

Takes Fans Inside the Creative Process Behind Heated Rivalry's Breakout Success

"Now I'm just like, 'Nah, all I'm doing is gay stuff now!'" Tierney tells *Teen Vogue*.



BY MAX GAO

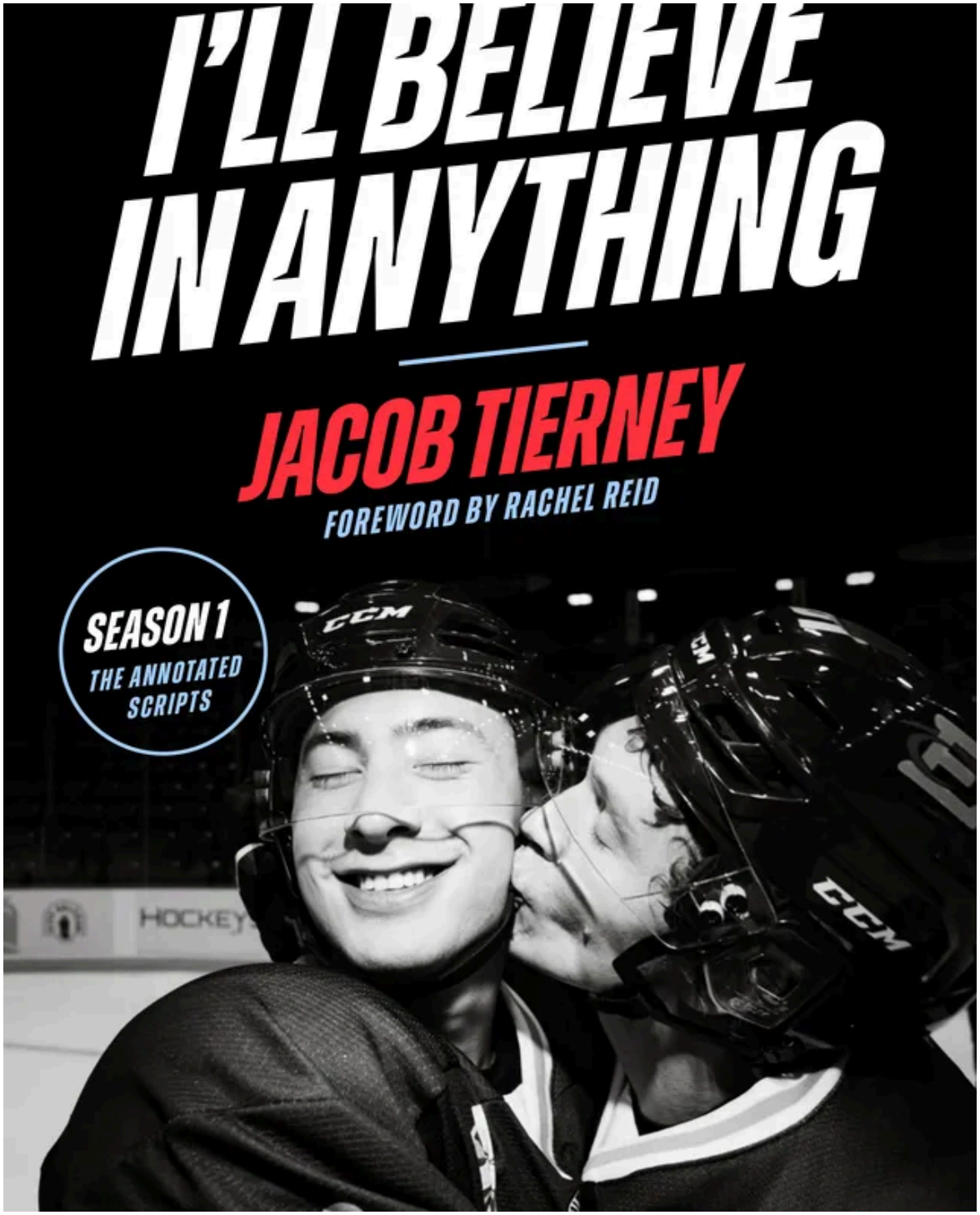
October 12, 2026

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Jacob Tierney is ready to take *Heated Rivalry* fans back to the cottage. Less than a year after the Crave hockey romantic drama became a cultural phenomenon, the Canadian actor-turned-showrunner is ready to pull back the curtain on his acclaimed adaptation of Rachel Reid's *Game Changer* novels.

I'll Believe in Anything—publishing October 13 from Little, Brown and Company—is an annotated collection of Tierney's six *Heated Rivalry* scripts from season one. Featuring a foreword from Reid, the book offers a detailed and candid look at how Tierney's small, tight-knit team crafted the show's standout moments. The collection details everything from costume design and intimacy choreography to the creative choice of interweaving Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) and Kip Grady's (Robbie G.K.) storyline with the clandestine love story of Shane Hollander (Hudson Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Connor Storrie), making it a must-read for both devoted fans and television enthusiasts alike.

"I think a lot of TV and film writers are hesitant about [sharing] their scripts because scripts are by their own nature not a finished product, so they don't often have a polish like a novel or a nonfiction book or an article. But I've always been a person who's happy to let people read their scripts," Tierney tells *Teen Vogue*. "I'm just very



I'll Believe in Anything by Jacob Tierney

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distribution, launching official merchandise lines, and even starting a real-life foundation inspired by the books' canon. But while the show's breakout success made overnight stars of its lead actors, it was no less transformative for its creators. (Alongside *Heated Rivalry*, Tierney is currently adapting Annabel Lyon's novel *The Golden Mean* into a drama series for Netflix.)

Teen Vogue was the first major U.S. publication to cover *Heated Rivalry* before its massive breakout last November. (Read our exclusive first-look story here, as well as the full transcript of Williams and Storrie's first joint interview here.) In early August—just days before starting production on the highly anticipated second season, slated for next year—Tierney hopped on a video call with us to reflect on season one and drop a few hints about what lies ahead.

Teen Vogue: You write in _I'll Believe in Anything_ that memory plays a crucial role in how you wanted to adapt Shane and Ilya's relationship for the screen. At what point during the adaptation process did you settle on that thematic through line, and why did you feel that was the best way to tell those early chapters of their love story?

Jacob Tierney: I don't know when I settled on it. It's probably something I realized more as I went along, that that's what I was doing. I just knew that the moments that mattered were the moments where they met, the moments where they interacted with each other. So when I did attempt to fill in the blanks, I was like, "Why am I doing this? Who cares?" The architecture that matters here is their love story. So if they're doing things off on their own, unless it's teaching me something about their relationship, I don't need it.



Heated Rivalry - Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in episode 101 of Heated Rivalry. Cr. Sabrina Lantos © 2025 `sabrina lantos`

_TV_: The final cut of the pilot maintains the core of your original script, but you actually moved some scenes around, cut some of them down, or axed them entirely.

JT: The very beginning changes. The rest of it doesn't.

change. There's so much information off the top that is actually quite important. But, ultimately, I didn't have the resources to do some of the things I wanted to do, which changed things. And then, when we were fucking around in the editing room, I was like, "Meh, this is a bit of a limp opening. We get there, but we're not *there* there." We cut that [opening] scene entirely, and then it was my editor, Arthur, who was like, "What if we did a version of that and we opened the show with that?"

What I liked about it too is—speaking of memories—I was like, "Oh, God, they would remember this [first meeting] so clearly." What they're talking about doesn't matter. It almost never matters what Shane and Ilya are talking about. [*Laughs*.] But in this scene in particular, the point is... It's full of platitudes. "Where are your parents? My parents are here, blah, blah, blah." It's like, "Who fucking cares?" But the point is that they don't know what to say to each other. So Shane is being Mr. Polite Boy asking normal questions, and Ilya is not comfortable in English and covers it up with being aloof. He doesn't understand a lot of what Shane is asking him, and he's just being like, "Yes. No."

What worked was the contact, and what didn't work was how long the scene was. We tried a bunch of versions of it. It almost needed to be very short or very long, and I was like, "The very long version is not episode one material. I want to move this along. I want to get to those stationary bikes real quick." That's the idea we're barreling towards.



Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in episode 101 of Heated Rivalry. Sabrina Lantos

_TV_: In the pilot, Ilya reveals that it was his idea for him and Shane to film the hockey gear commercial together. What was the thought process behind adding that line that wasn't in the book? Do you think Ilya carefully wrestled with admitting that to Shane, or was it more of an impulsive slip of the tongue?

JT: Almost everything Ilya does is impulsive at that age. It's so important to remember that he's 18, so he doesn't have a master plan. Him being a Lothario or [this idea] that he's so good in bed—you're like, [*in a mocking tone*] "*Sure*. Every 18-year-old is *so good* in bed." No, he's just confident—and he's trying to unsettle Shane every chance he can get because he wants a reaction out of him. So what I like about that moment is that I don't even know if it's true. Ilya could be saying that to f*ck with him. We don't know. But what we *do* know is that he's thrilled to say it, so I like that part.

an actor—is that you have a sense of yourself, and then you have a sense of how other people see you publicly, and a sense of how they talk about you that most people don't get. And then, it's really just kind of growing up with that. What does that do to you if you're 18 and you're drafted one and two into the sport of your dreams? [I think about] the pressure on you, the sense of responsibility that comes with that, the desire to be perfect.

I talk a lot about Shane's desire for perfection and its kind of oppositional nature to queerness, in the sense that that's a very difficult thing for somebody like that to wrap their minds around. "How could I be gay *and* be perfect? I don't think I can be both those things." It's interesting to me how it would manifest in this relationship, which is so intense and intimate and *so* secret. So I think it just gives you a lot of room for good behavior, which is always a thing I'm looking for. [It leads to] interesting human moments in behavior, where you're zigging where you're supposed to zag and just doing things that you don't expect.

Honestly, Rachel's book is such a great recipe for that. There are these really unexpected scenes, like in episode two. When they meet in the bathroom after the awards show, it just does not go the way you think it's going to go. I don't think it goes the way *they* think it's going to go. I love those moments where, probably with another network, [the executives] would've been like, "What is this scene? Why is this happening? Why is Shane allowing [Ilya to be intimate with him]? I thought he was mad at Ilya. Why did he change? What changed?" And you're like, "I don't know." But, look, it's so much more interesting than the other version of what it could have been.



Hudson Williams as Shane Hollander in Episode 105 BTS of Heated Rivalry. Sabrina Lantos © 2025

***TV*: Ilya baring his soul to Shane over the phone in Russian is one of the most important moments of the novel, but you were given the tall order of actually having to write out that monologue in episode five. How many drafts did you go through before finalizing what exactly Ilya would say? Did Connor or his Russian dialect coach Kate Yablunovsky have any suggestions that you included in the end?**

JT: No, they didn't. It was two drafts probably—not more than that. When I write stuff like that, I tend to do method writing [*laughs*] where I'm in Ilya's brain like, "What would he say now? What is accumulating? What has happened? What have we seen? What are the rest of the pressures? What would he be thinking about?"

To me, [that monologue] was a lot of just being overwhelmed by coming back to this place and feeling like a bank. He's like, "I'm endlessly just a withdrawal for these people, one way or the other. I'm not a person." He's making so much more money

***TV*: There is a specific cut line from the pilot that I want to ask you about. When Shane and Scott cross paths at the afterparty of the awards ceremony — right after Shane has won rookie of the year — Scott jokingly calls himself Captain America. Was that supposed to be a reference to the rumor that *Game Changer* was originally a Steve/Bucky fanfiction?**

JT: [*Laughs.*] I don't know about Steve-Bucky fanfiction. I'm not even aware of that. No, he's just Captain America because that's who he's supposed to be. There's way less meaning to that than people attribute to it. Yeah, that didn't even occur to me.

***TV*: Do you think that Scott picked up on the exact nature of Shane and Ilya's relationship at any point this season?**

JT: In this season *maybe*, but definitely not in episode one. Frankly, Scott is the kind of character who is so scared and so obsessed with his own sense of being different that he cannot see it in other people. He doesn't recognize that anyone else could share what he's going through because he thinks he's so alone. So he's trained himself to not look for it. He's not looking for it in other people, especially other hockey players, because that's dangerous. What he's doing is being the captain of the Big Brothers Club of America.

What he's very keenly aware of is the enormous pressure placed on the two of them, because he had that pressure placed on him. So [he's like], "Like it or lump it, you guys are interconnected, because the league has decided that this [rivalry] is a storyline. You got drafted to Montreal and Boston. All of this adds up to: You're never escaping this. This is going to be your life. So good luck to you." So when he does that thing of, "Where's your boy Rozanov?"—he's just assuming a level of maturity that

their epic, sweeping kiss at the end of episode five. Like many viewers, I assumed that Scott's championship game was the first time that he and Kip had seen each other since breaking up two years earlier. But you seem to have established in your own writing that they had a pretty tumultuous relationship, so they were still seeing each other on and off.

JT: "Established" is a big word. This is just what played around in my head. [*Laughs*.]

***TV*: Why do you think they go through an on-again, off-again relationship in your version of the story, and why did you opt not to include any of that development of the relationship in the show?**

JT: Because it's tedious. It would be the same thing over and over again. The conversation they have at the end of episode three, *that's* the conversation. I think like a lot of real-life big problems, did they solve it? No. Does it mean that they broke up? No, they can't resist each other; they're very much in love. But how much is Kip willing to put up with? I'm sure he blocks Scott's number and unblocks it because he gets sad, and then Scott will do something huge and romantic and he'll be like, "Okay, we can try this again." And then after another three months, he's like, "I can't just live in your fucking apartment like a prop. I can't do this." I've seen a lot of relationships tread water, and I think they're just treading water—whatever that means for them.

But I do think that at the end of episode five, it's been a minute since they've seen each other, and Kip is going to this game because he knows how much it means to Scott. That's his version of being like, "Of course I still love you. Of course I know that nothing matters to you [more]." This guy keeps picking hockey over him, so he is like, "Okay, I went to your hockey game. I saw you won the Cup." I bet there's a part of [Kip], too, that's like, "Will it be different after this? Has this itch been scratched? Is that possible?"



Connor Storrie as Ilya Rozanov in Episode 104 of Heated Rivalry. Sabrina Lantos © 2025

***TV*: I also know that you intentionally expanded characters like Svetlana (Ksenia Daniela Kharlamova) and Rose (Sophie Nélisse) to emphasize the importance of female allyship, especially in the lives of queer men. From a writing perspective, was there anything in particular that you wanted to capture about those relationships?**

JT: I wanted them to feel different in their own way. I really just grounded them in the experience of what was happening in the show. I relate to all of them in different ways, and I’ve had friends like those throughout my life. But a lot of the things that Rose talks about have happened to me. I was kidnapped many, many times as a child in movies and TV shows—I think five times.

***TV*: Really?**

time, and I love her. She's so funny. She's so confident. I was like, "If I could bottle Nadine's energy, Elena will be perfect."

It was just [about] treating them like everybody else, honestly, and taking them seriously, while obviously—you're quite right—putting a primacy on the relationship between queer men and their female allies specifically. And in a slightly more cynical or mechanical way of looking at it, when you're adapting a book, there's so much inner dialogue or inner thought that you can't express. You need somebody to say things out loud, so you have to give them a friend to talk to. Somebody has to say something at a certain point—with Shane in particular. So once Rose was coming in, I was like, "Okay, there should be a floodgate almost of, 'Okay, you can finally talk to somebody.'"

***TV*: One of the first season's more unsung dynamics is the fan-favorite pairing of Shane and his teammate Hayden—or, as you like to call them, "Shayden." Given that Hayden famously has four kids in the novels, Shane's cheeky line—"You want to get me pregnant too?"—was hilariously on-the-nose. I still don't know how you managed to sneak that line into the show.**

JT: Me neither!

***TV*: What exactly were you looking for when you were casting the role of Hayden, and what stands out to you about Shane's relationship with him?**

JT: It's a role that I knew, should we be lucky enough to make more, was also going to grow. So this casting is very important, much like the casting of Kyle in a way, where I was like, "He doesn't have a lot to do in this [season], but boy, oh boy, if we go forward,

Hayden adores Shane, right? Part of what is interesting to think about there—and to explore a little bit—is that Hayden wants to be the safest place. No matter what he’s presenting, he wants to be so safe for Shane because he knows something’s wrong. He doesn’t know what it is, but he knows that there’s something [bothering Shane]. So everything he’s doing is trying to be like, “Hey… I’m your buddy. You can tell me anything. Yeah… I know what that means." And he *doesn’t* know what it means, but he does want to make sure that Shane knows how much he loves him. It’s a bit of a golden retriever vibe. That’s what you want—a sweet, open face; a guy that would be willing to do anything for you.



Sabrina Lantos © 2025

JT: That's a great question. I've never felt more connected to other queer people. I didn't really think that that would happen from this [experience]. It's been the response, honestly, from queer women. The way that this show has found its way into the hearts of so many people is so moving—and it certainly makes me regret ever hesitating doing gay stuff, adding in queer stuff. That self-policing I think a lot of us do, where we're like, "I don't want to make this too gay, or maybe I should stop doing gay stuff." Now I'm just like, "Nah, all I'm doing is gay stuff now!" So it certainly gives me the confidence to do that, of being like, "No, we're going to keep going down this path." [*Laughs.*]

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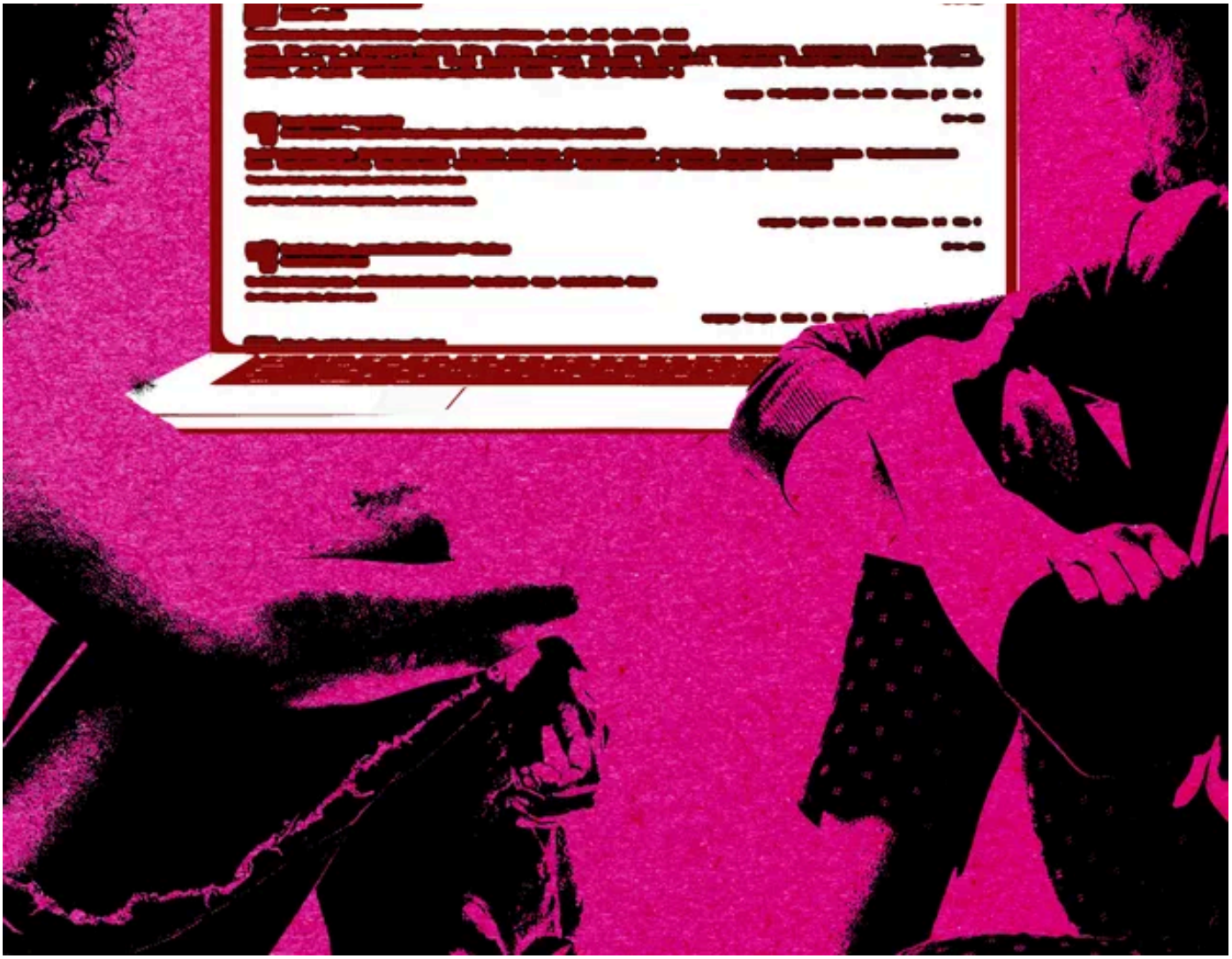


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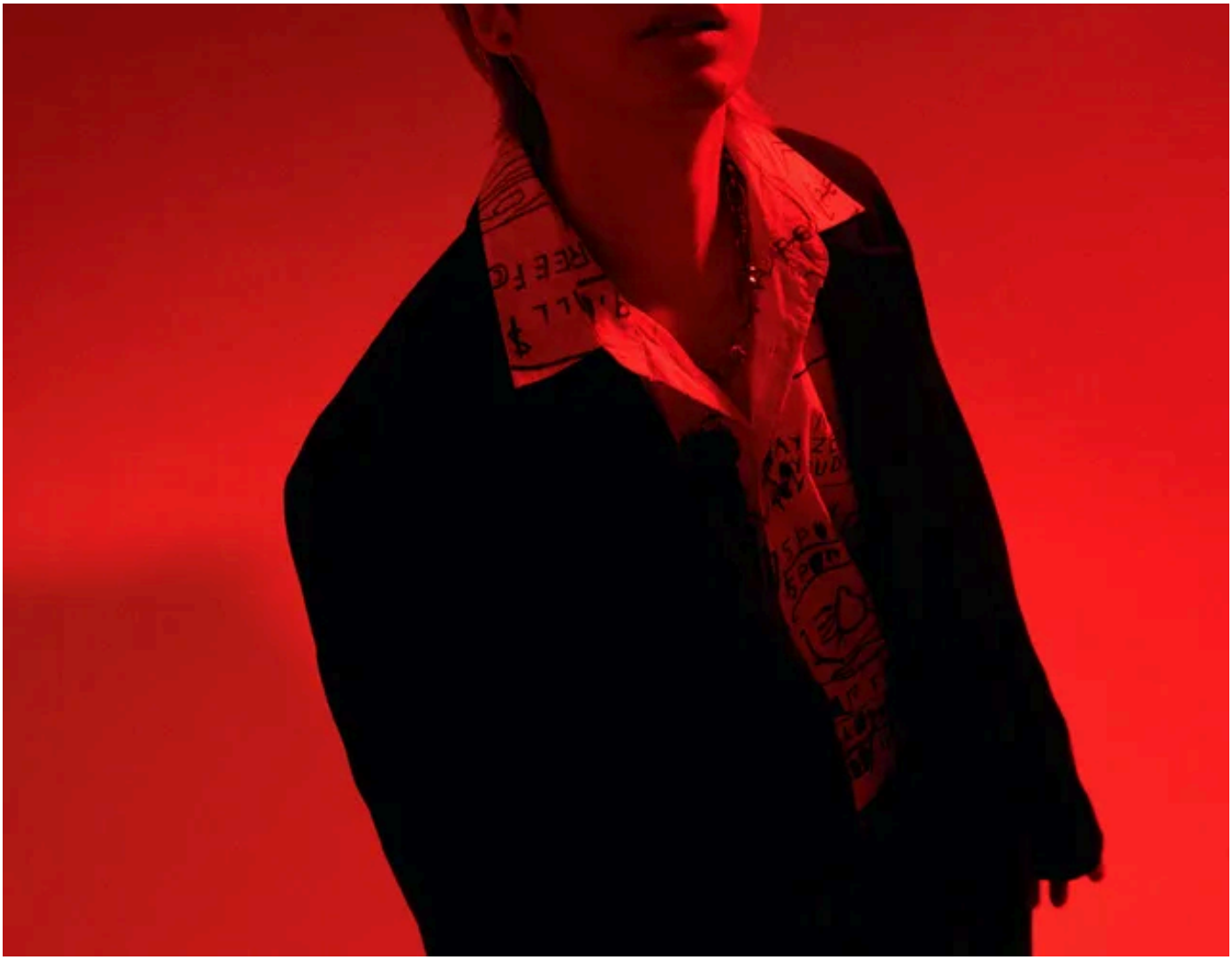


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