwone pick her up and half-heartedly scold her a couple seconds later.

"Jesus, furball, alright," Kent mutters into a towel as he dries his face. He throws it back on the hook and opens the door. Antwone's leaning against the wall a little ways away, holding Kitt and petting her distractedly.

"I'm alright," Kent promises, because Antwone looks kinda unsettled again.

Half of the reason Kent's sick of these stupid crying fits is because they don't fix anything. But the other half is because of the way they keep freaking Antwone out.

The other man's been treating him like glass ever since Kent broke down on the phone a couple weeks ago. Kent gets it, and he gets that all of this is probably shitty for Antwone, too; but it's still a frustrating reminder of just how badly this injury's gutted him. At least his arm just fucking healed.

Antwone doesn't actually tell him that he thinks what Kent said is bullshit, and he's clearly trying not to show it on his face, either. But still.

Kent shakes his head and rubs a hand over his face again. "No, just.... I'm gettin' better. It's all right. I promise."

He drops his hand and lifts his shoulders. "The...my mental therapist, he said symptoms of depression are pretty normal with injuries like this. Even more than, like, when I busted my arm. So."

He huffs out a frustrated breath, and goes over to Antwone. The other man puts Kitt down before sliding an arm around his waist. When Kent leans into it, Antwone pulls him into a hug.

"He said keep on workin' like it's a temporary ailment," Kent mumbles. "And we'll keep an eye on it. I'm gonna get better. It'll be fine."

"...Okay," Antwone says, resting his head against Kent's. "Tell me if there's anything I can do, yeah?"

"I only got so many years I can play," he says, quieter. "I don't have time. I'm fuckin' twenty-six, I don't quit gettin' injured, I'm gonna be outta my prime before I'm ever in it."

He rubs his eyes again, harsher, as Antwone squeezes him a little tighter.

Kent exhales hard. "Sorry," he mutters. "I dunno what's gonna set me off half the time. 'S a good song."

"You don't gotta apologize," Antwone tells him gently.

"Still." Kent swallows, looking down at the floor as Kitt pads around their legs. "It wasn't...it's a good song, album, just. That I'm not falling behind' bit'...."

Because that was the second sucker punch, after the chorus and before that goddamn part that made it clear who in that story Kent actually heard himself in, and it sure fuckin' wasn't the main character.

"You wanna take a raincheck?" Antwone asks. "Maybe come back to it some other day, if you feel like it? It ain't goin' anywhere."

"...Yeah," Kent says. "Yeah. ...Thanks."

"Of course," Antwone tells him, sliding his hand up to rub the back of Kent's neck. Kent lets out another slow breath, and closes his eyes and turns into him, wrapping his arms around his waist. Antwone hugs him back.

Later, after they've gotten back to cooking before the meat winds up sitting out for too long, Kent pauses in the middle of seasoning the steaks.

He looks over at Antwone, and says, "Hey, uh. Was it a dick move talkin' 'bout twenty-six bein' old when you're thirty-four?"

"I was gonna let it slide," Antwone says dryly, visibly holding down a smile, "but yeah."

Kent snerks once. And then he ends up laughing for real, because that was a damn good drawl right there.

*  

That night, once the five of them arrive at Vichy's condo, Catsby flees the van almost before the driver even stops. Wuss. Kent wasn't dragging him that hard.

"Jesus Christ," Robber says at Kent, as he's holding the door open for Laia to climb out.

"He knows what he did," Kent replies. Antwone laughs into a fist as Robber rolls his eyes.

They separate pretty soon after heading into the party. Antwone wanted to track down Vichy's friend who sells computer parts to ask him a bunch of spec questions that he's got saved on his phone, and Kent meant it about needing to circulate and get an idea of how the team's currently feeling.

Things seem pretty good. Korsy isn't here this year, which means Kent needs to keep an eye on things between him and Vichy. But Boar showed up, which is weird enough to be a miracle. Whoever in admin got Boar and Vichy's dads together on the annual trip better've gotten a huge
holiday bonus.

Kent tries to get over to Antwone when he notices Vichy's wife pouring the man a drink from the decanter that has the murderously spicy liquor in it. But the room's crowded enough that he doesn't make it there until after Antwone's accepted the glass and apparently taken at least one drink, because he's whistling silently.

"Shoulda warned you 'bout that one," Kent says. "It'll burn your throat right out."

"Yeah, I'm gonna be drinkin' this for a minute," Antwone agrees, eyebrows raised. "What is this?"

"Uhhh...I can't pronounce the name," Kent replies, folding his arms on the high counter between him and the other man. He tilts his head in Nadiya's direction, since she's left the kitchen and is now talking with Scrappy's wife. "Nadiya makes it every year. Always gets at least one rookie."

"Homemade?" Antwone asks, leaning against the sink on the other side of the counter and tilting toward him. When Kent nods, he whistles again appreciatively and takes another sip.

"You're braver than me," Kent tells him, one eyebrow slightly raised. "I had one glass of that in my life, and that was enough. I only finished it 'cause I had to."

Antwone frowns faintly. "Had to?"

"Yeah." Kent nods slightly again at where Nadiya's picked up Scrappy and Luisa's daughter, holding Izzy on her hip as she laughs with Luisa about something on the other woman's phone. "It was like... She didn't say it, but I knew it was a test. Y'know, 'If you're worthy of skating on the same line as my husband, you should be able to drink this. Don't flinch.' And I was like 'Alright then, we're doin' this,' and downed it. And then I went and stuck my head in a sink of cold water 'cause I was sweating so bad."

Antwone mouths "wow" as he chuckles silently.

"Zach put a post-it with a skull and crossbones on it one year to save the rookies," Kent tells him, grinning. "She marched him right outta the condo and didn't let him back in until he started singing this super-loud apology ballad outside the door, it was great."

Antwone laughs again. And then he nods at the TV. "He's playing tonight, right?"

"Yeah," Kent agrees. Houston's in Phoenix today, and Vichy's had the game on in the background since before they arrived. The Aeros're currently down by one late in the second period; several of the guys have been chirping Showy and his team intermittently, Kent included. They've kept it pretty mild, though. There's still kids awake and around. "Number eight in white."

"Gotcha," Antwone says, taking another sip as he looks over at the TV with a serious expression, like he's trying to put a face to the name Kent's mentioned a few times.

Kent reaches over the counter and bops his knuckles lightly against Antwone's wrist a couple times. Antwone gives him a small smile.

And then Carl hoots at the TV when Houston has a turnover.

And there's still a lot of people milling around.

Kent presses his knuckles a little harder against Antwone's wrist, and then pulls his hand back
when Chazzer heads into the kitchen. "I'm gonna make another round of the place. Catcha ya later?"

Antwone nods. "See ya."

Both the Aces' goalies are here again, but things're a lot better between them than last year. At this point in the season, it's getting pretty clear that Pittsburgh's planning to expose its older goalie in the expansion draft so they can protect the younger one for their future; and if Quebec City has the chance to snatch up Fleury to be a netminder for its new expansion team, they're absolutely going to do it.

Kent's relieved. Boxy and Arno are still pushing each other hard—but now it's the pressure of two good goalies driving each other to get better, not two guys each fighting to secure the Aces' one protected goalie spot. That particular dressing room background stress has faded some, at least.

Kent spends a little time talking with Boxy. But then the other man cuts off abruptly mid-sentence, and shoves Kent at the balcony door, telling him to get out and take a breather.

Kent goes without arguing. The party's starting to grind him down.

He's been drinking water all night, and he's only allowed himself to look at the game on the TV if several of the guys are chirping at it. But the place is still way louder and a lot more crowded than Kent's been used to for the last couple weeks. He feels like a headache's coming again; and he's so goddamn sick of that feeling.

Trojan and Tommy and Mitts are already out on the balcony. Mitts is leaning against the railing, while Trojan and Tommy sit in the chairs and Trojan's son is slumped over asleep in his lap.

Kent shuts the door quietly and raises a hand with a with a mouthed "Hey."

"You're good," Trojan says, though his voice is lower than normal. "He sleeps like the dead."

"Good kid," Kent grins. Tommy nods as Trojan smiles fondly at Dylan.

Kent's barely braced his forearms on the railing when inside, several people start booing loud enough that Kent guesses Houston gave up another goal. A lotta guys still like or miss Showy—they wouldn't be giving his new team this much shit otherwise. Dylan wakes up and starts fussing.

"C'mon, kiddo," Trojan says plaintively; but he stands up and starts carrying Dylan back inside.

"All right, all right."

Kent holds the door for him. Tommy stands as well, lifting his beer can slightly. "You want anything?"

"Water," Kent says, since he's mostly emptied his bottle. Mitts shakes his head and sloshes his own beer can briefly with an "I'm good."

"You okay?" Mitts asks, after Tommy's shut the door behind him.

"Yeah," Kent answers automatically. "What's up?"

"You're pale," Mitts points out, and Kent exhales through his teeth. No wonder Boxy kicked him out here.

"...Yeah," he mutters, before shrugging. "'M just...tired, I dunno. It's loud." Kent waves over his
shoulder at the windows. "I'm alright."

"Okay." Mitts shifts slightly, tilting his head toward him.

Kent belatedly remembers that Mitts' vision is bad in his left eye now. He pushes up straight, away from the railing and further into Mitts' view. "How're you doin'?"

Mitts shrugs, but he half-smiles as he does. "Up and down," he replies. "Andy said it takes about six months to adjust to a 'major life change,' so I guess it's normal."

Kent makes a note that Mitts is still using the team's doctor, though it's not really a surprise. Mitts might've been forced to retire after the injury, but the Aces have pretty much re-hired him for community outreach work.

Part of Kent can't help being suspicious that that means Mitts knows more about the silent investors than he's let on, or that he knows something about the shady aspects of the club.

But the rest of him can't really picture that. Mitts couldn't keep a secret unless his life depended on it.

Kent thumps him on the shoulder. "We miss you, man."

"Well, some of you," Mitts grins. "Pretty sure Vichy's fuckin' glad I'm no longer around to wind him up."

"Nnnn," Kent says, as diplomatically as he can. Mitts laughs.

He takes another drink of his beer a couple seconds later, shifting against the rail. Something metallic clangs.

Kent winces reflexively, and then drinks the last of his water to hide it. But Mitts notices.

"Ah, yeah," he says. Mitts balances his can precariously on the balcony railing and then works a heavy silver ring off his finger. Kent thinks it's his Cup ring for a second--but there's no ace of spades made of chocolate diamonds on it.

"It's cool--" Kent starts, but Mitts says, "I been hit in the head too, Parse."

Kent huffs and changes the subject. "That new?"

"Yeah." Mitts had been stuffing the ring into his jeans, but now he pulls it free and holds it out. Kent puts his bottle on the ground and takes it.

It's a weird ring for Mitts. Some bearded guy in a robe and wizard hat is walking with a stick--a spear?--on the top part. There's a bird carved on both of the sides, in different poses.

Kent must be making a face even though he tried not to, because Mitts snickers again.

"Yeah, I know," he replies, as Kent hands the ring back. "Tommy gave it to me. You know how he and Vivi do the pagan thing?"

Kent didn't, but he and Tommy don't really hang out outside of the clubhouse. He makes a mental note of the info, and says, "Cool."

"Yeah. After the last tests came back all th' same, he gave me this and said, uh...one sec."
Mitts rubs his face with a faint frown, the way he usually does when he's trying to remember something to quote it. Kent readjusts his watchband and waits.

"Okay. 'This one-eyed asshole went around insulting his hosts and got himself tied up between two bonfires because he mouthed off to a king,'" Mitts says, dropping his hand. "So you can't do worse. You might do as bad since you're such an ass, but you can't do worse."

"Sounds like a challenge right there," Kent remarks.

"Right?!" Mitts grins. "I looked him up later, it was like, 'Tommy, this dude ripped out his own eye!' And he was all, 'Just keep bein' a trickster instead of obsessing about gaining wisdom and you'll be fine.' 'Okay, but he threw the eye in a well and then hung himself?? You tryin' to tell me something?""

Mitts shifts expressions again from his theatrical disbelief to Tommy's deadpan. "Smitty, if you hang yourself for nine nights and come back, you're a lich and we have bigger concerns."

Kent doesn't get the reference, but Mitts is laughing again, so he snorts in amusement too.

"None of that shit was in Thor," Mitts adds, shaking his head. Inside, Vichy bellows, "Mitts!!"

Mitts raises an eyebrow at the balcony door. Kent presses his lips together to hide a smile and asks, "What'd you do now?"

"I'm innocent for once!" Mitts insists as Vichy yells his name again, even more urgent. His voice sounds off.

"Yuh-huh," Kent drawls, following him back into the condo. Mitts elbows him in the side.

Vichy's over by the kitchen--and his voice sounds off because he's visibly struggling not to laugh. Behind him, Antwone catches Kent's gaze and mouths "Sorry."

"Mitts, who do--" Vichy starts "--do we both know that--" and then he breaks off again with a long, stifled snigger.

"You know it's a shit chirp if you can't actually get it out, right?" Kent says dryly.

"Who do we know that calls power skating 'fuck you, McDavid' drills?" Vichy finally manages, bracing himself against the countertop as he laughs hard.

"There you go, you finally got there," Kent drawls, golf-clapping as Mitts cracks up beside him.

Mitts throws an arm over Kent's shoulders and tries to say something, and then ends up cackling harder instead.

"Is this supposed to be surprising?" Boxy asks from where he's sitting on the couch with a drink, which Kent would think was somebody in this band of jackasses actually being on his side if he didn't know their goalie better. "After his blue twigs, nothing fazes me."

Somebody calls "Bullshit!" at Boxy. One of the defensemen, Bacon, frowns and asks, "Blue twigs?"

"Oh yeah, you ain't seen that yet, huh rookie?" Boxy smirks.

Kent says, "Box."
Boxy ignores him. "He's got these sticks he likes to bust out sometimes, no big deal, when he feels like going from 'elite player' to 'living nightmare' on the ice. What's their flex again, Parse?"

"It's not that wei--"

"Right, 120," Boxy continues casually. "How much higher is that than your normal sticks again?"

Kent just gives Boxy a flat look and waits, because he's clearly not necessary to this chirp.

"Right, right, thirty higher," Boxy nods. "No big deal."

"It's not that weird," Kent replies, and more than one guy yells "Bullshit" at him this time. Bacon's looking between him and Boxy like he's not sure if this is a prank.

"Sure, 'course it's not," Boxy drawls. "Any player could immediately transition back and forth between a stick that's thirty stiffer than he's used to if he just tried hard enough, eh? And perform better with it. No adjustment period."

"That's what practice is for," Kent points out.

"'Practice,' yeah, that American for 'comin' in early and stealing everybody's sticks to shoot with them'?

"It's English," Kent says, spreading his hands. "You friggin' speak English."

"Well," the Aces' actual British player remarks from over by the door, where Trojan and his wife are trying to get their son's coat and shoes on him. Kent and Boxy both say, "Shut up, Troy."

"If I break a stick, I wanna be able to use somebody else's if they give me it instead of havin' to get to the bench," Kent says in annoyance. "There's no point in havin' a stick you can't use. It's just practice."

"You mispronounced 'theft,'" Chazzer calls cheerfully. Kent looks over to confirm that Chazzer's filming this like he expected, and then he holds up a middle finger to the man's phone. Chazzer snickers.

"What's the range of stick flexibility you can work with?" Boxy asks. "Can you cite me a minimum to maximum range? Should we be callin' the league, telling them you've actually broken another record last hit in the '80s and '90s but nobody was trackin' that one?"

"It's not that weird," Kent repeats.

Boxy takes another sip of his drink. "Okay, Satan."

"What?" Kent replies, making a face; but by that point Mitts is laughing so hard he collapses to the floor, dragging Kent down with him. "Goddamnit, Smith."

"So like I said," Boxy continues pleasantly, "after the blue twigs, nothing's surprising. Oh, after those and the whole real reason behind his superstition of getting at least six pucks in the net during warmups, I mean."

Kent pauses. And then he turns his head and stares narrowly at Trojan, because he only mentioned that to Trojan when the other man asked him about it last season.

Trojan hefts Dylan into his arms and nods at the general room as he and his family head out. "Try
not to strain anything, Smitty."

"Too late!" Mitts wheezes gleefully, one arm wrapped around his stomach. "Fuck, my spleen. That one was the best!"

Bacon starts to ask, "What's the superstition about--?"

"I don't miss any of you assholes," Kent announces loudly over him, as he extracts himself from Mitts. "You all know that, right?"

"Now that one's bullshit," Boxy says over the rim of his glass, doing a one-handed finger-gun at Kent.

Vichy rescues him soon after, like that's gonna make Kent forget he's the dick who started all this in the first place. He tells Kent he looks lousy and to head out before he gets any worse.

Antwone's talking business with someone again, so Kent sends him a text that he's gonna hang out at the pool for a little while and there's no rush.

It's cold enough that nobody's at the pool or the grill, so the area's dark and quiet. Kent punches in the gate access code that Vichy told him a few years ago, and then props it open with a rock so Antwone can get in. He pulls the hood of his windbreaker up, and stretches out on one of the lounge chairs.

It feels like he's there for a long time, but Kent knows he'd be colder if that were true. Time just drags with these stupid headaches.

At least it was pretty minor this time. When he hears someone push open the gate, Kent rubs his face and lifts a hand. "Yo."

"Hey," Antwone calls, coming over. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Kent agrees, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the lounge. "I just needed a break."

Antwone hesitates, and then cups a hand around the side of Kent's face, brushing his thumb over Kent's cheek and temple. "...Okay."

"It's a lot better'n it was," Kent says, patting a hand against Antwone's wrist. "Promise. I'm gonna be fine."

"All right."

While they're waiting for the Lyft driver, Antwone asks, "So what is up with the six goals warmup?"

Kent makes a face. "It's not as big a deal as Alex was pretendin'."

"Still curious," Antwone says in amusement. "That other guy kept trying to get an answer out of Alex when I was leaving, and he said . . . something 'bout how he already set up the reference, it'd need explanatory dialogue that's outta character for them and would break the kayfabe, which.... Does that mean anything in hockey talk?"
"Jesus," Kent says, shaking his head. "That's not a hockey thing, that's a goalies-are-fuckin'-weird thing."

He pulls out his phone again, and sends Vichy a quick text telling him to keep an eye on how much Boxy's drinking because he's getting weird as fuck again. Kent really hopes this doesn't become a New Years' Eve tradition.

He pushes his phone back into his jeans. "It's just a...."

Kent exhales through his teeth, and then tells himself that of all the people in his life, Antwone's the one least likely to give Kent a hard time over this. "Alright. You know who Mario Lemieux is?"

Antwone shakes his head.

"Okay. You know Wayne Gretzky?"

"I was alive in the nineties," Antwone mentions, and Kent snickers.

"All right. Gretzky's the greatest hockey player in the world," Kent says with a wave. "Past, future, whatever. He's number one. And then after him is Lemieux."

"Okay."

"You'll get people claiming it's other guys, Orr, Sawchuk, Bad Bob, whoever, but they're all wrong," Kent adds. Antwone makes an amused noise. "It's Mario. And if he'd been healthier, he'd be number one. --Bad Bob Zimmermann's third. FYI."

"So how much of this, if I mentioned it to Blake over lunch, would start a drag-out fight about hockey players?" Antwone grins.

"If he says any different, he's wrong too," Kent retorts. Antwone ducks his head as he laughs.

"You could gripe that Gretzky conditioned better, but he skated with goons who took hits for him," Kent shrugs. "Like how I haven't been injured near as much as I coulda been, 'cause my lineys step to anybody that tries to target me. Mario played physical, so of course he got roughed up more. And like, cancer? That's not a conditioning failure. And he came back after that went in remission."

"Damn," Antwone whistles lowly. "Okay, yeah."

"Fuckin' Super Mario man, he's one of the greatest players who'll ever live," Kent says decisively. "He'd be the top if Gretzky'd had to play dirtier to score."

"Gotcha," Antwone agrees, still grinning. "I'm absolutely telling this to Blake."

"Go for it. If he says any different, never listen to his opinion on hockey again," Kent replies. "Fuckin' Connecticut Whalers fan, couldn't even keep a team."

Antwone swears in amusement as he laughs. "Dude."

"Just sayin'."

"Dude."

"Look, Gretzky's the greatest scorer ever, whatever, but it was easier then," Kent insists. "If we
had the same rules now, Ovechkin'd blow him outta the water if Crosby didn't. And Gretzky went through five teams an' two leagues. And then he retired and was such a shit coach he bankrupted his team.

"Mario," Kent continues, thumping his palm against his thigh, "played his whole fuckin' career on the Pens. When they went bankrupt, he bought the fuckin' team. While he was still playin'! He's the only guy on the Cup as a player and an owner. There's great, and then there's committed."

"So, big fan," Antwone confirms.

"Shit," Kent says, rubbing his nose. "I think the only time in my life I almost had a panic attack, I went to this guy's house for dinner, and I walk in and god damn Wayne Gretzky and Mario fucking Lemieux are just chillin' in the living room, like--son of a fucking, goddammit Zimms, this is not a 'family dinner,' what the fuck?" Kent growls, making a strangling motion with his hands. "Thank God I was in my good jeans 'cause it was Bad Bob's house, but fuck.

"And then I pretended I needed to use the bathroom and spent like five minutes trying not to hyperventilate," Kent finishes, as Antwone laughs next to him. "Fuck me, it was great, but Jesus. Warn a guy, asshole!"


Kent sighs. "I met Mario again after I won the Calder. Uh, it's a rookie trophy. I wasn't any suaver then," he says regretfully. "God knows what he thinks of me. I don't wanna know."

Antwone pats him on the back, even as he keeps chuckling. Kent shakes his head.

"Okay, so anyway," he continues. "You know a hat trick?"

"Three goals in a game?"

"Yeah. So there's this other thing called a Mario Lemieux hat trick," Kent explains. "He scored five goals one game, in all the different ways it's possible to score. When both teams have all five of their guys on the ice, when his team was short-handed because they were on the penalty kill, when they had more men on the ice with the power play, he got a penalty shot, and he scored into an empty net. Nobody else--the league's been around almost a century, nobody else's done that. Not even Gretzky."

Antwone tilts his head, giving him a considering look. "So--you shoot at least six goals, to top that?"

Kent makes a self-deprecating chuckle. "Yeah. I mean, you can't beat it, but," he shrugs, as Antwone grins again. "Still gotta dream."

All of that's everything he told to Trojan, and which Trojan apparently turned around and told to other guys like a dick, even though that's what Kent figured would happen.

Which is why he didn't tell Trojan the real reason for that warmup habit.

Kent huffs out a breath and stuffs his hands in his pockets, hooking his thumbs out. "...I mean. I knew I was probably gonna get outed at some point in my career."

Antwone stops chuckling and looks back over at him. Kent shrugs again.

"I wasn't gonna, like, marry a woman and have kids just to keep up the act," Kent says, quieter.
"Fuck that. So. It's gonna happen eventually. And then I'm gonna have to be twice as good as everybody else for people to say I'm 'average.'"

Antwone shifts closer and wraps an arm around his shoulders. Kent shrugs once more, but leans into him. "So I decided fuck it, I'll be six times as good. So no matter how much anybody despises me, they'll still hafta acknowledge it."

"It sucks," Antwone tells him.

"Yeah," Kent says, because it does.

But.

He exhales slowly, and tips his head back against Antwone's shoulder. "But it coulda been worse. I got real lucky, endin' up in Vegas. Playin' with the guys I have."

Kent swallows hard, and then reaches up and rests a hand over Antwone's on his shoulder. "And meetin' you."

Antwone hugs him tighter for a long second and briefly kisses Kent's cheek. Kent squeezes his hand.

While they're riding back to his apartment, Antwone looks up from his phone and says, "Kent, you know there's a difference between 'a rookie trophy' and 'the trophy for the player most proficient in his first year of competition in the NHL'?"

Kent makes a face and slouches deeper into the seat. "I can't go braggin' about that stuff," he replies. "Everybody'll think I'm an asshole."

"This's why I've learned to look up the stuff you mention," Antwone remarks.

* 

That night, Kent ends up freaking out during sex bad enough that they stop in the middle. In hindsight, he's pissed at himself for not seeing it coming. He already knew he felt weird about the kind of sex he and Antwone were having lately; when Antwone told Kent he could smart off at him tonight if he wanted, in order to let off some steam from all the chirping he took from the guys earlier, he should've guessed it was going to wind up like this. Kent might be blindsided by half the stuff that's been messing him up these last few weeks, but the other half's been pretty predictable.

Antwone makes him talk about it, but he gives Kent time to get his shit back together first.

"Hey," Antwone says, when Kent finally comes out of the bathroom. He's pulled on a t-shirt and sleep pants. He hands Kent a glass of water, and asks if he wants to change, too.

The last thing Kent wants is another reminder of how he keeps on fucking up in relationships, and that's what getting dressed and consequently giving up on the idea that he can just have sex like a normal person feels like he'd be doing.

But then Antwone sits down on the sofa; and Kent guesses there's no salvaging the night. He goes and pulls on a pair of sweatpants so at least he won't be sitting bare-assed on his couch.

Kent sits on the other end of the sofa and drinks his water as slowly as possible, shoulders tense,
while Antwone rubs a thumb against the bridge of his own nose.

But when he eventually starts talking, it's not anything Kent expected.

"Back when Darryl went to jail, I was really fuckin' angry," Antwone says quietly.

Kent blinks and looks up from petting Kitt.

"Like, dangerous angry," Antwone explains. "He didn't blame me, but I blamed myself. I knew I had to get a handle on it, before I got myself shot. Or at best, lost my scholarship or got kicked outta CCC.

"I switched to drums for a while, to make myself be more disciplined," Antwone continues, sinking a little deeper into the couch. "But after they added to his sentence for fuckin' up some Aryans that kept tryin' to recruit him, I got pretty bad again."

Kent hesitates, and then shifts his glass into his other hand, and then hesitates again for a second before reaching over and resting a palm on Antwone's shoulder.

Antwone twitches the corner of his mouth in a failed attempt at a smile, but he reaches up and cups his hand over Kent's own.

"This guy I was doin' a project with offered to teach me aikido, to help," he adds. Antwone snorts once and lifts his eyebrows briefly. "I thought it was a trade off, for me to do most've the work--I hadn't had a lotta sex, since, you know. One wrong guy and you can end up positive. And I'm not gonna be a statistic."

Kent nods. He's only had sex with a handful of people, but he's always insisted on condoms and gloves when he has. When he was a kid, way before he figured out who he was attracted to, the only thing he knew about gay people was that being one eventually meant you'd die from AIDS.

And fuck that.

Antwone huffs out a faint laugh. "So it took me a while to figure out he was tryin' to pick me up."

"Heh."

"Yeah. Anyway," Antwone says, "he introduced me into the queer community, and I started figurin' out what helped. I got into some pretty intense stuff for a while, 'til I moved to L.A."

He shrugs. "I only knew a couple people in Chicago, and neither of them could gimme a recommendation for anybody they trusted enough to handle my attitude," he adds. "'Cept this one guy. But he quit working when he married. And my car was on its last legs after the trip down there, so I didn't feel like hauling ass across town for an interview on the off-chance he knew somebody."

Antwone lifts the corner of his mouth again fleetingly. "I was doin' a lot better then, anyway. Darryl got transferred to a different place where he was gettin' left alone and gettin' an business degree. And then I went to work for Blake. And he was payin' me enough I was puttin' together decent savings. I didn't need it any more like I used to, so...." He lifts his shoulders once more. "I just kinda stuck with aikido, and fell outta the scene."

Kent has no idea what the right response to all of this is. So when Antwone pauses, he just nods and says, "Okay."
Antwone drops his head for a moment with a long exhale, and then he squeezes Kent's hand and looks over at him.

"That's all a real long-winded explanation that I didn't think about how this'd feel for you," he tells Kent seriously. "None'a it felt that seriou--no. This is serious, but it never felt that intense, to me. So I didn't talk about it, what you were comfortable with, beforehand. That's on me. I'm sorry, Kent."

Kent fidgets uncomfortably with his glass. "You didn't do anything--"

"I mean it," Antwone says intently. "If you felt forced to go past your boundaries to make me happy, that's me abusing you. And I don't want to do that to you, Kent. I'm sorry."

Kent shifts on the sofa, and then puts his glass on the floor so he has a hand free to pet Kitt again.

When Antwone doesn't say anything else, Kent eventually digs his fingers into Kitt's fur until she shifts further away, off his lap. "It's not.... You weren't doin' anything, it's okay."

"If you got hurt, it's not okay," Antwone tells him gently. "I didn't mean to do that, but it bein' an accident doesn't make it okay. It means it's somethin' I wanna make sure doesn't happen again."

Kent pulls his hand away from Antwone and makes an agitated gesture. "I don't--I'm okay, I'm not the--I'm the one hurting you, I don't get--!

He cuts off, clenching his jaw, and then pulls his legs up against his chest. Kitt keeps sitting next to him despite all the jostling and his raised voice, but her ears've gone flat.

"You aren't hurting me, Kent," Antwone tells him after a long pause; and Kent makes a sneering noise before he can stop himself, because Antwone was right there in the bed. They both were. They both know what Kent was doing.

Antwone gives him more space on the couch, shifting further away, but he tilts in to look at Kent more directly.

"You've never hurt me, Kent," Antwone tells him seriously. "All you've ever done is what I asked. If I ever said anything was uncomfortable, you always immediately stop, without pushing. I've never felt like I'm not safe with you."

Kent swallows hard and slumps deeper into the couch, hunching his shoulders as he rubs his arm absently.

"Is it that it was getting too rough?" Antwone asks. "We don't have to do anything like that again. I don't want to force you into something you don't like."

"It's not...it wasn't...."

Kent doesn't know where to start trying to figure out how to talk about the whole complicated mess of feelings that having rougher sex the last several months has been stirring up in him, mostly because he's been doing his best to keep them shoved down. He's pretty sure if he starts thinking about them now, then at best he's going to end up crying yet fucking again, and he's so goddamn sick of that by now that he's not gonna set himself up to do it yet another time.

At worst, Antwone's going to figure out that Kent's not safe for him. For anybody. And he'll leave.

Which. Is what Kent outha want. If he were a decent person, he'd want Antwone to leave while
"Shit." Antwone says almost inaudibly, starting to sound really worried. He reaches out, and then stops and pulls his hand back uncertainly. "Kent, I'm so sorry."

--Okay. Okay, okay. Shit. All right.

If Kent doesn't find his balls and say something, Antwone's gonna be thinking this was something going on for months, when--it's not what got to Kent tonight, at least.

_Fuckin' get it together, Parson_, Kent tells himself, as he drops his feet back to the floor and braces his elbows on his thighs, rubbing his face.

The sofa cushions shift as Antwone moves further away. Kent exhales hard, and makes himself sit up.

"It's not--that wasn't it," he says, shifting around to face him. Kitt finally gets sick of them both and jumps off the couch, padding over to her cat tree. "It's the...the talking, the uh, like, insulting--it's just," holy fuck, finish a sentence already, "I don't think it's for me."

"Okay," Antwone says immediately, with a nod. "Gotcha."

Kent drags a hand over his hair, flattening his cowlick. "...Sorry. 'S just...."

"Everybody's got things they're not into," Antwone says. "If you don't like it, we won't do anything like it again. It's not a big deal, I promise."

Kent drags a hand over his cowlick again, but makes himself nod.

"...Honestly, it's not really my thing, either," Antwone tells him a couple moments later. Kent blinks and looks over again.

"Uh," he says. "Then why...?"

Antwone lifts his shoulders with an attempt at a self-conscious half-smile. "I usually stay away from it 'cause most guys can't figure out how to do it without fallin' into race play," he says. "Whether they're white or just lighter than me. But I figured, I trust you. And you had it rough lately."

He lifts a hand again, but then pauses, watching Kent. So Kent scoots a little closer on the couch. Antwone shifts over as well, and slides an arm around Kent's shoulders.

"Bein' able to talk shit helped me, so I figured--but that's just me," Antwone says. "If it's a hard no for you, then that's that. I shoulda talked with you first. I'm sorry," he says, hugging Kent briefly. "I won't suggest it again."

Kent swallows hard. He stretches out his legs, staring down at them and the floor. "I don't...."

Talking's where everything always starts going wrong.

If he doesn't watch himself, if he lets himself say shit in the moment, there's never any coming back from it. That's why guys on the team are always telling him to keep his mouth shut during bad games, or in the playoffs, or after them. That's how he fucked things up so bad with Jack.

"I just." Kent slumps down, gripping his elbows and wishing Kitt hadn't ditched him. "I don't...."
wanna say the wrong thing. I always do, and it fucks everything up, and I don't wanna--I don't want to screw this up, too."

In his peripheral vision, Antwone frowns slightly at that. But he doesn't pull away.

"Okay," Antwone says a few long moments later. "I don't think you'd say anything that'd screw us up, Kent. But if you don't like doin' insults because you're worried about that, all the more reason we don't do 'em again. Okay?"

"...Yeah," Kent says, rubbing a hand over his face again. "Okay."

They end up dragging the blanket out to the couch and half-heartedly jumping around Netflix for a while, until they're both yawning.

"This is a lotta anime recommendations, dude," Antwone says eventually, clicking through with the remote.

"Fuckin' Robinson," Kent grumbles into the blanket without opening his eyes. "When he and the guys were here 'n November, he fucked my whole account when I wasn't lookin'."

"Wow," Antwone remarks. The remote clicks again. "...A lot."

"I tried gettin' back to normal, but--" He breaks off to yawn. "Still workin' on it.

"M almost impressed," Kent adds in a mumble. "Th' petty shit. Don't tell 'im that."

Antwone chuckles quietly. "Gotcha."

*  

Tomorrow morning, things are still kind of awkward. But since Antwone has to fly back to L.A. that evening, and they don't know if they'll be able to see each other again before the Aces' bye week frees Kent up in mid-February, they both try to make it normal.

Except for the fact that they don't have sex again before the drive to the airport. Antwone said he wanted to talk more about some of the things Kent said last night, so he could understand Kent's boundaries and he won't run the risk of making sex bad for him again; but Kent didn't have it in him to try getting through a second conversation like last night's. Just--not yet.

They do other stuff instead.

The weather's nice enough that they walk a few blocks over to the selfie studio that Kent's always secretly wanted to go into, but wasn't willing to face the infinite chirps he'd get if he actually put any of the photos up on Instagram. Antwone made a world-weary Angeleno face when they reviewed the place's website to book a time slot, but he told Kent he was down for it.

"You kids these days," Antwone comments sotto voce while they're taking a picture together in the ridiculous Louis Vuitton-patterned bathroom; and Kent ends up destroying that photo by laughing so hard he slides out of the frame.
In early January, the NHL releases the roster for the NHL All-Star game at the end of the month. Zimmermann's name is on it. Kent's isn't. Chazzer and Robber were selected as the Aces' representatives.

Logically, Kent knows that means nothing. His stats for this season were career average before he got knocked out of playing, and they were better than last year, but they weren't exemplary. More importantly, he's still on the long-term injured roster. And he has to stay on it until at least next week, because of all the fiddly league rules about the LTIR's impact on the team's salary cap.

And even then, he can only come back if the doctor clears him, and if the GM agrees with the decision. The league has no guarantee that he'll be healthy in time to play during the All-Star weekend.

So of course they weren't going to risk giving him a spot, and then potentially have to scramble at the last minute to replace him with someone else.

And Chazzer's been playing as good as he did last year. Robber's been scoring at career-high levels since the coaches put him on a new line. So of course they're the league's choice for Vegas this year. Chazzer deserved to be selected, with the points he's racked up over the last couple seasons, and Kent told him as much during breakfast the day after the list was released. Robber earned his spot on the roster too. Logically, there's nothing for Kent to have a problem with.

Illogically, it still stings.

"I know better," Kent says irritably, slouched deep into the armchair in his mental therapist's office. "How many more sessions I gotta keep doing this before that stops?"

Dr. Fisher turns his chair slightly to face Kent better, since Kent's sitting perpendicular to him like usual. Sitting on the couch directly across from the man always feels too weird. "There's no set number of sessions before you're 'cured,' Kent."

Kent frowns and looks over.

"There's no finish line here. This is maintenance," the man tells him. "If you end your physical maintenance, you'd gain weight and lose lung capacity, correct?"

"Yeah," Kent agrees. He's still trying to get his conditioning back to his pre-concussion level.

"And if you quit skating, wouldn't you start to lose your skills?"

Kent can see where this is going. "So this--" he waves a hand around the office. "It's forever?"

Dr. Fisher tilts his head slightly, which isn't a yes or no. "It's for as long as you want the benefits to continue. You work hard to maintain your body, because you want the benefits of doing that. You've been working hard on retraining and maintaining your brain, because you decided you value those benefits too."

Kent exhales through his teeth and slouches deeper into the chair, leaning his head back against it.

"The end goal of my job is to help you develop the tools to recognize those habits and thought"
patterns that you want to change," Dr. Fisher tells him. "So you can recognize what's leading you to feel or act the way you do at those times, and then take steps toward a more productive response. From some of the things we've discussed lately, I think you've come a long way in developing and using that skill set."

"--Oh," Kent says, sitting up slightly. "Uh, I wasn't tryin' to say I don't wanna keep working with you or anything."

Dr. Fisher shakes his head. "I didn't take it that way. But we live in a culture that mainly thinks of medical services in a preventive or curative way. Someone takes allergy medicine to avoid a runny nose, or antibiotics to get over the flu."

Kent scratches at his forearm and nods once when the man pauses, to show he's listening.

"Physical therapy is the closest parallel," the doctor tells him. "You had to do a lot of extra work when you broke your arm, or your ankle, didn't you?"

When Kent nods again, Dr. Fisher does the same. "But once they were healed, you still had to maintain a baseline of conditioning and activity. The bones wouldn't have re-broken if you did, but you still would have lost muscle strength and mobility."

Kent exhales again, more resigned this time, and flattens down his cowlick absently. "...Yeah, that makes sense."

"You're fully capable of designing your own workouts and consistently executing them, Kent," he says. "But you consult with experts to make sure you're achieving your best when doing so, and you revise your set-up based on their advice. Working in therapy sessions like this is only for forever in the sense that it's the same as a good diet and proper exercise. It's just one part of maintaining a healthy life."

Kent smooshes down his cowlick once more and then drops his hand. He has to nod, since there's nothing in there he can really argue with. "Alright. That makes a lotta sense."

The session's more than halfway over when Kent finally tells himself to quit being a coward and talk to the man about the thing he told himself he was going to do today. He's not gonna wuss out and leave without doing it. He's running out of time.

It still takes another ten minutes, and Dr. Fisher giving him a considering look and asking, "Did you have something you want to talk about?"

Just fucking do it already, Kent thinks at himself irritably.

He already read through all the doctor-patient confidentiality statements when he first started working with Dr. Fisher. And he--probably a little paranoidly, in hindsight--grilled the man about them again before he made himself start talking to Dr. Fisher about how scared about the future the concussion left him feeling.

The Aces are the ones who set Kent up with this mental therapist, but Dr. Fisher's not on the team's payroll. The confidentiality seems legit. The Aces' doctor and trainer don't seem to know about the stuff Kent talks about in his sessions, unless he gives them the brainwave readouts or tells them about it.

He already mentioned to Dr. Fisher that he has a long-distance boyfriend, a little while ago when
Kent was frustrated at himself that Showy's off-hand comment about feeling lonely hit him so hard. The man took that in stride.

Kent had half-expected him to--even if he's got doctor-patient confidentiality, it's still the front office that initially directed him to Dr. Fisher's office, and the front office knows he's gay.

Plus, the first time he saw Dr. Fisher again after Christmas, Kent immediately told him about the fight with one of his relatives, and they discussed revising his impulse control workouts, once he's cleared to work with the EEG again. He knew better than to seriously throw down hands with his cousin like he did, and he did it anyway. If the concussion screwed with his ability to make good decisions, then Kent wants to fix that as soon as he can.

And that's--that's kind of like what he needs to talk about now, isn't it? Kinda liking making someone else hurt during sex is fucked up, so Kent has to fix it.

If he's gonna date someone again for real, then he's gotta get his shit together. If he can't fuckin' just do that, then he has to break up with Antwone so he doesn't end up hurting him. It's pretty cut and dried. Kent just has to finally choose.

"Kent?" Dr. Fisher asks, when he hasn't said anything for a long time.

"Jesus," Kent says in frustration. He drags his hands over his head. "Sorry. I'm not mad at you, just--yeah. Yeah. I gotta talk about something."

Kent spends a few minutes trying and failing to put together a coherent statement, until Dr. Fisher gives him a legal pad and a pen and suggests he might feel more comfortable writing instead of speaking.

Kent figures it can't be any worse, so he takes them. He spends a while longer trying to write while also making awkward small talk, until Dr. Fisher asks if Kent would feel more comfortable if he was also doing something with his hands. When Kent says "Yeah," Dr. Fisher gets a book of sudoku puzzles from his desk drawer and starts working on one.

Kent's still writing when the session ends. Dr. Fisher shuts his book; but then he says, "I have another client, but we have a lactation room here in the office. Stacy's off today, so you could finish writing in there, in private, if you'd like. Or if you'd rather leave, you can drop that off during business hours. Arriya or Stacy will get it to me."

Kent's pretty sure if he leaves here without finishing this, he's going to shove the paper into the bottom of his trash and avoid talking about all of this ever again if he can get away with it.

And making that choice means he'll have to break up with Antwone.

It's cut and dried. Kent has to choose.

So he makes himself nod, and says, "If I could finish here, that'd be cool."

"All right," Dr. Fisher agrees, pushing up out of his chair. Kent does the same, holding the pen and legal pad tightly.

He finally gets it all written out over a half-hour later. Kent starts to reread it; and then he stops himself and just rips the pages loose instead, tearing a couple. Kent folds them all up twice and
heads out for the lobby.

The receptionist takes the folded papers and immediately puts them into a manila envelope. "I'll get these filed with your info," she tells Kent, as the phone starts ringing.

"Thanks, Arriya," he replies, before leaving.

*

He gets a phone call from Dr. Fisher early the next morning. Kent missed it because he was on the ice for his usual personal skate, but the man left a voicemail.

Kent puts off listening to it until after he's showered, and changed, and driven to the clubhouse, and eaten breakfast. But then he makes himself do it.

He goes to the building's far utility closet first, though. There's no real privacy anywhere in the clubhouse during the season--you're always going to run into someone. And going to his car to listen still felt too exposed; he doesn't have tinted windows. Kent upturns a bucket for a seat, and tries multiple times to unlock his phone until his shaking hands mess up the fingerprint lock enough that he has to use his passcode.

His mental therapist said that he's read through Kent's note. He said that based on the content, the situation, and his knowledge of Kent, he doesn't think that there's anything dangerous or wrong occurring, though he wants to discuss Kent's concerns at their next session.

Dr. Fisher also adds that, given the parameters of the situation and Kent's clear strong discomfort with his part in it, if Kent wants to add an extra session this week instead of waiting until the next one to meet, they can arrange that.

After the voicemail ends, Kent spends a few minutes just sitting with his eyes shut, elbows braced on his knees and head resting against his folded hands, breathing steadily until his heart rate's slowed down again.

And then he calls Dr. Fisher's office to make the additional appointment.

*

During that session, for the first time, Kent starts talking about Juniors, and Jack.

*

When he gets back home, Kent dumps his keys and wallet on the kitchen island and then flops across his sofa, feeling completely drained.

All the furniture in his main room is still pushed up against the walls from when Antwone was over for the New Years' weekend. They'd cleared the space so they could dance together while waiting for the ball to drop, though they'd quit when the downstairs neighbors started banging on the ceiling again.

He hasn't moved the pool table back into place because he doesn't feel like listening to whoever lives downstairs now getting pissy about the noise again yet. Kent's seriously starting to consider moving out of his apartment and into a real house.

Although, one of his teammates just finally bought a home in Vegas during last offseason. And Chazzer spent so much time whining about the process to anybody dumb enough to reply to his
texts that Kent's pretty instinctively opposed to the idea.

But still. It might be better to leave on his own terms, instead of waiting for management to tell him they're not going to renew his lease. Whoever moved below him in the last year clearly can't handle living beneath somebody with a professional hockey player's schedule, or even any kind of real social life.

The friggin' commitment of a house, though. It'd be one more thing on top of all the other crap he's trying to deal with right now.

Kent thumps his face against the sofa cushions and groans. Kitt pads into the room and then jumps up onto the couch and then him, and curls up on his back.

*

Dr. Fisher schedules him for double sessions next week, too. The man says he wants to try a non-verbal therapy with him, since Kent had a good response but clear difficulties with the letter-writing.

Kent almost bails on the second session. During the first one, Dr. Fisher tried some finger-moving thing called EMDR where he wanted Kent to think about his past memories, but where Kent wouldn't have to talk about them so long as he focused on how he was feeling.

Kent spent the last half of that session hiding in the bathroom, so angry and ashamed he was shaking with it, trapped back in the headspace of being eighteen and having so much pressure on him—the coach who didn't like him because he thought Kent was immaturely argumentative, who told him that if he didn't quit fucking around so much off the ice then no matter where Kent was picked in the draft his career would end up playing out in the AHL after a couple years, because it wasn't like Kent had a legacy of success to lean on to make up for his behavior like Jack did; the increase in radio and magazine interviews that kept unbalancing his schedule; getting cut from the 2008 Junior Worlds' roster, which Kent was pretty sure was the fucking influence of that one coach and also the consequence of whatever asshole took pictures at that last party he and Jack had gone to; the fact that he was still struggling with French, despite living for two years in Rimouski and for a lifetime in the northland border between upstate New York and Quebec; the way the draft lottery had thrown all the NHL rankings into the usual chaos, so that now the first pick of the draft wasn't going to go to New York but instead to fucking Nevada; and worst of all, the gut-sinking realization that Kent was going to have to fuck up his brand and refuse to take the pre-draft combine that summer, because unless something massive changed, Zimms was never going to make it through all those tests, and Kent couldn't abandon him to try and survive all the scrutiny and negative reactions and speculation that would get heaped on him if Zimms was the only one to refuse--so much pressure that the only way Kent could cope was to just not think about any of it, because he couldn't fucking talk about it to anyone without looking like he was whining about being considered talented. He especially couldn't talk to his supposed best friend about any of it, because Jack was too busy having his own stress collapse, and whatever was left of Kent's energy kept being poured into trying to support him through the incessant waves of that. Or being eaten up by the shame of being sick and tired of dealing with Zimms' shit, because that meant that Kent was a bad friend.

By the time he finally calms down enough he can leave the bathroom, Dr. Fisher was already in the middle of a session with his next patient. Kent slips out of the building with barely a goodbye to the receptionist.

Dr. Fisher calls him later, during what must've been the man's lunch break. He tells Kent that they don't have to repeat the EMDR again, but that if Kent trusts him, Dr. Fisher wants to try at least
moving him past the point that Kent left the room at. The man tells him that a strong emotional
reaction like what Kent had is common for the first round, but that most studies show the intensity
fades with further exposure and review, which is the end goal: to reduce the power of the
memories, by enabling Kent's current older self to examine his past feelings without getting caught
up in their visceral immediacy.

He also says that he understands if that's a method Kent's not comfortable working with again. Dr
Fisher tells him that he's also been researching non-evasive EEG training methods, and that he's
found a model that should be safe for Kent to try.

Yet another long-term consequence of his concussion is that Kent's pretty much permanently
barred from the original EEG training he was doing. You don't stick needles into a damaged brain.

He almost bails on the second session; but the possibility of being able to resume his EEG work is
worth making himself go in again. So Kent does.

The new EEG program looks like some weird Silicon Valley project: it's an altered pair of Beats
headphones with sensors in it, and a software program that Kent has to download onto his phone.
But it works pretty similarly.

Kent has to start over almost from the beginning, half because of his concussion and half because
he he spent almost a month not doing his mental workouts.

But still. It's something. It's finally moving forward again.

*

In mid-January, he's finally cleared to begin playing again.

Kent plays a career-low number of minutes in his first game back, skating on the third line and
doing muck-work to help shut down Carolina's skill players. It's weird, and it never gives him
enough time on the ice to really get back into his groove. He only manages two shots on goal, and
one pass that doesn't become an assist when the Canes' goalie snatches Tommy's shot out of the
air.

But given how thoroughly the Aces' trainer and its coaches grilled Kent over whether his
headaches were really over and he really did feel ready to come back and wasn't trying to push to
return too early, Kent's just glad to get the tap on his shoulder to go over the rail onto the ice at all.

He doesn't register any points in his first game back; but he doesn't have any concussion symptoms
return, and he passes all the tests the doctor gives him afterward.

Once the coaches and staff trust that he really is healthy, Kent gets moved back with his regular
line and starts playing his normal amount of minutes again.

The Aces continue their current bumpy up-and-down, loss-win-loss-loss-win-loss slump, slowly
sinking lower in the standings.

*

Near the end of January, the Aces who aren't attending the All-Stars get a multi-day break with no
practice, meetings, or skates. Kent flies over to L.A. to spend some time with Antwone.

The downside is that the 2017 All-Star weekend is happening in L.A., because that's how Kent's
luck's been going all year.

At least Antwone doesn't live near the arena. He and Kent spend most of their time either in Antwone's studio apartment or in the immediate neighborhood, or on the west side of the city, away from Staples Center and the highest concentration of hockey fans. Kent doesn't want to distract from Chazzer and Robber getting tapped as the Aces' representatives by being spotted in the city the same weekend.

"It's that or lean into it," Kent says as the two of them're grabbing dinner Thursday night, at a hot dog place on the way from the airport to Antwone's apartment.

Kent swallows a mouthful of the vegan hot dog he's dubiously eating at Antwone's recommendation. "Show up at the glass during Sunday's warmups with a sign: 'Don't fuck this up for the Pacific.' Watch Pete try to figure out where the cameras are and if he can flip me off."

"Laia'd do it for him," Antwone snickers. It makes the thick twists his hair is in now bounce slightly. He'd told Kent at the airport that he'd switched to the wash and go style for a while to give his scalp a rest from the strain the braids put on it.

It looks pretty cool. Kent started to touch it, but then caught himself and shrugged his duffel up his shoulder instead.

He's been talking with the Aces' minority players about race stuff since the PR blowup that targeted Korsy last month, in order to try and get this shit better in the future. Because Showy was right: Las Vegas is probably one of the least-white organizations in the league.

Which isn't exactly a hard bar to meet. But the club's clearly targeting Nevada's increasing Latino--Latinx? Kent's not sure which one's the right term; Catsby always uses "Latinx," but Nino made and then quickly hid a "not this bullshit" face the one time Kent used it instead of "Latino" when talking with him about a school PR event--that population as one of the ways to grow the sport.

And Kent's the captain. And committed to the Aces for, ideally, the remainder of his career. So it's on him if there's changes that need to be pushed in the dressing room.

Especially if Das, the teenage defenseman currently killing it up in Reno, goes on the roster next season like Kent expects. If the kid lives up to his potential, he's gonna be a franchise face for years after Kent's retired. Losing him because of a hostile culture would be a severe blow to the Aces' next era.

Kent hasn't gotten much out of either Nino or Pits, which doesn't surprise him. Nino seems to genuinely enjoy doing his interviews and promo spots with the Aces' Spanish broadcast staff, but he's always kept his head down and avoided talking about race, trying to do his job without controversy. And Pits is a sophomore playing on the d-men's third pairing; he's not gonna risk rocking the boat and potentially see himself become a healthy scratch.

But when Kent was talking about it with the Aces' main goalie while he and Boxy were driving to the clubhouse after an early-morning practice, Boxy pointed out that it's barely been a decade since McGuire's "right off the reservation" comment about the Habs' goalie Price, and less than half a decade since the Habs' head coach banned Price and Subban's game-winner low-fives for not being humble enough. With political bullshit ramping up again over the Keystone pipeline being build through an American Indian reservation, no matter what Kent does to try and build trust, Kawapit still isn't likely to talk about any crap he's put up with as a First Nation guy.

The rivalry between Edmonton and Vegas is intense enough as it is, without Pits saying anything
that could get leaked and turn Alberta's oil-industry-associated fanbase against him. Not every guy is Subban, capable of being a solid defender in opposing teams' barns in the face of incessant racially-charged heckling from opponents' fans. So if Kent could avoid helping to psychologically break one of the d-men Boxy trusts to consistently clear the puck from their zone, that'd be great.

Kent'd exhaled and slumped back in his seat, and decided to just stick a pin in that one and try to figure it out later.

But Korsy and Catsby have been willing to talk to him, telling him about microaggressions and about people whose work he should listen to or read.

Korsy recommended a couple comedians' podcasts and an essayist. Catsby dumped a bunch of scholarly and hyper-footnoted books on him, which Kent's pretty sure are all books Catsby literally just finished reading himself. Friggin' college kid. Antwone asked about them when he was over during New Years and saw the pile in front of Kent's bookshelf.

He made a checklist of everything in Google Docs, and reorganized his schedule to make sure he spends at minimum forty-five minutes a day working through it. Though he usually ends up spending more, if he can--Kent recognized the author of one of Catsby's books as the sociologist who was cited in a couple of the industrial psychology books Kent picked up while dating a hotel consultant years ago, so he's been going through her stuff first.

But, now that Kent knows how much hair is a big source of being hassled for black people, he figures he should probably ask Antwone if it's okay to touch his new curls first. Even if they're dating.

Were dating. Or. However things end up going after tonight.

Before he headed to L.A., Kent wrote a letter that covered everything he could think to say about what happened between them during sex a few weeks ago, and about Antwone's worries with both that night and some of the past stuff they'd done.

He tried to write about everything that he was pretty sure Antwone had wanted to discuss with him. The letter was kind of a rambling mess by the end, shifting between some of the things Kent had managed to unpack with his mental therapist about why he probably felt and had reacted like he did and occasionally derailing when Kent tried to explain better some of the stuff about why he ultimately just doesn't trust that being honest when he talks--especially in relationships that mean something--isn't gonna lead to everything all going downhill to hell. But he couldn't bring himself to reread it enough to try rewriting it, so rambling mess it stayed. Kent shoved it in a plain envelope and stuck it into his jacket's inner pocket, and went to finish packing for his flight.

Turns out carrying a letter describing a lot of your psychological bullshit is a great way to make what should've been a standard plane trip into a long series of what-if freakouts.

Kent ends up chatting up people in the waiting area and then his row-mates, and playing a lot of poker before and through the flight, because the alternative was continuing to imagine the plane crashing and killing him and that fucking letter somehow surviving and destroying his reputation posthumously.

Which Kent was fully aware was unlikely on a lot of levels. But still. Knowing that his thoughts were irrational didn't conveniently make them disappear.

So it's almost a relief when they get back to Antwone's apartment and Kent can finally pull out the
letter and hand it over to the other man, except for how it's also terrifying.

If this ends everything between the two of them tonight, then.

Kent'll find a hotel, and pay whatever it takes to move up his flight back home. Or maybe he'll just fly somewhere else for the long weekend, some place that doesn't have any memories associated with Antwone. Once he's run out of immediate practicalities to take care of, Kent'll find something else to distract himself with. He's always been good at that.

Eventually, he'll probably talk to his mental therapist or somebody, and in the meantime he'll focus back fully on hockey. And life'll keep going.

It'll be kind of weird with Catsby's sister still working for Antwone, but it's not like Kent normally talks to Laia much, beyond the baseline of it being his job as captain to keep up with how she's doing since she's related to one teammate and dating another.

It'll only even come up when Robber flies Laia over for another weekend, anyway. Catsby's pretty much fully distracted with his increasing problems with his agent; he doesn't have time to be bothered with any potential weirdness from Kent's breakup.

Kent'll deal. He's not going to blame Antwone for making the smart choice and protecting himself, and deciding to look for a healthier relationship with a better partner. That's a dick move.

It just.

It fucking sucks.

But he'll deal. He lived through breaking up with Jack. He'll live through this too. Probably do it a little better this time. Be hard to do worse.

"What's this?" Antwone asks, taking the envelope.

"Uh." Kent shoves his hands into his pockets and hooks his thumbs out. "It's. You said you wanted to talk about--y'know, last time, but I...."

Kent tightens his jaw and swallows, and then shuts his eyes and makes himself take a long breath. When he opens them again, Antwone's watching him carefully, his arms dropped slightly as he holds the letter in both hands. Kent huffs out another breath and looks down at the floorboards, and pushes his hands a little deeper into his pockets.

"I'm not great at talking sometimes," he continues. "Like...I kinda wrote about it in there. But. I figured maybe that writing would work better. I know you were worried, and I didn't wantcha to be," Kent finishes. "So. I wrote that."

"...Okay," Antwone says, when he doesn't add anything else. "Did you want me to read it now? Or, later?"

"Uh--" never, but that's off the table. Kent's always figured if you're gonna commit to doing something that sucks, you might as well get it over with, so he says, "Now, I guess? If you wanna. Or, whenever you do, that's cool."

"Okay," Antwone repeats. He slides a finger under the envelope flap and starts to tear it open.

Turns out giving Antwone that letter when they're in the man's studio apartment is even more
awkward than Kent expected it to be.

There's nowhere he can go as Antwone sits down in his desk chair and starts to read it, and nothing really to look at. The main room is one half bedroom/eating area and one half office full of music and electronic equipment that Kent tries not to touch in case he messes up a switch or throws off a setting. His refusal to think about this any more than he absolutely had to is really biting him in the ass.

Kent stomachs standing in the room not-looking at Antwone while the other man reads silently for almost a full minute. And then he flees into the kitchen.

He gets a glass out of the cabinet and fills it at the sink, before opening the freezer to get some ice. Kent pauses when he sees a pair of jeans inside.

He reflexively starts to call into the other room to ask what the heck is up with that. But then he stops. He probably shouldn't interrupt. Kent just pulls out the ice cube tray instead.

He very slowly drinks the water, and fidgets repeatedly with his phone without unlocking it. He can't think of anything he wants to focus on enough to bother. Maybe checking if his cat sitter's sent him a new picture of Kitt; but Susan doesn't usually do that until day two.

He just. Can't handle doing nothing. So he keeps flipping the phone absently in his hand until he accidentally drops it on the floor.

Kent picks it back up and shoves it into his pocket, and drains the water, and then refills the glass from a lack of anything else to do. He slouches back against the sink, and sips the water, and pulls out his phone again and starts dicking around with it with no real purpose once more.

What feels like five human lifetimes later, Antwone says, "Kent?"

Kent shuts his eyes and takes another long, steadying breath.

And then he puts the glass on the counter, and pushes away from the sink he was leaning against, and heads back into the main room. "Yeah."

Antwone stands up, and then comes over when Kent hesitates outside the doorway. "Thanks, for telling me."

"...Yeah." Kent swallows hard because his mouth still feels dry despite all that frickin' water, and then he makes himself look Antwone in the eyes. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I--I always just--I just shove this stuff down, don't think about it, but that's--it ain't fair to you. It wasn't right. I'm sorry."

"Okay," Antwone says. "I receive your apology, Kent."

Kent blinks, and then drops his head and exhales. "--Thanks. Uh, thank you."

"Yeah." Antwone reaches out and cups a hand around his wrist. Kent pulls his hands out of his pockets, and Antwone slides his hand down to hold Kent's. Kent squeezes it hard.

"Okay," Antwone says. "I was thinking. Do you want to talk about this with me, with someone else? Like a neutral third party, to help us get to the same page."

Kent blinks as he looks up. "Like...." He spent so much time preparing himself for the worst outcome tonight that he's still trying to get his footing in this unexpected version of how things are
maybe going. "Uh. Like, a couples therapist?"

"Yeah," Antwone agrees. "There's a guy I know from Chicago that I make appointments with, if something's going on and I need to talk to a therapist. I dunno if couples work is something he does, but he'd probably know somebody to recommend.

"And." Antwone squeezes his hand. "He works as a dom. I was thinking, some of the things you said you feel uneasy about, I think talking to somebody who's more familiar with that side will help? Like--look."

Antwone exhaled, a little shakily; and Kent belatedly realizes that he should have gotten out of his own head and given the other man more warning about tonight, instead of just pushing an envelope full of heavy shit at him with no advance notice. That was a dick move.

"Hey," Kent says, when Antwone stays quiet for a little longer. "I'm sorry I just dropped this on you. I should've--I dunno, said something first. Let you know beforehand. I didn't think about how it'd feel on your end."

"Hey," Kent says, when Antwone stays quiet for a little longer. "I'm sorry I just dropped this on you. I should've--I dunno, said something first. Let you know beforehand. I didn't think about how it'd feel on your end."

"That was selfish. I'm sorry."

"That was selfish. I'm sorry."

Antwone takes another slow breath, and then lifts the corner of his mouth. He looks up and gives Kent a half-smile with a raised eyebrow. "I mean, it's not like I don't know you only operate at zero or hundred-fifty percent. So...."

Kent starts to say something; and then he thinks Where's the lie, though? and just chuckles.

"Do you want some water?" he asks. When Antwone nods, Kent goes back to the kitchen and fills up a glass with tap water and only a couple ice cubes, since Antwone's teeth are a lot more sensitive to cold. He tops up his own and swipes a hand over the condensation that'd dripped onto the counter before drying it off on his jeans, and carries both glasses back into the main room.

Antwone's sitting in his desk chair again, but he's pulled it over near the bed. Kent hands him the lukewarm glass and sits down on the mattress across from him, fidgeting with his own glass.

"Thanks," Antwone says, and Kent nods.

Antwone takes a slow drink of his water, and then rests the glass on his thigh. "Okay. I'm here in this relationship, Kent. Like, sometimes it's rough, I feel lonely or...but I'd still rather be with you despite all that, than not."

He nods at the letter Kent wrote, sitting folded over on the desk. "And since you wrote that, I'm guessing, you wanna do the same?"

He sounds like he's pretty sure that's true, but not completely certain. So Kent nods and says "Yeah," and then forces himself to go on.

"I--when I made myself start talkin' 'bout this with the therapist, it was 'cause--" Kent huffs out a breath, and keeps fidgeting with his dripping glass as he finishes the sentence. "It was either, I had to do somethin' about all this shit, the...gettin' angry, and bein' violent, and deal with it. Or else--or I had to break up with you, because it wasn't fair to you."

Kent wipes more condensation off on his jeans and looks up at Antwone. "And I didn't want to do that. I dunno if it's selfish, but--I dunno. Talking about all this shit with him's sucked the last couple weeks, but if the alternative's not bein' with you, then--yeah. I want to be in this with you, too, Antwone."

Antwone's smiling even as he swallows and then takes a long drink of water. Kent shifts
uncomfortably on the bed, because two-something-weeks of feeling flayed open by talking about things he's avoided for years hasn't actually made the talking part any easier yet. He wipes more condensation onto his jeans.

"I mean," Antwone says, setting his glass back on his thigh, "if you'd broken up with me to 'protect' me, like I don't know how to gauge my own damn safety, I definitely would've cussed you out. So I'm glad we're bypassin' that," he tells Kent with a half-smile.

Kent cracks up despite himself, hard enough that he almost tips his glass over. He catches it before it spills. "Fair 'nough, yeah."

Antwone chuckles and shifts his glass from one hand to another.

Kent shakes his head as he bites down a final laugh. He drains the rest of the water, and then sits up and looks at Antwone straight. "Okay. So. We talk to the guy you know in Chicago? Or somebody he recommends?" Kent frowns slightly. "Is it, like, phone sessions? Or do you go there?"

Antwone shakes his head. "Nah, it's on Skype."

"Okay," Kent nods. That'll be a lot easier to coordinate.

Antwone shifts the glass in his hand, half-smiling again. "Okay."

A moment later, he pushes out of the chair. Antwone sets his glass down on the TV tray that serves as a nightstand before sitting down on the bed next to him.

"I meant what I said before, Kent," Antwone tells him, wrapping an arm around his waist. "I've never felt unsafe with you. If we decide scenes aren't our thing goin' forward, that's cool. But it doesn't change that that's true. For me, with you. For what it's worth, you've never made me feel unsafe."

"Fuck," Kent mumbles a little hoarsely, feeling his face heat up.

He puts his glass on the floor and then turns and hugs Antwone hard. Antwone shifts closer and rubs a hand over his back.

He and Antwone settle on some potential times and ways to contact the guy in Chicago, and draft an email to Jermaine asking about his status on couple's therapy work. And then they figure out some starting boundaries and safewords.

Kent didn't realize how strung out he was from stress and mentally planning for failure, until it finally dropped away.

It makes it easier to say things he was hesitating to ask before. Like that vague plan he'd started thinking about during the New Years' weekend: seeing if Antwone would like to go to Chicago with him as a pretty-belated-anniversary thing, during the Aces' bye week in February. For whatever amount of time the man could take off.

Kent hadn't said anything about it then, because later that same night things had gone weird. But still. Kent wanted to do some kind of anniversary thing with Antwone, because that's what people in real relationships do, and that's what they have.

And if everyone's schedules worked out, maybe they could do an in-person session with Jermaine.
"Killing two birds with one stone and all that."

"...You know what Chicago's like in February, right?" Antwone asks, biting the corner of his lip to hold down an amused look.

"Hell," Kent replies. "Opposite of hell? There's some part of hell that's supposed to be super cold and slushy, right?" He's sure he's heard Vichy make a nerdy literature joke about that before, although it was in Edmonton.

"Just checking," Antwone says, openly smiling now.

"Hockey player," Kent shrugs. "And I'm from upstate New York."

"You're from east upstate," Antwone points out. "You never been through a lake effect winter."

...He can't argue that one. "Fair enough."

"Okay," Antwone agrees. "Hell yeah. Lemme see what I can get outta Blake."

Later, Kent finally remembers to ask, "Why do you have jeans in your freezer?"

"Oh," Antwone says, propping himself up on an elbow from where they're watching Netflix on his bed. He looks over at the kitchen. "A friend of mine's workin' for a raw denim company. One of their shipments got mangled in a wreck, so they sold him the roll cheap. He made me a couple pairs to test how well the burned parts'll last before he starts selling them."

Antwone shakes his head. "Jabari said a lotta raw denim guys don't wash their jeans, even though washin' gets out the dirt that'll ruin 'em faster. He said to freeze one pair to replicate the hipsters so he'll know how long it'll take for them to start bitchin' at him that their pairs are shredding."

Kent looks at him.

"Before you say anything," Antwone drawls, "let me remind you that you dress like a L.L. Bean catalog model and you have zero room to talk."

Kent looks down at his shirt and jeans. "What's wrong with these?"

"Nothin'," Antwone replies with a straight face. "That's the fashion choice you've made, and I accept that about you."

"Jeeesus," Kent snorts hard. "I need to put some frozen clothes on after that burn."

*

Antwone has to work Friday and Saturday. His apartment complex doesn't have an onsite workout room—which makes the place unlivable in Kent's opinion—but Antwone got Kent a visitor pass to his gym.

He drops off Antwone at work after breakfast Friday morning, and hands him a package as the man's unbuckling his seat belt. "Hey, would you give your boss this? It's just kinda a 'thanks' for being chill about how much of your time I been taking up lately."

Antwone looks down at the package, and then back up at Kent, eyebrow raised. "How much trouble is this gonna get me in?"

Kent pauses for a few moments, making a deliberately thoughtful face. "...The surprise is half the fun."

"Oh Jesus," Antwone says in weary disbelief. But he takes the package, shaking his head. "All right. This is gonna be somethin'."

Kent grins. "Text me when you're off."

Antwone gives him a brief kiss. "See you then."

The package contains a Parson jersey that Kent bought last week and then handed around to the whole team to sign with a casual "'Nother gift, guys, here's the sharpie." He'd figured if things had gone differently with Antwone the other day, he would've just mailed it to his parents so they could donate it to whatever charity fundraiser they've currently got on their radar.

He gets a voice text from Antwone while he's still trying to navigate his way out of Culver City and down to the gym, and checks it at the first red light.

"--fucking trolling me, and you're helping," a man accuses. Kent assumes it's Antwone's boss, Blake.

"I thought it was a very thoughtful gift," Antwone says pleasantly.

"Really," Blake drawls out, which is the point Antwone cracks and starts laughing, because he's not a good liar.

"You're both assholes, Twone," Blake grumbles. "You're perfect for each other. Put a ring on it."

Antwone snorts hard. "Fuck off with your homonormative assimilation paradigm."

Blake sounds like he doesn't even blink. "Jesus," he mutters. "I'm gonna frame this and hang it in the lobby. Tell that little rat thanks for the free endorse--are you recording this?!"

Antwone starts laughing even harder. The voice note cuts off.

Kent cackles and texts back a thumbs up. And then he tosses his phone into the passenger seat when a car honks behind him, and starts forward through the green light.

* 

Showy vid calls him that evening, after the day's media work must be over. Kent answers, sees Seguin standing next to the man, and immediately says, "Hope somebody warned you not to get directions from that guy, Short."

"--What?" Showy replies, distracted from whatever chirp he'd planned to lead with. Seguin breaks into a grin.

"First day before conditioning camp, I get a text from him warning me there's construction and I should come a different way," Kent says dryly, jerking his chin at Seguin. "So I'm getting up at four, driving the long way around friggin' Toronto, and every day he's still gettin' in before me. Last day of camp, I find out the 'construction' is a half-block of repairs shutting down one lane on a three lane street."

Seguin's out of frame now, laughing off to the side. Showy cackles, "You got played that easy? You?! Kent Parson?"
"Good luck bein' last off the ice next game against, Segs," Kent says louder, because everybody knows about that warm-up superstition of Seguin's.

"Holy shit. Okay, I'm gonna call you back, I need the long version of this," Showy snickers.

"I'll be busy then," Kent drawls.

Seguin leans back into view to grin, "It was construction."

"Yuh-huh," Kent replies, before Showy hangs up. Kent double-checks that the call's disconnected, and then adds, "Gonna put a nail in your tire next camp. Let's see you beat me then."

Antwone chokes on a laugh from the other end of the bed.

He and Kent were sitting together against the headboard earlier, watching a rough cut of a short horror film Antwone did a song for on his laptop, when Kent got the call. Kent would've ignored it if it was anyone else; but he wanted to get ahold of Showy this weekend anyway, so Antwone paused the movie and went into the kitchen to refill their waters as Kent answered. After he'd come back with the glasses and seen Kent was on a vid call, he'd sat down at the foot of the bed.

Kent would've moved over there and introduced Antwone, if it'd just been Showy.

But it wasn't.

Kent and Seguin've grown up and gotten over the dumb Twitter fight they got into during the 2011 playoffs, back when Seguin was still with the Bruins. They've had an endorsement deal with the same company for the last couple years, so they pretty much had to.

Kent's new conditioning camp is hyper-competitive and has a wait list to match, but Seguin's been with that gym since he was in Juniors. When Kent mentioned that he was shopping for a new camp during an endorsement photoshoot last season and asked Seguin about his own place, Seguin put in a good word to the owner about Kent's work ethic that helped get Kent onto the client list.

But ultimately, Seguin's a guy who plays for someone else's team. So Kent stayed where he was until the call was over.

He raises an eyebrow as Antwone coughs hard into his fist.

Antwone waves a hand over his face. "The PR voice didn't change at all," he grins, handing Kent a glass. "Who was that?"

"Zach and a guy that plays in Dallas," Kent answers, taking it. He puts his phone on silent and drops it onto the TV tray Antwone uses as a nightstand. "Tyler Seguin. We go to the same conditioning camp."

"Amazing," Antwone says. "--Were you serious?"

"...Plausible deniability means I gotta say 'no,'" Kent replies, and Antwone snickers again.

* 

Antwone was supposed to only have to work Friday and Saturday, but while they're cooking dinner Saturday evening he gets a call from a client.

Kent finishes washing the asparagus and spinach while Antwone goes into the main room to take it, and then he seasons the tilapia as he listens Antwone's tone go from reasoning to fake-polite.
When it descends to ultra-professional, Kent turns off the stove and puts the fish back in the fridge.

A few minutes later, Antwone ends the call. And then he screams muffledly.

Kent goes out into the main room and over to where Antwone's sitting in his desk chair, face buried in his hands.

"*Every fucking time!*" Antwone snarls, as Kent starts rubbing his shoulders. "*Every fucking* time with this bitch! *Every* time he's gotta fuckin' come in with bullshit notes 'cause he's just *gotta* swing his dick around! *F*uck!"

"There anything I can do?" Kent asks.

"Keep me from killin' this fucker," Antwone growls into his palms.

"I mean, yeah, wait 'til I find a good lawyer first," Kent says; and Antwone laughs abruptly.

He drops his hands and tilts his head back to look at Kent. "No."

Kent shrugs casually. "I'm just sayin', hypothetically if he happened to--"

"*No,*" Antwone drawls, before cupping a hand behind Kent's neck to tug him down for a kiss. Kent snickers against his mouth and kisses him back.

Antwone spends most of that night and Sunday working on revisions and on the phone trying to explain to the client that the revisions reflect exactly what the man asked for, without directly saying that *yeah*, the original version was better, fuckface.

Kent handles the meals. He watches the All-Stars skills competition on mute on his phone Saturday evening, and tries to read some of the punk/queer books and magazine-like things Antwone called "zines" that're in the crates stacked in the corner to make a bookshelf on Sunday.

He watches the All-Stars game on mute as he starts making lunch.

Antwone shoves his laptop shut and comes into the kitchen while Kent's dicing up veggies and tofu and eggs to make rice bowls, since that should be easy for Antwone to eat one-handed while working. "*When was your flight, again?*

"Eight," Kent tells him. He booked it late, to make sure he had a chance to meet up with Showy for a little while, even if it was just at the airport. "But uh, I was gonna head there around six."

"*Jesus,*" Antwone says quietly, rubbing his eyes. "*Yeah, to meet Zach, right? Okay. There anything you wanna do before you gotta leave?*"

Kent turns away from the cutting board with a grin. "Oh, you finished? Nice."

"Nah," Antwone shakes his head. "*I'll get back to it tonight.*"

Kent pauses. "You sure? I'm good, I know you got work--"

"*That motherfucker has robbed the last chance I get to see you until next month,*" Antwone says flatly. "*Fuck him. He's gonna do the same thing as always and eventually want to go back to the original, after he's jammed his fingers all over it to pretend he has anything of merit to add. I'll get back to it tonight.*"
"...Okay," Kent agrees. "I'm cool with anything. What's around here?"

Antwone thinks about it for a little while as he washes his hands. "...The place where the Black Dahlia's body was dumped is a couple blocks up."

Kent looks over with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, the neighborhood's pretty quiet," Antwone agrees.

Kent has a haunted museum, an Instagram photo place, and an escape room in under ten minutes walk from his apartment. And like four wedding chapels, but that's just Vegas being Vegas. "I thought L.A. was supposed to be a big city."

Antwone snorts as he gets another knife to help with the cutting. "I don't care about this place enough to defend it from your chirps."

Kent snickers. "Fair 'nough."

A couple moments later, he finishes the last egg and looks at Antwone. "Hey, uh. Wouldja want to come to the airport with me? Like, to meet Zach?"

Antwone pauses and looks over. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Kent says. "Lemme check with him when his flight is, but yeah. If you want to. It'd be cool."

"Okay," Antwone says with a small smile. "Yeah."

Kent dries off his phone and texts Showy.

I'd say good luck in the game, but you're in Central now so we both know you're gonna lose again.

Also, is it cool if Antwone hangs with us at the airport tonight?

After lunch, they walk down to a park and then back up through the neighborhood. Kent gets a reply from Showy.

1. fuk u, 2. yeah cool

there n e where good 2 eat outside security? Showy adds.

They pause in the shade under a tree as Kent checks the Central vs. Pacific game's score and then writes It's LAX, no. Starbucks?

Also, losing 3 to 10 is pretty bad even for Central

Showy writes back 3. fuk u parse and 4. alrite c u there

Kent sends an okay emoji and then eyes his phone suspiciously.

"He say no?" Antwone asks.

"Nah, he's cool with it," Kent says, before showing his phone to the other man. "He's too chill. He's planning something."

Antwone reads over the messages while Kent readjusts the brim of his hat over his forehead.
"...You're seein' something I'm not."

"He's too chill," Kent says, as Antwone hands the phone back. "He's up to something. You'll see."

Antwone chuckles and shakes his head. "Alright."

*

At the airport, Kent and Antwone have already gotten coffee and juice by the time they see Showy coming through the entrance with another guy from the Aeros who got selected.

Showy spots them, and then says something his teammate. Rakes nods with a half-wave and heads for security; Showy heads over to them.

As soon as they're through the introductions, Showy shakes Antwone's hand and says, "The legend in person. I can't believe I get to meet you."

"I knew it," Kent drawls, pulling out his phone. "Told you he was too chill."

"Yeah, 'cause if I exhibited any enthusiasm in that reply, you woulda lied to me that the terminal changed and then told him I flaked out," Showy retorts, which isn't entirely false. Kent hits call for Showy's cell.

Antwone chuckles. Kent watches Showy shift slightly as his phone starts vibrating, and then says, "You gonna get that?"

Showy pauses, and then eyes him. "Are you.... You seriously gonna put me on blast when I haven't met him two minutes? --Okay, I see how it is," he says, when Kent just keeps smiling as the call goes on. "Lemme get it off silent."

Showy pulls out his phone and flips the sound on. A cut from Wicked's "Dancing Through Life" starts playing.

"That's this motherfucker's ringtone for me," Kent tells Antwone dryly. "In hockey you just gotta make friends with the guys you're stuck with."

"In my defense--" Showy starts.

"You didn't actually think I'd agree to go to that play," Kent finishes. He tells Antwone, "He dragged some of us there on a free afternoon in Manhattan, so I know exactly how much of a dick he's bein' with that song."

"That too," Showy agrees. "But primarily in my defense, you are you. Also, there's a difference between a 'play' and a 'musical,' Parse."

Antwone chuckles politely.

"I had to go," Kent tells Antwone with a shrug. "It was charity. How else were we gonna get decent seats at the last minute? I had to go flash my name, his sure wouldn't have worked back then."

"Three shots fired at me in the same amount'a minutes," Showy drawls. "Somebody's showin' off."

Kent smiles wide enough to show teeth. "Just comin' into my prime, Short. What, can't remember those days anymore, old man?"
"Holy shit," Showy says, as Antwone starts laughing quietly for real. "I've fallen in the trap, Parse. Stop opening more traps under it, this can't just be traps all the way down."

"I think you've forgotten what tryin' to chirp me'll getcha," Kent replies with a smirk. "Go get your coffee."

"I'm normally cooler than this," Showy tells Antwone as he heads inside the store. Antwone hides a snort of laughter in his fist.

Showy comes back with coffee and one of those prepackaged meals, because it's getting to the point of the season where guys start feeling like they're starving all the time. Eating more around this part of the year is such a habit for Kent that it's been hard to break, even though he gained weight while the concussion kept him off the ice and out of the exercise room. Showy's already eaten the egg inside.

Showy holds it out to them in an absent offer as he's taking a drink of coffee. Antwone raises a hand. "I'm good."

Kent shakes his head. "Don't try to get me fatter before our last game. Won't work."

Showy pauses and looks at him over the rim of his coffee; and all right, Kent didn't keep enough of his frustration about the conversations about his weight that he and the Aces's trainer've been having for a couple weeks now.

Showy tucks the package under his arm and pats Kent on his good shoulder. "It's gonna be fine, Parse. Now that you're playing again, it'll burn off before you notice."

Kent exhales. Elliot's told him pretty much the same thing. "Yeah, alright. I'm just sick of feelin' slow."

"I'll sympathize with that one after our last game," Showy drawls, and Kent snorts.

Showy looks over at Antwone, who's been quiet on Kent's other side. "So you're from L.A.?

"Yeah," Antwone answers. "I'm in the music business here."

"Yeah," Antwone answers. "I'm in the music business here."

Showy whistles. "Cool."

Kent smiles to himself and takes another drink of coffee.

They don't have a whole lot of time together. Showy's flight leaves half an hour before Kent's, and Antwone's got to get back to work on his project. Eventually, Kent squeezes Antwone's forearm for as long as he dares in public, and then they separate.

Once he and Showy are through security's lines and have slightly more privacy, Kent gets the contact info for Showy's agent from him. Catsby's problem with his current agent over him doing all his social posts in both Spanish and English has gone on too long.

Kent's already recommended his own agent. But Allen's not taking any more clients at the moment, and he could only recommend two people in his agency who'd be likely to take on Catsby, given how wary a lot of sports agents are getting about political clients.

"That bad?" Showy asks, holding out his phone so Kent can copy the agent's information into his own.
"I keep telling him he needs to fire him already," Kent says in annoyance. "As soon as possible. Then the narrative'll be how he needed someone more understanding of the unique nature of Vegas's fanbase. If he lets the guy fire him first, it's just gonna be painted as another version of that anthem bullshit. He's gotta make the first move and make him look bad."

Showy shakes his head with a weary exhale. "Tell him good luck."

"He did this to himself," Kent mutters. "Don't start a power move and wuss out halfway through."

"Do I need to give you a detailed breakdown on what's fucked up about that comment, or can I just give you a look and assume you have a good general idea?" Showy asks dryly.

Kent just grunts.

*

He heads back to Vegas. The next night, the Aces extend their losing streak to four games.

*

They lose to Edmonton, which triples the frustration. Even if Kent being overweight is supposedly a temporary problem, it's fucking up his game. He's slow.

And meanwhile, the Oilers' captain and hockey's future greatest player in the world McDavid is flying across the ice and constantly taking the puck into the Aces' zone.

Kent breaks his stick against the wall after the game's over and they've headed back down the hall toward the dressing room. And then he exhales through his teeth, and tells himself to get his shit together before the media descends on them.

Press conferences after a loss are always a slog through the same old questions: what went wrong, how does he feel about the various penalties called, what needs to be fixed in both the team's system and Kent's own game.

Except now, because the Aces've been streaky for the past month, more and more people are asking whether "politics" is creating a distraction for the team.

Korsy's taken a break from social media for his mental health after last December's PR flare-up, and the club's been good about spinning any conversation on Catsby's bilingual posts into references of Vegas's large Hispanic population. But this current skid is confirming what people wanted to believe: that any political behavior by athletes damages their team.

Kent's hoping this shit will end after the Super Bowl finally closes out the football season, but he's not holding his breath. The regular news media keeps stirring the pot about the anthem protests in order to maintain a constant level of outrage and keep their ratings up; and the sports media keeps feeding into it with commentary. It's all so completely obvious that it's starting to piss Kent off to have to be complicit with such shitty manipulation.

But he's the captain of the Aces, so he can't just refuse to do interviews.

It's fine. He's just irritated because he had such a long break from pressers while he was on the long-term injured reserve. Even when he started practicing again, he got away with only doing short sound bites every fifth or six time.
He just--has to deal. He just has to get used to talking to the media again. That's his job.

The Aces were in their losing habit before Korsy reposted screenshots of the threats he got for implying he supported the NFL anthem protests, but Kent's obviously not going to mention that in his answer. "No, I don't think we have any distractions here on the team.

"I don't see what the big deal is about bilingual posts," Kent continues, because that's the safer topic. "I played in Quebec and grew up near the border there. You always heard a lot of English and French, that's just how it is," he adds, shrugging his good shoulder. The other one's bugging him again; he needs to talk to the trainer about it. Again.

"We know Vegas and Nevada has a big Latino population. It's the same as the Habs havin' bilingual broadcasts and posts, isn't it?" Kent tells the Review-Journal's beat reporter, and the other media around Collins. "If it helps our fans feel more engaged, that's a win for everybody. It's growing the sport in our non-traditional market."

He's probably starting to sound like he's parroting a press release. Which he is, but the media should ask new questions if they want new answers.

So Kent throws out a touchy-feely closer. "Our fans've been here with us since we started, standin' with us for a over a decade. We want 'em all to feel welcome back. We've only got hockey out in the desert because of our fans' support over the years."

Collins nods. "What was behind this latest loss? It's a four-game slump now, and the team's been streaky for months."

Kent forces himself not to exhale through his teeth. He likes Collins; but she's still media in the end, and she's got a job to do. Kent knew what he was getting into, accepting interview requests after this game.

"A mix of things," Kent says. "We've had good guys get injured over the last few months, and we're still trying to cohere after all those changes. But that's no excuse, every team deals with that. I've personally got to get better out there. I made mistakes that are unacceptable."

On top of being too damn slow all night, he turned over the puck twice to the Oilers' checking line, screwed up a pass to his liney that Edmonton capitalized on, and hit the goalpost even though he was taking a shot from his wheelhouse and the Oilers' goalie was on the other side of the net. It was a bullshit game he played tonight.

Collins nods again, and then shifts aside so the SportsNet guy can do his interview.

"After four straight losses, it seems like something's affecting the team," Weibe starts. "Has there been a change to Moss's system? Or are some players' recent social media behavior creating a distraction in the locker room?"

"Go fuck yourself, back off my team, Kent thinks automatically.

Weibe's a fucking baseball transplant, taking over while Larson's out on medical leave, and he can't even get the language right. Who the hell that actually knows hockey would call it a "locker" room?

He should've known he was going to have to answer this question over and over. The Fox Sports reporter is going to be next, and he's probably going to ask the same thing, because the TV outlets all want to keep people tuned in after the game. Kent should've fucking turned down his interview requests and cut out straight for the showers, he's so fucking tired of this.
"Coach's system is the same," Kent replies, because Weibe definitely knows that. The Aces' style hasn't changed beyond small tweaks since the start of the season; the question's a trap. "We've had some guys rotating through the roster with injuries and call-ups, but that's no excuse. Every team deals with that. We've just got to figure out how to cohere anyway, there's always going to be changes."

That question was a trap. Kent bets himself a hundred dollars that the next words out of Weibe's mouth are going to be closing in on the "distraction" bullshit.

"What's causing the lack of cohesion on the team?" Weibe asks--and goddammit, Kent straight up handed him that one. "The Aces have seen an injection of younger players lately, but this late in the season, players should be adjusted to Moss's system. Given the debate going on about the anthem protests in football, it's hard not to speculate that this latest slump isn't influenced by some players' recent political stands online. Does it feel like that distraction is affecting the locker room? Or is there a different cause for this skid?"

*Back the fuck off my team*, Kent thinks again.

Jesus fucking Christ. Do these people even want to talk about hockey at all any more?

Do they seriously fucking think Kent's going to burn one of his teammates on live TV, just so they can have the storyline they want? Who the fuck do they think Kent is? Who the fuck do they think he is?

They want athletes that don't talk about politics, but now they won't quit riding Kent's ass to try and make him give a political statement. How much of a stereotypical idiot hockey player do they think he is, that he can't see through that shit?

It isn't going to stop. Even if they break out of this slump and win their next game, every fucking time that the Aces lose for the rest of the season, the media's going to pull out this same goddamn insinuation about distractions, because they know it'll sell. This is going to be Kent's life post-game for months, until a better story comes along for the media to cling to.

Why the fuck couldn't Korsy have just not retweeted that article? Or at least not reposted screencaps of the insults and death threat he got for it?

Why the fuck couldn't those so-called fans who did that shit to Korsy just fucking be satisfied watching their games, instead of wanting to control their lives off the ice too?

How long is Kent going to have to let "fans" opinions shape his life off the ice, just to be able to keep playing? Until he retires? Longer, if he stays in the hockey world like he wants to? Until he's just fucking dead and they finally can't get to him any more?

Kent thinks about how Antwone said that, years ago, he had to work on his own anger problems before he got himself shot.

Said it casually, like that's a normal fucking thing to need to worry about. Except it is, because he's a black man in America.

Kent thinks, *Alright then*.

If they want a story to sell ads, Kent has one.

He might as well get outed on his own terms. Everybody's still going to try and twist it into the narrative they want to hear, but at least he won't be letting them take his story away from him from
Holy shit he can't, he can't fucking do that, he's gonna burn everything he's spent his whole life building, it's going to end everything. How the fuck did Jack survive this?

Because he still had being a Zimmermann to fall back on.

No.

Because he was always the brave one.

Fuck it. It's time for Kent to catch up.

"No," he replies flatly. "My boyfriend's black, and I've been learning that his life experiences're a lot different than mine. I think the protests reflect a real concern for a lot of our country's citizens, and we oughta all act like adults and discuss it honestly. But it's not a 'distraction' in our dressing room any more than any guy's community outreach is 'distracting.' Our guys are all professionals here."

The noise level in the room has audibly dropped.

"Seriously, bro?" Chazzer says from the next stall. "This is how--?"

"Finish your interview, Chaz," Kent interrupts.

Weibe is just staring him, so Collins—who looks like she knows full well what Kent just did, but also knows there's no way to ignore the subject change—shifts forward again. "To confirm, you said 'your boyfriend'?"

"Yes," Kent says bluntly, as several reporters abandon the guys they were talking to and shove into the group that was already around him.

"Kent Parson, are you stating officially that you're gay?" one of them demands, edging his way in next to Collins.

Go fuck yourself, Kent thinks. Of course it'd be that asshole Yerby leading this. "I've already said it twice."

Yerby rolls his shoulder to get space from the guy trying to wedge a phone in next to him. "Why are you only coming out with this now? You Can Play's been--"

"Because it's not relevant to hockey," Kent interrupts tersely, before that trap can get sprung on him. "I thought this was post-game."

And that's the point when across the room, Anatoly Ivanovich Klimentov—who can usually be counted on to be a goddamn grown-ass professional in front of the media—puts his face in his hands and starts laughing hysterically.

The press conference just gets stupider from there.

Knowing full well what he was about to do before he did it still doesn't mean Kent wants to deal with the fallout.

He can tell that despite all his PR training, he's getting aggressively terser as the same stupid
questions keep getting asked over and over again. As if the fact that everybody's completely abandoned talking about the game to salivate over this irrelevant news isn't a perfect answer for why Kent never talked about it before. He knew the subject change was going to be effective, but Christ, didn't they get all this shit out of their system with Jack? It's not some fucking miracle, being gay and still able to pick up a stick and play hockey without being poison in the dressing room. Kent knows how to be a fucking *professional*.

Current presser to the contrary.

He knows he's lost all control of the situation around the time he snaps back to one reporter, "Because it don't *matter*, my off-ice situation. I don't play hockey with my dick."

"I dunno about that, I've pulled my groin before," Brownie calls loudly from outside the scrum around Kent. His alternate captain's been trying to turn around the presser for the last minute and a half, once it became clear that Kent was gonna be useless. "That sure has an effect, I'll tell you."

He gets a few obligatory chuckles, but it doesn't derail anyone.

Kent checks yet again that his hands are splayed flat on his thighs and tries to force his shoulders to loosen. He can't afford to fuck this up any worse by having threatening body language--all the camera guys for Fox Sports and ATT SportsNet and the NHL channel have followed their reporters over here.

And then someone blares an airhorn briefly.

Near the doors to the dressing room, the Aces' head of PR announces loudly, "We'll take three more questions, *on tonight's game*. Return to the players you requested for interviews, we have a system for a reason."

Yerby turns toward her to argue. "Becky, you can't seriously--"

"Chuck," Adams interrupts, raising the airhorn threatningly.

"God I wish I had my phone," Chazzer murmurs. He's still lounging in his stall next to Kent, enjoying his front-seat view to this trainwreck. "This's fuckin' historic."

Chazzer's had his legs stretched out ever since the mess started, forcing the reporters to negotiate around him and giving Kent a fraction of space to his left. Kent appreciates it, as much as he can appreciate anything while he's currently so aggravated. Boxy abandoned his stall on Kent's right with a "Nope" as soon as the vultures swooped in.

"It's gonna be all over the internet in five minutes, you'll live," he mutters. Chazzer snickers.

"My interviewee left," the Sun's beat reporter says with a gesture at Korsy's empty stall, because Korsy cut out of the room a good minute ago. The man nods his head at Kent. "So--"

"That's unfortunate," Adams replies blandly. "I'll review with our players how to determine when an interview is properly concluded. We will of course have our usual slots open when we play again Wednesday. I look forward to working with your requests then."

"You are so dead, bro," Chazzer adds under his breath, still openly half-grinning as they watch Adams wrangle the reporters. "Tell me you at least warned her in advance."

Kent exhales through his teeth.
"Jesus Christ Almighty, Parse."

"Cram it," Kent growls. "Just do your interview."

"Bro," Chazzer replies, shaking his head. "Fined fifty for poor impulse control. You're gonna be lucky if Robber doesn't call an exception and triple it."

Kent makes another irritated noise in the back of his throat. Their fines master probably will.

And then he exhales harshly, and re-focuses on the reporters who pulled him for post-game. The rest of the media drags their feet back toward their own interviewees.

Collins lingers by his stall as PR chases the remaining reporters out. Kent exhales, but makes himself lift his head and let her catch his gaze.

"I know your personal life is technically outside the bounds of sports reporting," Collins says. "But Kent, this is a bit of an unusual situation."

He huffs. Newspaper reporters. "You just wanna scoop the Sun."

"Absolutely," Collins replies; and Kent snorts out a real laugh despite himself. "Is there anything you're willing to say on the record?"

Kent rubs his face with his hand. "Not just...."

He exhales hard. "Look, I know the Falcs and Jack did that press conference, but he and his boyfriend both play hockey, it's different. Antw--my guy works in a different industry. I don't need his info getting out and messing with his work until we've talked about what he's okay with being known." Kent pauses. "I gotta do that tonight. Shit."

Over on the other side of the dressing room, Robber stops in the middle of talking to the new equipment person about one of his skate's blades. "What the--you didn't discuss that before this?!" he demands. "Fucking--fined a thousand for poor impulse control, Parse!"

Kent throws his hands in the air in aggravation, but he doesn't bother arguing. He fucked up.

Collins opens her voice notes on her phone, but doesn't hit record. "I'd like to use the statement about maintaining privacy and his different career field. No names, no identifying info," she says. "Is that all right?"

"Yeah, okay," Kent agrees. When she starts recording, he gives a better soundbite version of the statement.

After PR finally escorts Collins out, Kent follows behind them to the doors. Adams looks over her shoulder at him as they leave. "I need to see you after cool down."

"Yes ma'am," Kent agrees. When Adams and Collins are past the dressing room doors, Kent pulls them closed and turns to Robber.

"Close out the bet on whether I'm gay or not tonight," Kent tells him. "I want this done with."

"Who told--?" and then Robber narrows his eyes and looks over at Vichy. "...You're cut. No refunds."
"It was Showy," Kent lies, heading to his stall to grab his workout clothes.

He changes and ignores the huddle around Robber as about a dozen guys sort out the bet's take. Part of him wants to know what they thought he was; but most of him's too busy sorting out what he needs to do tonight and keeping an eye on the notifications blowing up on his phone to bother.

Kent ignores a phone call from his aunt and then one from his parents, and ignores several texts from other guys he knows from training camps and other league stuff. His agent emails.

Kent wrenches on his shirt and opens it. Allen sent a brief note that he'd like Kent to call as soon as he's able, and that the attached document is a list of anti-doxx tactics that Kent should give to his boyfriend asap.

Kent forwards the email to Antwone immediately, along with I'll call as soon as I can, I came out in post-game, we gotta talk but go through that list soon as you can. I'm sorry.

He hits send and starts for the workout room. In the huddle, Kirbs is grilling Robber on how he knew Kent was gay; Robber replies, "I got eyes, Carly. Also, he's dating Laia's boss."

"That's fucking cheating," Kirbs says, outraged.

"Co-worker," Kent corrects automatically. "Shut the fuck up, I said I don't want his info out there."

"You yourself shoulda fuckin' thought of that, Parse," Robber retorts, and God Kent wishes he could argue with him. "I know my own girlfriend's job, asshole, he's her boss."

Kent pauses just long enough to look over at him. "Blake was supposed to offer her a promotion this week. He not do that yet?"

Robber stares at him, and then squeezes his eyes shut and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Scrappy, leaning against one of the stalls with his arms folded, grins. "This is just hell for you, huh Red Robin?"

"Fuck you Scalfano," Robber growls at him.

Scrappy just grins wider. Kent abandons the room to go cool down.

He doesn't get halfway to the exercise room before he ends up flanked by Vichy and Chazzer, who've obviously rushed to catch up to him because Kent's entire life is just going to be chirps for the next month. Or the rest of the season. Or maybe the rest of his actual life, he doesn't put it past them. Chazzer's still pulling on his shirt as he tries to catch up, and nearly runs into the skate-sharpening table.

"Seriously?" Kent asks, grabbing the back of Chazzer's shirt to yank him clear.

Chazzer drags it over his head and gives him a shit-eating grin. "Bro."

"Cram it," Kent growls, checking his phone when it vibrates again. Another call from his parents. "What'd you bet?"

"That's confidential," Chazzer replies.

"Straight with youthful experimentation or whatever," Vichy quotes.
Kent raises an eyebrow, because that's a weirdly specific bet. Chazzer makes a "what the hell, man" gesture and pops Vichy in the arm. Vichy shoves him in the side.

"I'm pretty fuckin' sure this bet is weird," Kent says. "You guys know that, right? You think this'd be normal on other teams?"

"You live in Vegas, deal with it," Vichy says. "I can't believe I heard 'cultural appropriation' come outta your mouth. I'm so proud of you, you finally figured out how to open a book."

Kent holds up a middle finger. Vichy just keeps smirking.

"We got in a debate about Miley Cyrus," Kent grumbles, as Korsy comes out of the exercise room and heads down the hall toward the showers. "I figured that line was more relevant to that dumbass's question than 'ratchet phase.'"

Further up the hall, Korsy chokes on a laugh and then stifles the first real snickers Kent's heard from him all day. Which. That's one tiny success outta all the shit tonight, at least.

"Wait," Chazzer says.

"And it starts," Kent replies wearily.

"Hold up, hold up, wait," Chazzer continues, staring at him. "This dude insulted Miley Cyrus to your face and you're still dating him?"

"It wasn't an insult."

"Hooooooy shit, Parse," Chazzer grins. "That's fuckin' love. Put a ring on it now, you're not gonna do better."

"That's a homonormative assimilation paradigm," Kent says to Chazzer, while keeping an eye on Vichy.

"--What the fuck?!" Vichy demands, not disappointing. "'Assimila'--oh my God, who the fuck are you!? What'd you do to the real Parser??"

Chazzer gets out most of what sounds like "Doppelgänger!" before he ends up doubling over with laughter. Kent ignores them both and shoves open the exercise room door.

Kent cuts his cool-down short, riding the bike for just long enough that he won't be sore tomorrow, and then heads for the showers.

When he enters, Willy glances over and then almost immediately turns off his shower and heads out, wrapping a towel around his waist. Even though he's still got body wash lather on him.

Kent manages to summon enough willpower to not roll his eyes.

He goes to the nearest shower and ignores Wilson's silent fleeing. Kent knew what was gonna change in the dressing room as soon as he was out, and he had a pretty good idea which guys were going to act the most creeped out.

Whatever. That's their problem, tonight.

Kent currently has way too much shit to get through in the next few hours to care about a
teammate who's dumb enough to think Kent gives a fuck about his dick. He'll deal with Wilson and Kirby and Spenser--and maybe Nino and Bacon, who've been harder to read but definitely spent their cool-downs avoiding looking at Kent--tomorrow.

When he's done, Kent scrolls through the accumulated mess of notifications on his phone's lock screen as he dresses and heads up to PR's offices, looking for important names. More family members, more guys from around the league and Juniors, a reply email from Antwone. Kent opens that one immediately.

*This is why Blake told me "Your trashcan fire of a boyfriend is in the news again," huh?*

Kent snorts and makes a mental note to meet Antwone's boss in person someday as he reads the rest: *Okay. I'm up until midnight.*

Kent checks his watch. It's pushing ten-thirty. Well, maybe Adams will let him take a break at eleven to check in with Antwone if he grovels.

PR's door is open. The first desk by it is the social media coordinator's: Tsui is typing sharply on her laptop.

Kent pauses by her chair. Every platform that the Aces use for social is open in her browser. "Hey, uh. I'm sorry for this."

"I have bingo cards, one for the racists and one for the homophobes," Tsui replies with aggressive cheerfulness. She doesn't look away from the screen as she waves a hand at a couple pieces of torn legal paper with grids and scrawled English on them. Several gummi bears are marking different squares. "Guess which one's winning?"

"...I already think most of humanity's trash, Grace," Kent says dryly. "Maybe don't add to it."

She snickers even as she keeps typing. "Did you seriously say 'I don't play hockey with my genitalia'?"

"...One of those words is wrong."

"Yeah, they put it in brackets," she replies. "Fuck, dude."

Kent shifts on his feet. "I mean it, Grace. I'm sorry about this."

Tsui nods shortly. "I will accept your apology later, but right now if I get out of this headspace I'm gonna find a way to burn all of Twitter's servers."


"You owe me ten dinners," she informs him, hitting post.

"Fair enough," Kent says with a half-smile.

Then he drops it and makes himself head over to Adams' desk.

She's the only one there, which is kinda ominous. Kent expected the Aces' GM to be present at this meeting, too.

He hopes Impey's absence isn't a bad sign. If the man's so angry at him that he decided to stay
away from Kent until he could be in the same room as him without yelling, that's not a great indicator of Kent's future with the Aces.

...He's got a full no-move clause in his contract. They'd have to get him to agree to waive that before they could trade him or put him up for selection in the draft for the new Quebec City team. He'll know it's coming, at least.

He sits down in one of the chairs across from Adams. "I'm sorry, Becky. I just.... I fucked up. Sorry."

She gives him a half-exhausted, half-scrutinizing look. "Why now, of all nights?"

Kent slumps a little deeper into the chair. "I just...."

He tells himself to give her a real answer. "I got sick of all the questions about Korsy and Catsby and 'distractions' and politics and crap," he says. "We're not a damn football team, they need to knock it off already."

"They're not going to, that's how they sell ads," Adams says dryly. "You need to put up with it and not let it under your skin."

Kent exhales. "Yeah. I know. Sorry, ma'am."

"I'm saying that because, normally, we try not to stack chaos," she reminds him.

"Yeah." Kent scratches the back of his neck under his shirt collar. "I just thought--you know, if they had a different story, they'd drop that one."

"Mm," Adams replies. She spreads her hands. "Yes, but ideally the clickbait would be on a different team."

Kent pulls the side of his mouth back slightly. "...Yeah. I'm sorry, Becky. I should've warned you first. I just--I should've had better control."

Adams makes a "yes, you should have" face. Kent shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

"...Well," Adams eventually says tiredly. "It's not like I don't know that ninety-eight percent of the time you stay on message, and two percent you burn the room down."

Kent starts to reply, and then thinks maybe he should just keep his mouth shut. It's not technically false. He's gone off at Yerby a couple times over the years.

On the other side of the room, Tsui quietly says, "Bingo."

"--Oh shit, double bingo!" she adds. "Joe, you win!"

"For real?" Boswell calls in disbelief. "I was being cynical."

"It's the internet," Tsui replies.

Adams rests an elbow on her desk and pinches the bridge of her nose, rubbing off some of her eye shadow.

"...Sorry," Kent tells her.

Adams exhaled heavily and straightens up in her chair. "All right. I need you in tomorrow at six
a.m. on the dot. You've got an interview with Yerby."

Kent makes a face before he can stop himself, and then reels it in. "Like, just him? Exclusive?"

"I know a lot of you don't like him because of his 'liberal agenda,'" Adams replies, and with a tone like that she doesn't need to make air quotes, "but that is going to be in your favor right now."

It's not like he's in a position to argue. "Okay," Kent says. "Where should I meet him?"

"Here."

She runs him through some more instructions--no posts until they've sorted out the team message; for the love of God just stay off social media entirely for the next few weeks, and he better not google himself for the rest of the season; if he plans to release anything via his agent, she wants a copy first--and then sends him home. Kent calls Antwone on his way down the stairs.

"Dude," Antwone says as soon as he picks up. "When I said you only operate at zero or a hundred-fifty percent, it wasn't a dare, Kent."

"Fuck," Kent says wearily. "Yeah. I know. I shouldn't've done that without talking to you first. I was just thinking about me and the team. I'm sorry, Antwone."

He didn't think about how coming out like that was going to affect Antwone, until his agent sent that anti-doxxing email. He really, really, really should've had better control.

"Yeah, I mean.... Shit," Antwone says. "I turned off the TV 'cause you always look worn down in interviews after losses. I didn't know you were plannin' to do this until Blake texted."

The equipment people are coming down the corridor, hauling bags of guys' stuff to the trucks to take it down to their practice arena for tomorrow. Kent ducks into the exercise room to get out of their way and flips the light back on.

"I didn't plan it," Kent says, sitting down on one of the bikes. "I just...."

He rubs his face. "They were gonna keep fuckin' goin' on tryin' to divide the team, until they got another story that sold better. And I just...."

Kent exhales. He drags his hand through his hair again, and then braces his elbow on his thigh and rests his forehead in his palm.

"I figgered, if I'm gonna get outing eventually, fuck everyone, at least it'd be on my own terms," Kent mutters. He pinches his nose, and then makes himself sit up and speak clearly. He's not eighteen anymore; even if he's still stumbling and fucking up his way through a relationship, he can at least refuse to make past mistakes.

"But I didn't think about you, how doin' it'd impact you," Kent says. "Not 'til Allen sent me that email. That was fucked up, Antwone, it wasn't okay. I'm sorry."

Antwone exhales slowly.

"...Yeah," he says. "Okay."

"Okay," he repeats. "I did some of the stuff on that list, but a lot of my social's work-related. I can't just go private. What'm I in for?"

Kent tells him about the short interview with Collins and how his official stance is that he wants
privacy for Antwone.

"How likely's that gonna be?" Antwone asks.

". . . Fans're assholes," Kent says. "But maybe enough of 'em won't give a shit if we just start winning? I dunno." He drags a hand through his hair again. It was already a mess because he didn't bother to put product in it before heading to PR, it can't really get worse.

Antwone exhales again, a little more muffled.

"Okay," he finally says. "Guess I'll--we'll just jump off that bridge when we come to it."

He sounds like he stifles a yawn, and then adds, "I'm gonna have a heck of a story about the perils of dating a celeb, at least. That'll break the ice with new clients."

"Absolutely roast me," Kent agrees. "I earned it."

Antwone snorts, and then stifles another yawn.

"Head to bed, man," Kent says. "I oughta too, I got an interview with that dick reporter at six I gotta be on my game for. We can talk tomorrow...when's good for you?"

"Uh..." Antwone trails off. "I gotta check the calendar."

"Okay," Kent agrees. "Whenever's good."


"Thanks," Kent says with a faint half-smile. "You too."

After they hang up, Kent rubs his face again hard before calling his agent. He sends his parents a text that he'll call tomorrow, but right now he's swamped and exhausted.

Everybody else he ignores until later, except Chazzer, who sent him a link to some Tumblr post with Click this if things get shitty

The post is an audio clip of the Aces' radio post-game show. Kent frowns at his phone as he drags himself out to his car in the parking garage, wondering why the sound's so lousy and full of static. How is NHLTV's radio option getting away with being this bad?

Then he hears a car horn blare distantly in the background. Kent realizes the audio must be coming from someone recording the actual radio program, here in Vegas.

He drags it back to the beginning and pays attention to the words this time.

"--unrealistic. I don't see why he 'should have' said this earlier," one of the radio guys--Kent's pretty sure it's Gill, though he usually sounds more cheerful--says flatly.

"I have to agree with her, it did seem odd to mention a boyfriend, but then not say anything else about him," Rubin comments. They must be at the call-in part of the show; Jesus, it's late.

"We don't demand other players name their wives and girlfriends on TV," Gill replies. "When the Sun reprinted those photos from the players' Halloween party a few months ago, they had the journalistic integrity not to print the wives' or girlfriends' names in the captions. I know everybody puts everything online willy-nilly these days, but some people do still appreciate privacy."
"...Well," Rubin chuckles. "It is Parson. He's one of this new era of younger players that's online more than ever before."

That's bullshit for several reasons, from Kent being "young" to the implication that he's on social half as much as some of his teammates. During conditioning camp last summer, Seguin kept giving Kent shit for not even having Snapchat.

"Does he even go online himself any more?" Gill asks dryly. "I thought it was all about his cat these days."

Kent snorts and makes a mental note to chirp the man next time he sees him. Rubin laughs for real that time, before going on: "All right, next caller."

The audio cuts off after that. The only text on the post is 

Fuckin' love my team

The first comment below adds kinda old man yellin at clouds with the privacy thing tho; and all the ones below that look like they just devolve into bickering about whether or not Kent should have come out sooner, like a bunch of strangers have the right to decide for him whether he should have upended his entire life and story. He doesn't bother reading further.

Kent unlocks his car and texts Chazzer Thanks

He's finally steering his way out of the parking lot so he can go home and pass the fuck out already when he gets a text from Showy: Y did Vichy blow up my phone w/ shit bout u & "assimilation paradigms"

Kent slows down to send 'Cause he's still wired from the presser don't encourage him and then tosses his phone in the passenger seat.

Showy doesn't reply at first. And then several minutes later, his ringtone starts up.

Kent sighs, fishes his phone off the seat, dumps it on the dash and hits accept, and gets his hands back on the wheel. "Yea--"

"WHAT THE HELL," Showy says.

"Jesus," Kent snorts. "You not see that yet?"

"Went out with an injury, I just got home. I repea--"

"Shit," Kent says, glancing over at the phone. "You okay?"

"Sprain," Showy answers. Which isn't great, but it's way better than other things. "Should be back in a week, maybe. I repeat, what the hell, Parse!!"

"They started it."

"Holy shit." Showy's starting to have a harder time holding down his laughter. "Kent."

"Laugh it up, I'm too fuckin' tired to care anymore," Kent grunts.

"Oh no, no, no pal, you aren't gettin' away that easy," Showy audibly grins. "I'll talk to you later, when you're awake."

"I ain't answerin' my phone for a year," Kent replies. "I don't care if it's God, Satan, or the GM."
"You will for me and we both know it," Showy replies cheerfully.

Kent sighs, because yeah, true. "--Hey, you and Rie did couples' therapy, right?"

"--Yeah," Showy agrees.

"You ever do Skype sessions?"

"Like, instead of live?" Showy asks. When Kent agrees, he says, "No, we did them in-person."

Kent exhales through his teeth. So much for that. Well, he'll ask Antwone anyway.

"That was a real conversational whiplash you just did there, Parse," Showy drawls. "You wanna
give me a hand here?"

"Antwone and me're gonna start it during bye week. We're goin' to Chicago, and the guy lives
there," he adds. "So like, doin' the first one in-person, then the rest in Skype. But I kinda don't want
to wait a few more weeks, now," Kent tells him. "I wanna quit fuckin' up like this. I shoulda
thought about him before openin' my mouth."

". . . I figured you didn't plan this," Showy comments. "But thanks for confirmin'."

"That obvious?" Kent mutters, stopping at a red light.

"Parse," Showy says dryly. "Everybody that knows you knows that a one-second pause after a
dickish question is you getting back on point without sounding like you wanna punch the guy in
the throat. A two-second pause is 'Oh shit, this is gonna be a clapback.' Three-second pause? 'Well
fuck, here we go, PR's gonna be up all night again.'

"A four-second pause is some entirely new level of terror never yet heard from you before," Showy
tells him, while Kent tries not to snicker. "I watched that silence drag out and I could fuckin' hear
Vichy internally screaming from three states away."

"Fuck off," Kent cackles.

"Try never to hit five seconds, I think somebody in the front office would just drop from a heart
attack preemptively," Showy tells him. A car honks behind him, and Kent starts driving through
the now-green light. "--Catch you later, Parse. Good luck."

"Thanks," Kent tells him. "Oh yeah, don't try to cash in on the bet about me being gay. I told
Robber you're the one who told me about it."

"Dick!" Showy says. "Who told yo--it was Vich."

"Aces bets are only for Aces, Aero," Kent replies cheerily.

"He's gonna believe me over you," Showy points out. "You know that, right?"

"Won't matter if Vichy's already collected," Kent says. "Not like he's gonna be able to take the
money back."

Showy calls him a dick again. Then he asks, "...Hey, Parse. If anybody round here comments on
you, is it gonna be a problem if I call them out on it? Because I'm gonna do it, heads up."

"Who'd fuckin' bother?" Kent asks. Sure, Showy plays in Texas, but Houston and Dallas have their
own hockey crises going on at the moment, between Houston's current three-game loss streak and
Dallas's complete implosion and crash to the bottom of the standings.

"Hager," Showy says flatly.

"Who--" Kent starts, before remembering the media guy Showy's been griping about this year. "Wait, is that the guy who got pissy about Jack last year? The one that made that comment about Rie's eyes?"

"Yep," Showy agrees, even colder now.

"Yeah, fuck it," Kent decides. "Go nuts, say anything."

He stops at a yellow light, and adds, "Keep it about me, though. Leave Antwone outta it. I gotta do an interview with Yerby tomorrow about preservin' our privacy and fuckin' whatever."

He can practically hear Showy's raised eyebrow in his voice. "You're willingly doing an interview with Chuck?"

"Becky made me," Kent grumbles.

Showy makes an agreeing noise. "Makes sense. He's probably your best bet. Or Sadie."

"Already did her," Kent replies, although he would've infinitely preferred a full-length interview with Collins over one with Yerby.

"He's not that bad a guy, Parse," Showy tells him, because he's biased.

Kent just grunts.

"--Whatever Hager says, don't say anything that'll make Becky actually kill me," Kent adds. "I'm on the edge with her as it is after tonight."

"I'm pretty sure she's not going to literally kill ya, Parse."

"What jury would convict her?" Kent replies, and Showy snorts.

Then he says, "Hey, I derailed earlier, but before I go. I'm proud of you."

Kent makes a face and glances at the phone. "What?"

"I mean it, Parse," Showy tells him. "Choosing to work on maintaining and improving a relationship takes a lot of maturity. You've grown up a lot since I've known you. I'm proud of ya."

Kent blows a breath out and rubs a hand over his face briefly.

"... Pretty sure if that was true, I wouldn't've fucked up like this in the first place," he points out.

"Well, yeah, you still got a long way to go," Showy agrees, and Kent shakes his head. He walked into that. "That's the shitty thing about personal growth, the work never ends. Not 'til you're dead."

"Jesus," Kent snorts. "Don't become an inspirational speaker after retirement, you're shit at it."

"I'm tired and dosed up on painkillers, cut me some slack," Showy gripes. "Fine, here: people come into your life for a reason, so they can help you grow if you let them and help them back. That's how you get changed for the better. --No. For good. Fuck."
"Now you're just quoting musicals at me," Kent says dryly. "You're quoting them wrong at me, you're definitely wiped. Go sleep and get better, Showy. Kicking the Aeros' ass again'll be more boring if you're still injured."

"You're a Glinda stan and I know it," Showy replies. "I saw you cry during 'Thank Goodness,' pretending otherwise just confirms how deep it runs."

"I'm hanging up," Kent tells him, because maybe he did almost tear up for a few seconds during that musical, but he's never going to admit it to him. "Bye, Short."

"Look forward to beatin' ya in March, Parse!" Showy grins. Kent shakes his head again and ends the call.

* 

After way too little sleep, Kent wakes up the next morning and boils a couple eggs to get him through the interview, before spending more time on his hair and on getting dressed than he usually does on any day when he doesn't have to wear a suit. He can't afford not to look perfect. He's not handing Yerby any easy weaknesses.

There's a whole spread of bagels and pastries and doughnuts and fruit in the kitchen. Kent guesses somebody high up in the organization is bribing the rest of the front office for putting in overtime. He steals some pineapple and gets more coffee, and then heads up to PR's office for the interview.

Yerby's already there talking with Adams at the small round table near the corner, which is irritating. Kent showed up twenty minutes early because he wanted to beat him in. Small power moves matter.

Well, fuck it. He had to sleep. Kent heads over and pulls out a chair to sit down. "Hey."


"This is a twenty minute interview," Adams says. "I know you have morning skate, we aren't going to run into that."

Yerby deliberately glances up at the clock on the wall as he turns his phone's mic toward Kent. "It isn't six yet. Couldn't that--"

"Twenty minutes," Adams repeats. "If you want a follow-up, join the pack of hyenas that'll be swarming the practice."

Yerby bites down a smile and raises an eyebrow. "Tipping your hand there, Becky. Had to sleep under the desk again?"

"Don't you start, Chuck," she replies. "Nineteen minutes."

Yerby shakes his head and looks at Kent as he hits record. "I know you put out the statement to the Review-Journal that you don't want to make any public statements about your boyfriend right now. Is that still true?"

"Yes," Kent replies. "We haven't had a chance to talk. I didn't get back until late last night, and he has work today. If we want to put out a statement in the future, we will."
"All right," Yerby says, looking down at his phone for the next question.

"Why did you wait for so long to come out?" he asks. "I can understand being more careful during your rookie or even sophomore year, but at this point you're clearly one of the most elite U.S. players in NHL history. Things are obviously better than they were in 2009, so why--"

"Think there's a lotta people in Orlando who'd disagree," Kent says before he can stop himself. "The worst mass shooting in America is 'cause some douche decided to kill people in a gay club, and you wanna tell me things are 'better'?"

Adams closes her eyes and takes another drink of coffee.

Yerby's silent for a long time, looking at him. Kent stares back.

And then the other man nods slowly, and takes his phone back, and starts editing his questions.

Kent finishes his coffee while Yerby makes his revisions, and wishes he'd brought a bigger thermos. He didn't even think about how many reporters were going to swarm the open-to-the-public morning practice. Fuck.

After a couple minutes, Yerby finishes and turns his phone back to Kent. He deletes the original audio file, and then starts recording again.

They run through the first question and answer about no public statements about Antwone. Then Yerby asks, "Why did you decide to come out now?"

Kent slumps a little into his seat and shrugs. "Jack Zimmermann made it easier," he replies, because there's no reason to pretend otherwise. It's obvious. "Seeing how many people supported him made me think, you know, maybe it's time to start trusting hockey fans more."

He shrugs again. "I'm sure there's people who chucked my jersey in the trash after last night, but y'know, maybe it's not as many as I assumed it'd be."

"Were there any other motivating factors?" Yerby asks. "There's been a lot of discussion about the NHL's anthem protests potentially creating a divisive environment among the team after one player's posts. Was this maybe a way to reinforce the Aces' commitment to inclusivity?"

That's for sure a rewritten question. "I guess," Kent says. "I don't feel the need to prove something I know is true. We have a good group of guys here, and when the organization talks about understanding our non-traditional market, it's not just words."

Kent exhales and twists his empty thermos on the table. "I dunno how I gotta say it so I'll be believed, but the team worked all that out in the dressing room and moved forward. We don't have a divisive environment here."

He drags a hand over his hair. "Seriously. Everybody that wants to be committed to the Aces knows that this club is dead serious that it wants the best players out there, and they don't care about guys' race or sexuality as long as they can play. If they're good, if they've got the potential to be great with experience, we want 'em."

Kent realizes he's tapping his foot restlessly on the floor, and stops. "Like, I've been upfront that I wanna play with the Aces. For my whole career, if I stay good enough that I deserve my spot on the roster. I wanna be here long enough that I watch the new guys come up that're gonna take over and be the next generation," he says. It's gonna sound like another PR-approved soundbite, but it's still true. "That means doin' the work now so when their time comes, they want to play here,
instead of goin' off to another team."

Kent shrugs again. "I mean, what better place for a team like us than Vegas? This whole city's built on the idea that if you come here, see a need, do the work, and you're good at it, you'll succeed. If we wanna be Vegas's team, we gotta live up to its ideal."

"Hm," Yerby says. "So, were the Aces already aware that you're gay?"

Literally fucking if one more person asks Kent why he didn't come out sooner, he's citing this goddamn interview. Everything he said about the club and its prospects and its city could've been followed up on, but the next question goes right back to him not being straight.

Kent starts to take another drink of coffee, remembers it's empty, and puts the thermos back down.

"Yeah," Kent replies, as Adams gets up and takes his thermos and her mug over to PR's coffee pot. "A bunch of the guys on the team already knew, and so did the GM and PR. I dunno how widespread the knowledge was in the front office, but I assume if it was relevant people got told."

He raises an eyebrow. "I know my track record isn't squeaky clean, but throwing that out at everybody from left field in an interview would be a little much even for me." Is that a good metaphor? Ugh.

Adams looks over from where she's filling her mug with a single arched eyebrow, which is maybe the most damning move she could've pulled.

He whistles silently. Yerby stifles a chuckle.

"Were there any additional motivating factors?" the man asks.

Kent shrugs again. "... I haven't been in a serious, long-term relationship until the last year. I didn't see a reason to make a big deal talking about it, and getting a bunch of attention put on my personal life instead of on our hockey." Adams returns and puts the thermos down by him.

"Thanks, Becky."

She nods. Kent takes off the lid to let the coffee cool and looks back at Yerby.

"Any other reasons?" the man asks. "You mentioned your boyfriend is black, and said that's been an influence on your views lately."

There it is. Fuckin' liberal agenda. "I dunno if I'd put it like that," Kent replies. "Maybe it's selfish, but I'd like to think if I hear somebody I love talk casually about havin' to adjust their behavior so they don't get shot 'cause that's a day-to-day fear for him, I'm man enough that I'd be pissed off about that on my own without needin' to be 'influenced.'"

That was incoherent and went too hard. Kent rubs a hand over his mouth, puts his interview smile back on, and exhales.

"I dunno what the right word for it is," he walks back. Kent picks up the thermos lid and taps it absently against the table. "If anything, knowing him's helped me grow up and be a better captain."

Yerby shifts the phone slightly. Kent realizes that tapping the lid's probably messing up the audio, and puts it down. "It's made me realize other guys probably have struggles I don't know about. Everybody works hard to be professional and leave stuff outside the door when they come in here, but some stuff's hard to shake." He shrugs again. "I get it. When I got concussed, I went through some pretty serious depression until it finally started gettin' better. Some stuff's gonna stay on your
back no matter how hard you try to throw it off.

"So now I know more things that some guys might be havin' trouble shaking off," Kent finishes. "I'm glad. Everybody who's been willin' to talk to me about stuff goin' on with them that I haven't experienced, whether it's race stuff, or relationship stuff, or struggling with living after multiple concussions, I owe them more than I can say. They've helped change me for the better."

He picks up his thermos, and then raises an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure there's some song from a play Zach Short likes that goes like that. But he garbles the lyrics, so I can't be quoting it right."

Yerby purses his lips to hide a smile as Kent takes a long drink of coffee.

The last few interview questions mostly circle back to Kent's original comments about the Aces' organization, until Adams closes it out.

Kent checks his watch and decides he has enough time to eat a real breakfast before he has to start warming up for practice. He tells Adams and Yerby goodbye and splits.

* 

Nino shows up in the kitchen while Kent's eating.

The timing's completely off for his usual schedule; Nino normally eats at home with his wife and daughter and just comes into the clubhouse to warm up. Kent knows what's happening before the other man even sits down at his table.

Nino starts to say something, stops, and then takes a long drink of coffee before trying again. "You always been gay?"

He has to appreciate the directness.

"Yeah," Kent answers. He was never really interested in sleeping with anybody before Jack, so he must've been.

"But you've dated women," Nino points out. "Were they just...not the right one?"

Kent lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "I did that 'cause I knew I was supposed to."

Nino makes an "I don't get it" face.

Kent resists the urge to sigh. At least he can be more honest answering Nino than he could back when his mom asked the same question. She and his dad always get kinda uncomfortable if Kent's too manipulative when he discusses how he's maintaining his brand and his image in the media.

He spears more eggs with his fork. "I knew it'd look weird if I didn't have a woman around that I was dating every once in a while," Kent says. "I mean, I liked Inez, and Brigit seemed cool. But still."

Luiselli was a mistake for several reasons, but Kent was being a drinking moper who talked too much about an old hook-up's business when they were together, so he can't hold much against her. They were using each other. "It was a PR move."

Nino exhales slowly at that, and then takes another slurp of coffee.
"I know it's weird," Kent says. "But I'm not gonna, like, start flamin' around the dressing room or whatever. I just wanted them to shut up about Korsy," he adds, because Nino and Korsy have been a long-running defensive pair for the Aces for a while. That's the best angle to lead with.

Nino snorts once. 'Can't picture you bein' one of those guys."

He huffs out a breath, and then puts his mug down on the table. "No. It's alright. Just--surprising."

Kent shrugs again, since there's nothing else to say. Nino saw what he expected to see, same as everyone. Kent spent years using those blinders to his advantage.

Nino shakes his head. "No, I mean it. It's alright. I...."

He fidgets with his mug, and then lifts his shoulders. "I was talking with Annabel about it last night. ...You know how many teams I've played on, where I haven't been called a wetback if I fuck up a pass?"

"--Jesus," Kent says.

"This one," Nino tells him, tapping a finger on the stylized ace of spades inlaid at the center of the table. "I'm glad to be in Vegas. If things're better here because the front office's been on top of stuff because you're gay, then--okay.

"'Rising tide raises all boats,' right?" Nino adds, scratching the back of his neck. "I'm fine putting on that pride tape and stuff during Hockey's For Everyone week and everything. I wanna play here, not somewhere else."

"...Thanks," Kent says with a half-smile, meaning it.

Nino nods once and drains his coffee.

". . . Bacon said anything about last night to you?" Kent adds.

Their rookie defenseman might not be actively avoiding Kent the way a couple other guys've been doing, but he was definitely behaving different after the presser.

"He's kinda weirded out, but." Nino shrugs again. "You're Kent Parson. He's smart enough to know he better get over it if he doesn't wanna get traded. Same as other guys."

Kent blows his bangs away from his forehead and eats his eggs. It's something, at least.

"What'd you think of Das last night?" he asks a couple moments later, breaking the awkward silence.

The GM called the kid up from the AHL again for yesterday's game, after one of their defensemen got knocked off the roster after taking a puck to the wrist. It wasn't a break, thankfully; but Pits still probably won't be able to play for a week until it's healed.

Nino visibly relaxes more with the topic change. They spend the rest of breakfast discussing the Aces' inevitable 2017-18 rookie d-man.

***

Later that same morning, the Aces player who was forced to retire due to injury a couple months ago shows up at the clubhouse.
Brandon makes sure he gets in at the right time to catch Vichy and Scrappy in the kitchen after Parse'll already have left it. He knows all their usual schedules; he's known them for years.

"There another event today?" Tommy asks when he arrives in the kitchen, handing the coffee pot over.

Brandon shakes his head. The Aces've been pretty good to him, post-retirement. Even after they bought out his contract, once his face got less gruesome and more kid-friendly, he started doing a lot of local PR work for them: going to schools or hospitals or libraries, helping with the neighborhood outreach stuff and building kids' play areas or ball hockey courts, sitting in on council and PTA meetings at the suburb where the club's trying to build a new practice rink and talking about how hockey helped him learn how to be a man and a good, responsible person in order to soften up the doubters.

It's nice to have a job to focus on. The club didn't have to do that. And they send the ice girls out to most of the kids' building events, since that's easier to coordinate than sending guys on the team, so Brandon gets to spend a lot of time around pretty women. He's not complaining.

Doesn't make up for having his whole life collapse because of one bad skate blade and an uncontrolled stick.

But it is what it is. Stewing on how shittily things ended isn't gonna get him anywhere; life's too short to go around being a miserable bastard about the bad parts.

"Nah," he says, taking the coffee pot and grinning. "Wanted to see the aftermath of the presser from hell."

Tommy, utterly unsurprised, heads over to their table--to his and Trojan's table. Brandon could keep on sitting there with them, they're still his friends, but right now the thought's still too raw. "Shoulda guessed."

"You knew Zimmermann's boyfriend plays hockey too?" Brandon asks, pouring some coffee into the mug that Tommy stole from Brandon's condo and brought back to the clubhouse after Brandon'd cleaned out all his stuff from the building.

Trojan, fully aware that he's up to something and helping him out at it like the good dude he is, shakes his head. "Nope."

"Me neither," Brandon agrees, putting the pot back. "Kinda weird Parse did to mention it, but I guess he met him at Samwell."

To the side, Vichy pauses in the middle of eating his oatmeal.

"Samwell?" Trojan asks, because he's the best dude.

Brandon picks up his mug and leans against the counter, keeping his face straight like his life depends on it. "Yeah. Member that college party I told you about, that Parse crashed before we played Boston a couple years back? It was Samwell."

Vichy turns his head and stares at him.

"No kidding," Trojan says, half-smiling. "So Parse musta run into Zimmermann's boyfriend there?"

"You two are monsters," Tommy mutters into his coffee, because he's got a full view of the expression on Vichy's face right now as he works out the reason they all went through so much hell
against the Bruins back in 2014 is because Parse was being a motherfucking jilted lover that night. Trojan just keeps smiling.

"Guess so," Brandon grins. "Explains why he was so weird that game, yeah?"

Vichy finishes the last of his oatmeal, sets the spoon down in his bowl, and pushes away from the table.

"Vich--" Scrappy attempts.

"I'm gonna kill him," Vichy says calmly, walking out of the room.

Scrappy rolls his eyes and shoves the rest of his breakfast taco in his mouth. He gives Brandon a look that Brandon misses because he's slumped against the counter laughing silently, before following Vichy out of the kitchen.

As soon as they're gone, Brandon starts cackling out loud.

Tommy shakes his head. "Smitty, you douche."

"You weren't there!" Brandon manages, slapping the counter. "He earned this!"

"Yup," Chazzer agrees, shoveling down the last of his eggs as he pushes out of his chair and grabs his phone off the table.

"Send the vid to Showy!" Brandon calls as Chazzer heads out of the kitchen.

The kitchen's on the opposite side of the clubhouse from the exercise rooms; but they can all hear the brief kerfuffle down the hall. Soon after, Chazzer blurs past the doorway like he's running for his life, laughing the whole time.

Not much later, Parse walks past, absolutely soaking wet like he was thrown into the hot tub and wringing out his shirt.

"It's a drowned rat!" Brandon yells gleefully.

Parse comes back into the doorframe a second later, pausing to look at Brandon before his eyes narrow.

Brandon keeps grinning as he watches Parse first work out that he's the cause of his ass getting dunked, and then try to decide if he wants to do something about it.

Which shouldn't be that scary an expression on a guy that Brandon's known ever since Parse was an acne-faced teenager who spent most of his rookie season as close to naked as he could get away with and whining about the desert heat. On the guy who still--as of last night's game--mouths along to the "that's what you get for waking up in Vegas" chorus of his Katy Perry goal song. Brandon's fought John Scott, before the goon got traded out of Arizona. He's seen real scary.

But it's Parse. The guy who skated two shifts on a broken ankle in a regular season game without telling anyone; the only guy Brandon knows with the brass balls to double down on the league when he got called into a disciplinary hearing a few years back for cross-checking Tommy in the head one game, in retaliation for the way Houston's old coach had ordered Tommy to go after Scrappy with dirty hits that night. He's the little rat who's hands down the dirtiest fighter Brandon knows, and who's already managed to take him down once before.
So, still kind of a scary face.

He grins wider at Parse. "I fuckin' dare you come at me."

"Literally trained by a marine," Boxy reminds him from where he's rinsing his dish at the sink.

"I dare you, I got nothin' to lose," Brandon continues, still looking Parse in the eyes as he grins. "You do."

Parse stares at him for another long moment. And then he points at Brandon with the hand holding his wet shirt. "Good work."

He turns back down the hall in the direction Chazzer went and goes outta sight, sneakers squelching on the concrete. Brandon cracks up again.

"He's gonna dump sugar in your gas tank," their goalie says, shutting the dishwasher.

Brandon shifts, because Boxy's gone too far to the left and out of his new line of sight. "Worth it."

And then--because if Parse was gonna throw a drama molotov by coming out while still playing, it was a dick move to do it after Brandon had to leave the team and wasn't in the dressing room to enjoy it first-hand--he raises his voice and adds, "I mean, he took second place on comin' out, but points for drama I guess!"

Boxy whistles lowly as the squelching footsteps stop.

"You always gotta go that step too far," Tommy says resignedly.

A heartbeat later, they hear Parse say, "Alright then."

And then he turns around and start striding back toward the kitchen, coming for him. Brandon picks the better part of valor and runs the fuck away, cackling.

Tommy goes to refill his thermos, shaking his head slowly. Trojan, openly laughing, kicks a chair out the doorway into the hall, forcing Parse to dodge around it and buying Brandon a couple extra seconds.

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