Seven Kilograms

by Anonymous_Introvert78

Summary

“So let me get this straight,” Taeyong ground out. “They want you to basically live off celery sticks and coffee so that you can lose the 7kg they want you to lose before the comeback next month, but still dance flat out for seven hours a day and maintain your abs despite apparently having too much muscle?”

There was a pause as Jaehyun mulled over his leader’s words before he nodded.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Notes

Thank you so much for this request! I had so much fun writing it. Maybe a little too much. I kind of got carried away. I hope this is what you were looking for, george_weasleys_cries, and thank you for being so patient!

See the end of the work for more notes
“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Hyung, no matter how many times you say it, it isn’t going to change.”

Taeyong swore loudly, raking his hands through his hair and turning to face the wall as though Jaehyun couldn’t see the way all his muscles were tensed and frozen in frustration and his shoulders were heaving in poorly concealed fury.

Johnny was still clutching Jaehyun’s phone, reading and re-reading the email that had just landed in his inbox with his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open in disbelief. Like he could change the words just by staring at them hard enough.

“They can’t do this,” he muttered under his breath. “They actually can’t do this.”

“Well, they have,” Jaehyun sighed, closing his eyes and allowing his head to flop back against the sofa cushions. “And if we want to keep our faces unbruised then there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Taeyong barked out the harshest and bitterest laugh that pretty much summed up everything all three of them were feeling at that moment.

SM needed them. They were one of their most successful and active artists, particularly as EXO were slowly filtering into the military. And yet they were abusing them, extorting them, exploiting them and using them for their faces and their bodies and their voices.

To them, they were products. Nothing more. Just money-making machines.

When did it end? Why did they put up with it? Some of them had been so young when they’d started that they couldn’t actually remember what freedom felt like. Why didn’t they quit the whole thing and start living like human beings?

It was moments like this that they truly didn’t know the answer.

“But this isn’t sustainable,” Johnny was still mumbling, scrolling through the list on the screen. “How are you supposed to perform at your best if this is all they’re allowing you to eat?”

“I don’t know,” Jaehyun declared, throwing up his hands in exhausted defeat. “They said I was gaining too much muscle and ruining my own image by putting on weight.”

“So let me get this straight,” Taeyong ground out, finally facing away from the wall with his jaw set in the way it always was when his protective dial was turned all the way up.

“They want you to basically live off celery sticks and coffee so that you can lose the 7kg they want you to lose before the comeback next month, but still dance flat out for seven hours a day and maintain your abs despite apparently having too much muscle?”

There was a pause as Jaehyun mulled over his leader’s words before he nodded.
“Pretty much, yeah.”

The following string of infuriated expletives that spewed from Taeyong’s mouth actually caused Jaehyun to chuckle a little but the reality was that there was nothing even remotely humorous about their current situation.

His company – the people who were supposed to protect and nurture him – were literally forcing him to starve himself, and they were allowed to, all because he’d signed some contract when he was still a child.

“You’re going to have to be so careful,” Johnny said, finally dropping the phone and joining his friend on the couch. “I mean it, Jaehyun. Losing this much weight in such a short space of time could make you really sick.”

Jaehyun didn’t answer. He was too tired to be angry and he was too angry to be hurt even though he knew he should be.

He had worked so hard for a body he could finally be proud of instead one he was constantly worried was too flimsy and pathetic for a dancer, but instead of praising him for his dedication, they were basically calling him too fat to be an idol.

It was insulting. It was humiliating. It was demoralising. But he had to follow along like the obedient little pretty boy they had conditioned him to be or else they would sue him until he drowned in debt.

“We’ve got you,” Taeyong was saying, still visibly seething even as he crouched in front of Jaehyun. “No matter what you look like or what you weigh, we’ve got you and we’re not losing you.”

And Jaehyun appreciated that, but even if it made him feel loved and important, his members promising to help him through this wasn’t going to protect him from the wrath that would rain down on him if he didn’t lose that weight in time.

Seven kilograms.

In one month.

Seven kilograms in one month.

That was dangerous. Surely the company knew that. They claimed that they consulted dieticians and health specialists so shouldn’t they be perfectly aware that thirty days was not a realistic amount of time in which somebody could shed fifteen pounds.

“I’m going to call the manager.”

“Taeyong-hyung …”

“No, Jaehyun. I’m going to call the manager and I’m going to get them to tear up that diet plan because this is ridiculous.”

“You can’t,” came Taeil’s voice from the doorway. “You know you can’t.”

He trudged over, holding out his hand so Johnny could deposit the phone in his palm and he could read for himself what his little brother was being subjected to.
Jaehyun knew he was absolutely right. They couldn’t afford for Taeyong to have any more bruised ribs or black eyes with the comeback so close, and once he’d calmed down, Taeyong would see that, too.

He just needed to get the anger out of his system.

Taeil skimmed over the email, his eyes getting narrower and his lips getting thinner the further down the page he got, before he lowered the phone and glanced at Jaehyun as though inspecting him.

There was a pause before he finally asked, “You know you’re not fat, right?”

“Well, duh …” Taeyong tried to interject but Taeil held up a hand and silenced him in less than a second.

“I want to hear it from him. Jaehyun, you’re aware that you aren’t fat, right?”

“Yes,” Jaehyun sighed. “Of course, I know I’m not fat.”

They’d been through this process before. He knew the protocol. He knew the questions they were going to ask him and the answers he had to give so that they could ascertain how stable his mental state was in the wake of such a disgusting command from their company.

They’d done it with Donghyuck. They’d done it with Johnny. They’d done it with Jeno. They’d done it with Yukhei, and now it seemed that it was his turn.

“I know the drill, hyung,” he expelled, the exhaustion coming through in his tone. “And I’m not insecure about my body. I’m not going to take things too far. I’m not going to keep secrets. I’m not going to let myself slip and I’m not going to become anorexic.”

They were still looking at him with scepticism and concern and he knew they were just trying to do their jobs as the three eldest so that what happened to Taeyong and Ten and Chenle wasn’t going to happen to him, but it just made him feel small. Like he wasn’t capable of looking after himself.

“Alright,” Taeil nodded. “But you know how dangerous this slope is. The minute you start slipping …”

“I will tell you,” Jaehyun cut him off. “I promise. I’ll tell you. So can I go now? Because I’m not allowed to eat anything until tomorrow morning so I need to go and distract myself from how hungry I am.”

He didn’t wait for a response before pushing up off the couch and storming from the room, shaking off the hand that Johnny tried to lay on his shoulder and ignoring Taeil’s call of his name.

He loved his job. He loved the people he got to do his job with.

But sometimes he hated it. Sometimes he hated them and it wasn’t their fault but he just couldn’t stand to be around them or else he would start comparing their bodies with his, trying to figure out why they were acceptable but he wasn’t.

If the company wanted him to lose weight then, fine, he would lose weight. It wasn’t really like he had much of a choice anyway. They’d dock his pay, restrict his screen time and reduce his lines if he didn’t meet with their requirements.

But seven kilograms? In one month? Were they trying to kill him?
The bathroom scales were cold beneath the skin of his feet, pricking his legs with goosebumps as he awaited the appearance of that almighty number on the tiny little rectangular screen at the top.

He supposed he should get used to the sinking feeling in his stomach every time he saw his worth printed in kilograms just above his toes. This was his existence now. Every day for the next month.

His company had better be goddamn satisfied when he showed up on MCountdown looking like a skeleton. Because if that’s what they wanted then that was what they would get.

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For the first week, he stuck to the diet they gave him.

It was awful, his stomach constantly pining for sustenance and twisting itself into cramped knots when he refused to give it the calories it craved. It felt like there was a monster inside of him that would scream in protest every time he refused a bite of food.

But despite how many meals he avoided and how much water he drank, he still hadn’t lost enough weight, a crime that was clearly unforgiveable according to the manager who glared at him over the top of the scales in the corner of the dance studio.

“Are you serious?” he asked, his lip curled in disgust as he regarded the boy before him like he was dirt on the bottom of his shoe. “You’re really giving me this attitude when we’re so close to comeback?”

Jaehyun had to resist the urge to roll his eyes, his cheeks burning as he felt the rest of his group’s eyes on him from behind.

They were supposed to be practising but he knew they were worried about him. He knew they were waiting for the inevitable explosion and he knew that Taeyong was just waiting to jump in and do what he always did: deflect and defend.

But the scales had been placed in this room for a reason. So the artists would feel humiliated if they were too heavy. So everybody would be able to witness the scolding they received for pigging out on too many occasions to maintain an acceptable body mass index.

And Jaehyun hated it.

“I’ll try harder,” he mumbled through gritted teeth, reminding himself that he was fine the way he was and all of this was just a process he had to go through. “I’ll lose the weight in time.”

“You’d better,” came the growl in his ear before the manager turned on his heel and stalked off.

Taeyong would call that lucky. Jaehyun just called it irritating.

And so, for the second week, he cut out lunch altogether. He did an hour of sit ups every time he ate an apple. He told himself that he was doing this because he had to, not because he wanted to.

He was in a constant state of exhaustion. He snapped at Donghyuck and Mark when they were being too loud and he could barely get out of bed in the morning and he occasionally had to stop dancing for fear that he would faceplant straight into the floor.
He didn’t like the person he was becoming, but he was losing weight and he was losing it fast.

Maybe even fast enough to reach that stupidly unreasonable goal before the deadline.

“How much have you lost?” Johnny asked him one night after practise, nervously glancing over at where he was slumped in his car seat. “Jaehyun? You there?”

“Three and a half kilograms,” Jaehyun grunted back, too tired to even raise his head.

“In two weeks?”

“Yes.”

“This is insane,” Johnny cursed softly and Jaehyun didn’t need to have his eyes open to know that his hyung was shaking his head in critical disbelief. “This has got to be some kind of abuse.”

Of course, it was abuse. Abuse that was perfectly legal and couldn’t be faulted by anybody because Jaehyun had signed a stupid contract when he was fifteen years old.

Comeback was ten days away and he was still only halfway there. He could feel his body shrinking and his clothes growing looser and the crease in Taeyong’s eyebrows getting darker every time he looked at him but he was still only halfway there.

So he took that final step. As a matter of desperation.

He stopped eating altogether, relying solely on protein shakes, coffee and chewing gum to get him through each day.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew it was dangerous and unhealthy but it was only for one more week. Then he could stop. Then the company would be happy with his weight loss and would stop measuring his BMI every three days to keep track of his progress.

It was only for one more week.

It was only for one more week.

It was only for one more ---
“You’re starving.”

Jaehyun’s elbow slipped off the edge of the table and he only just caught himself before he could fall face first into the floor. Yuta was sitting opposite him, gnawing on his bottom lip in the way he always did when he was beyond worried.

“I know,” Jaehyun murmured, reaching up to rub the sleep from his eyes.

“How much have you eaten today?”

“Nothing. It’s only eight thirty in the morning.”

“And how much did you eat yesterday?”

Jaehyun opened one eye and regarded his hyung with nothing but apprehension. He could tell Yuta was trying to assess the situation, had probably been sent by Taeyong or Johnny, and if he told the truth then he would have hell raining down on top of him.

“Don’t lie.”

Well, that scuppered that plan then.

“Nothing.”

Yuta’s eyes darkened and he started grinding his teeth, clearly fighting the urge to slam his fist into the table and then go and beat the living daylights out of their management team. But then, at the last second, he sighed and his whole body seemed to just deflate.

“Here,” he said, stuffing his hand into his pocket and sliding a breakfast bar across the table. “We’re dancing flat out for probably well over ten hours today. There’s absolutely no way you’re going to get through without something in your system.”

Jaehyun picked up the snack and flipped it over in his palm, scanning the list of ingredients and the calorie information printed in tiny black letters on the back.

“Don’t read that.” Yuta snapped, snatching the wrapper and tearing it off before returning the rectangle of granola and yoghurt to Jaehyun’s hand. “It’s not going to help.”

“You and I both know that if I eat this and they decide to weigh me today, I’m going to get my screen time cut down and my lines shortened.”

“So fucking what?” Yuta growled back, glowering at his younger brother and the energy bar still resting in his palm. “Look at me. No screen time, no lines. I manage just fine.”

That was a lie if ever Jaehyun heard one.

“What would you rather, Jaehyun? Fewer moments in the spotlight or having your heart give out in the middle of a performance with hundreds of people watching you?”

He was right. Jaehyun knew he was right and maybe he was being selfish by wanting more time with the cameras pointed at him and longer verses in their songs, but if he faceplanted in the middle of an Mnet stage then the company would probably pull him from promotions entirely.
So he closed his eyes, he took a deep breath, he pushed aside the fear and he bit down on that sugary wall of nuts and oats stuck together with honey and drizzled with vanilla yoghurt.

And it tasted good.

It tasted really good.

“Thanks,” he whispered in Yuta’s direction just before Jungwoo poked his head out of the practice room door and told them they were needed inside.

“No problem,” Yuta shot back, linking his arm with Jaehyun’s and pulling him onto the polished panels.

NCT 127 were infamous for their choreography and its individuality. ‘Cherry Bomb’, ‘Black On Black’, ‘Regular’ … Not only were they physically exhausting but there also wasn’t a dance out there that could compare to them.

And usually Jaehyun could take it. Usually he could keep up without feeling as if his heart was about to explode out of his chest and his limbs were going to burst into flames. Usually he could be the dancer NCT needed.

But recently, his stamina had been dwindling and his strength had been fading almost as quickly as the muscles seemed to be disappearing from his bones.

He thought that Yuta’s protein bar would give him the boost he needed to get through the endless repetition of the same demanding routine but, for some reason, he felt worse and his condition only seemed to be deteriorating as time stretched on.

He was missing beats, he was forgetting entire steps, he was struggling to remember where he was supposed to be and he could literally feel his manager’s withering eyes burning holes in his failing body.

“What’s wrong?” Mark hissed as they finished their seventh run-through, pressing a water bottle to his forehead. “Are you going to pass out?”

Jaehyun didn’t know. He truly didn’t.

He knew what it felt like to faint. He’d done it countless times before, but this wasn’t the same. There was no burning behind the eyes and tingling of the fingers.

Instead, there was sweat pouring off him in torrents and shivers wracking his body and some kind of foggy sensation putting a dampening on his mind. He couldn’t remember the name of their title song. He couldn’t remember when Mark had dyed his hair green.

He couldn’t … He just couldn’t. And now he couldn’t remember what he couldn’t do.

“Hyung?” Mark called and, for a moment, Jaehyun thought he was talking to him. “Taeyong-hyung, he’s not well.”

Taeyong’s fingers were digging into his shoulders. Taeyong’s face was swimming in front of him. Park Taeyong. Park … Park Taeyong, right? That was his name, right? Park? Was it Park?

“Sit down,” Taeyong ordered and Jaehyun didn’t need to be told twice, his knees folding on command and his entire body just flopping to the floor.
He was so tired. He was so, so tired.

“Just breathe,” Mark was saying and there was a hand rubbing up and down his back and only then did he realise his lungs were turning to sand. “Taeyong-hyung’s sorting it. Just breathe.”

Jaehyun sagged obediently against his little brother’s chest, his eyelids suddenly hanging like concrete over corneas that couldn’t have been working properly if the fuzziness of his vision was anything to go by.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realised Taeyong was talking with their manager in the corner of the room, their voices steadily rising in volume and adding to the cacophony raging between his ears.

*SMACK!*

Everything went silent.

Doyoung and Donghyuck had been crouched beside him and Mark, offering water bottles and sugary snacks that might boost his blood pressure, but at the sound of flesh meeting flesh, the two of them froze.

The others had been hanging back a little to try and give him space, their eyes constantly on their fallen member in case their assistance was needed but as a flat palm made contact with a bony cheek, their attention immediately switched sources.

Taeyong’s face was still turned to the left in the wake of the slap, his jaw already turning red, and Jaehyun was suddenly very – very – sober.

They knew Taeyong got hit sometimes. It was just a fact of the idol life and, as the leader, Taeyong was almost always the one to come home with a black eye or a bruised shin, but none of them had ever witnessed it for themselves.

The abuse usually happened behind closed doors and behind closed doors only and Taeyong most definitely downplayed the severity of the assault so as not to worry the rest of them, but now there was no denying it.

That slap had hurt him. That slap had meant to hurt him.

“You will respect your superiors!” their manager roared at Taeyong who was still yet to move an inch since the impact occurred. “If I say he dances, he dances! Who the fuck are you to tell me otherwise? Who the fuck are you to talk back to me? You worthless pieces of shit would be nothing without me so shut your fucking mouth, get that useless wimp back on his feet and start fucking dancing!”

The tension could have been cut with a knife.

Taeyong still wasn’t moving and Jaehyun couldn’t see his face but he could tell it was screwed up in pain. He wanted to get up and reach out for him, to check if he was okay, if he was going to bruise when they were so close to comeback, but he was too tired.

He just hoped his leader would return to the dance floor, help him to his feet and then start the music so they could get this torturous rehearsal over and done with.

But Taeyong was Taeyong: leader, hyung, friend. And they should have predicted what the idiot would say next.
“Jaehyun’s hypoglycaemic. He needs to rest or he’s not going to be able to perform next week.”

The words had barely left his mouth before the manager’s hand was fisted in his hair and he was being thrown to his knees.

“Hyungnim!” Taeil cried, starting forwards to intervene but Taeyong held out a restraining hand, silently ordering him to stay back despite the pain twisted into his expression.

“Get on your hands,” the manager growled and Taeyong sent the bastard a look that could wither an oak tree before he manoeuvred himself into a press-up position.

Jaehyun was still on the floor. Jaehyun should get up. This was happening because Taeyong had tried to defend him. Had tried to help him. He shouldn’t be allowing this to go on.

“Practice continues!” their superior bellowed at the rest of them. “We’re going to run through this song until it’s absolutely fucking flawless. Only then is your pathetic excuse for a leader allowed to get up.”

If looks could kill, the man would be dead.

“Mark,” Jaehyun gasped, clinging to the front of the younger boy’s shirt for support. “Mark, help me get up.”

Taeyong couldn’t hold that position for long. It was probably already causing him a great deal of agony and if they didn’t get this routine perfect then he was going to have to stay that way until his bones broke or his muscles snapped or his spleen ruptured or something.

Jaehyun would not be the cause of anymore of his hyung’s pain.

“Start the music,” he ground out, stumbling slightly as he finally made it to his feet. “Just start it.”

The others followed his lead, getting into position as Jungwoo scuttled over to the sound system and pressed PLAY, preparing their already-exhausted bodies for another three and a half minutes of exertion.

Taeyong was already starting to shuffle on his hands, a clear indication that the pain was getting to him, and Jaehyun felt his blood boiling.

Maybe it literally was boiling. He sure was sweating enough for it. He sure felt ill enough for it.

Had the music started? He hadn’t noticed. And now he was a beat behind and he could see that fucking sadistic smirk on the manager’s face as he struggled to catch up and the bastard didn’t even stop them.

He let them carry on, right the way until the end before he barked out a curt, “Too sloppy. Start again.”

Jaehyun didn’t feel well.

But this was for Taeyong. Taeyong who was in this situation only because of him. Taeyong who must be experiencing the most excruciating agony as he continued to hold the position he’d been forced into.

“Again!”

Jaehyun didn’t feel well.
But he had to keep dancing. For Taeyong. And he kept making mistakes. Why couldn’t he stop making mistakes? Why couldn’t he even remember the words to this song? Why could he no longer hear the music?

“Do it again!”

Jaehyun didn’t feel … *THUD!*

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Taeyong’s head snapped up at the sound of a body hitting the floor so hard that it shook.

For at least thirty minutes now, his abdominal muscles had been burning almost unbearably but nothing – absolutely nothing – was more painful than seeing Jaehyun lying motionless on the ground.

Taeyong scrambled up from his position, completely ignoring the manager’s shriek of “what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” and propelled himself over to where Johnny was already heaving their fallen friend into his arms.

“Get back up!” the manager yelled. “Stop faking and get the fuck back up, you useless --!”

He started forwards, his hands already balled into fists but Doyoung was way faster, inserting himself protectively in the space between assailant and victim with his hands folded politely in front of him.

“Don’t,” was all he said.

Taeyong phased everything else out, choosing instead to focus all his attention on the beads of sweat drenching Jaehyun’s hairline and the way his body seemed to be twitching, his head lolling lifelessly in the crook of Johnny’s arm.

“This isn’t right,” the second eldest hissed, and Taeyong couldn’t agree more.

Jaehyun’s eyelids were flickering, muscles spasming, and every single person in that room knew this didn’t look like a textbook fainting.

Even the manager had gone silent.

“Mark, call an ambulance.”

The kid already had a phone in his hand and as Taeyong leant forwards to take Jaehyun’s pulse, he met Johnny’s eye over their best friend’s body.

“This is serious.”

Jaehyun’s eyes slid open, rolled back into his head and then closed again, and Taeyong was on the verge of a full-on panic attack as he glared up at the manager hovering over them with tears in his eyes and growled out the words,

“Are you finally fucking happy now?”
They’d pushed Jaehyun to this. They’d threatened him with his job, with violence, with humiliation and then they’d even tried to use his leader to blackmail him into working his body into the ground.

This – whatever was happening to Jaehyun right now – was their fault.

“The ambulance is coming,” Mark mumbled, returning to his hyungs’ side and staring at the prone body with nothing but panic in his expression. “They said to lie him flat and keep his legs up.”

Johnny didn’t look like he was prepared to let anybody take Jaehyun from his arms but he lowered him to the floor nonetheless as Donghyuck took his feet and propped them up on a chair.

And Jaehyun was still twitching and sweating and wheezing like his airway had closed up.

“I’m going to kill these people,” Johnny was muttering under his breath, fingers combing through Jaehyun’s sodden hair. “Seven kilograms? He could be dying for seven fucking kilograms? I’m going to fucking kill them.”

And he was going to have a lot of help.

It took almost five more minutes for the paramedics to arrive and, by the time they had, the intensity of Doyoung and Yuta’s glares had chased the manager right out of the door in both crippling shame and flustered embarrassment.

Realising that Johnny wasn’t about to give up his spot by Jaehyun’s head, Taeyong shifted to the side to make way for the medical professionals, nibbling on his bottom lip with his eyes anxiously rallying between the EMTs and the gradually worsening condition of his friend.

“Tell us what happened,” one of the medics instructed as she started unpacking the necessary equipment and fastening a blood pressure cuff around Jaehyun’s upper arm. “Any information can help.”

“He’s been starving himself,” Johnny cut in at once, his jaw bulging and his teeth grinding as he continued combing his fingers through his best friend’s hair. “For almost a month now. I haven’t seen him swallow anything other than coffee in the last week.”

The machine attached to the pressure cuff gave a satisfied beep and the moment the paramedic’s eyes honed in on the numbers printed against the screen, Taeyong knew it was just as bad as he’d thought.

“This is too high for somebody who hasn’t eaten anything,” she muttered to her partner who was strapping an oxygen mask to Jaehyun’s nose and mouth, emphasising the severity of the situation.

“Actually,” Yuta voiced from off to the side, instantly drawing the attention of everybody in the room. “I gave him a protein bar about … uh … six or seven hours ago.”

Taeyong thought that was good. If Jaehyun had been able to eat something – even if it was just a protein bar – then he should be getting better. So why wasn’t he getting better?

Why was he lying on the ground with his head in Johnny’s hands, an oxygen mask clamped over his face and a pair of paramedics crouching over him, looking visibly concerned for his wellbeing?

And did they say his blood pressure was too high? He thought that malnutrition meant it would be lower?

“What do you think?” the male paramedic whispered. “Could it be refeeding syndrome?”
Refeeding syndrome? What the hell was refeeding syndrome?

“It’s definitely a possibility,” his partner shot back. “Which means we need to get him to the hospital now. His heart’s already unstable enough. He could start seizing or just go into cardiac arrest.”

What? Seizing? As in seizures? And cardiac arrest? As in … As in actual death? This wasn’t happening. This actually couldn’t be happening. This was … This was crazy. It couldn’t be real.

He couldn’t have allowed Jaehyun to get this sick.

“I’ll get the gurney,” the male EMT declared, his knees popping as he straightened up from where he’d been couching. “I’ll hurry.”

“Wait …” Johnny called, his voice ever so slightly cracked as he spoke. “Can I carry him? That would be faster, right? Is it safe for me to carry him?”

The thin-lipped woman shot him a sharp glance just as she pricked Jaehyun’s finger with some weird yellow needle machine, “You think you can?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then let’s go.”

Taeyong was too numb to move, too paralysed at the thought of seeing Jaehyun’s back arch in a seizure or the monitor at his bedside stuttering into a final resounding beep that signified the death of his heart.

It was Jungwoo and Donghyuck that helped sit Jaehyun up so Johnny could hook his hands beneath the patient’s knees and lift him onto his back, having to lean forward slightly so that his friend stayed secure.

“You good?” the paramedic questioned, eagle eyes narrowing at the sight of Johnny shuffling slightly to adjust his burden into a better position. “Because we cannot afford for you to drop him right now.”

“I’m good,” Johnny shot back, already taking massive strides towards the door as though he wasn’t carrying a full-grown man on his back, the paramedic keeping close to his side so that the oxygen cylinder she was carrying was never too far from Jaehyun’s mask.

The others filed after them, probably hoping to be able to help in some way, shape or form even though it was clear that Johnny was going to be the one climbing into the back of the ambulance, and Taeyong was left alone.

Just kneeling on the floor, staring at the spot where his best friend had been lying only a few seconds previously, his skin pale and pasty and shining with sweat.

He thought they’d taken every precaution. He thought they’d been safe. He thought they’d done everything right to ensure that what had happened before wasn’t going to happen again, but it had.

And, this time, it could be life-threatening.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

One last hurrah! Here we go …

Also happy birthday to Doyoung ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny couldn’t remember ever feeling anger like this.

He’d been furious when Taeyong had first come home with a bruised face and when Chenle had needed to undergo therapy for what could have developed into an eating disorder had they not caught it when they did, but nothing like this.

No rage could ever compare to the bubbling boiling white hot demon brewing inside of him when he was finally allowed into Jaehyun’s hospital room after several hours of excruciating waiting and pacing and praying and silent seething.

It was like he didn’t even feel human anymore. His hands were curled into permanent fists, fingernails cutting into his palms, and the one thought ricocheting through his mind was what it would feel like to break his manager’s jaw.

But when he sat down at his best friend’s bedside and the chair gave a groaning creak beneath his weight, Jaehyun’s eyes crinkled ever so slightly before the lids pried themselves open and his glazed corneas shifted into focus.

“Hi,” Johnny gasped, leaning forwards to take hold of the limp hand resting against the bedsheets, carefully avoiding the IV embedded in his skin. “You’re okay. You’re in a hospital.”

All of that anger seemed to just dissipate, diffusing out of his body the minute that Jaehyun gave his fingers a feeble squeeze. It was like that tiny little action used up all his energy and his eyes slid closed again, head rolling slightly on the pillow.

The several minutes of silence that followed were more than enough to convince Johnny that the patient had fallen asleep again and he reached up towards Jaehyun’s face, needing to do something productive but instead simply resorting to adjusting the oxygen cannula threaded beneath the boy’s nose.

He was so pale, his skin almost as white as the mattress beneath him, and if it weren’t for the steady beep of the heart monitor, Johnny wouldn’t have even believed he was alive.

This was what seven kilograms was worth? Being this sick? Coming this close to death? The doctors said that he’d been lucky. That it could have been so much worse. Would Jaehyun really have died for those seven kilograms?

Remembering the promise he’d made to Taeil just before he’d leapt into the back of the ambulance, he dug his phone out of his pocket and dialled his only hyung’s number.

It rang only twice before Taeil picked up, his voice desperate and terrified and yet trying to sound
calm all at once even as he practically yelped out the words, “Johnny? How’s Jaehyun?”

“I’m with him right now,” Johnny relayed, combing a strand of Jaehyun’s hair behind his ear as he spoke. “The doctor said it was close but he should be okay.”

The sigh of relief seemed to bleed through the speakers, followed quickly by the muffled sounds of Taeil conveying the good news to the rest of the people who had undoubtedly been huddled around the phone for the last two hours.

“Did you speak to the management team?” Johnny continued, deliberately softening his tone when Jaehyun shifted slightly in his sleep. “What did they say?”

“That it wasn’t their fault,” Taeil ground out through gritted teeth. “That Jaehyun’s responsible for his own body and therefore they aren’t to blame for what happened.”

The urge to punch something or someone was coming back, almost twice as strong as it had been when he’d first laid eyes on Jaehyun’s unconscious body swallowed up in the big white bed.

“They agreed to postpone the comeback for a few weeks and there’s going to be an investigation to find out if Manager-nim’s fit to continue working with us but, let’s be honest, Johnny, nothing’s going to come from it.”

He was right. These “investigations” were launched all the time but it was just a hoax. A cover-up to keep the idols quiet by telling them that the people who’d hurt them would be brought to justice. In reality, there was no sanction, there was no punishment and there was no justice.

They would take the manager away for a week or two, give them a temporary replacement, and then before they knew it, he would be back with his bulging veins and his big red screaming face and his flat-palmed slaps that left bruises the colour of the night sky.

And if the comeback had been postponed then explanations were going to have to be given. The fans would need to be provided with some kind of information to excuse the delay, and Johnny knew that admitting the truth was the very last thing Jaehyun wanted.

He was already going to be in trouble with the company once he recovered. Maybe even before he recovered. As far as they were concerned, he had taken things too far, put his own health in jeopardy and caused a huge inconvenience.

No matter how badly Johnny and the others may try to protect him, there was only so much power they held.

“Something has to change,” Taeil breathed into the phone and Johnny found himself nodding softly even though he knew his hyung couldn’t see him. “Something has to change before one of us is killed. Look at what happened this time. We thought we had it under control and then Jaehyun nearly died. Something has to change.”

Johnny continued to nod, allowing his eyes to flutter closed for a brief moment of self-collection before he returned his attention to the boy in the bed, sleeping so peacefully that nobody would have been able to tell he’d been so close to death just a few hours previously.

“Maybe someday it will,” he hummed in response. “But not yet, hyung. Someday, but not yet.”

The conversation was over after that. They exchanged a few more empty sentences but no further information was passed and no more anger was expressed and, at last, Johnny hung up after promising fervently to call if there was any change in their friend’s condition.
He pocketed his phone and engrossed himself in the delicate joints of Jaehyun’s fingers, tracing the veins that stuck up against the underside of his skin and feeling the indentation of every bone, starkly prominent and alarmingly sharp.

Seven kilograms really didn’t sound like much but, looking at the effect it’d had on what had previously been a strong and muscular body, Johnny realised just how devastating a loss it was.

Jaehyun looked hollow, like his skin had just shrunken, clinging to every bone for support before it could be sucked in even further. His muscles had lost their turgor, melting away in his body’s last-ditch attempt to preserve fat.

He had been so strong and so confident and so comfortable in his own skin after years and years and years of obvious distaste at the way he looked and the face he bore.

That’s what he’d always said. That he wished he’d been born with a duller appearance so that people could appreciate him for his talent rather than his handsomeness.

Jung Jaehyun had finally found himself in a place he wanted to be. In a place he felt safe and content to be who he was. In a place where he was confident and secure enough to show his body on camera without fear of being ridiculed for his fragility or weakness.

And now all of that had been taken from him. In just a single month, a couple of weeks, that surety had been peeled from his soul and left him nothing more than a pile of bones that couldn’t even remember how to digest a protein bar.

“I can hear you thinking …”

The croak was so soft and so feeble that it could never have been seen as anything other than pitiful and pathetic but the sudden interruption of the silence he had grown so accustomed to still had Johnny flinching slightly in his seat.

He glanced up from his careful examination of the patient’s hand to see Jaehyun’s eyes cracked open, revealing nothing more than bloodshot slits beneath heavy lids. But the glaze was gone, or at least a little thinner than it had been the last time Johnny had seen it, a clear indication that Jaehyun was returning to lucidity.

“It’s annoying,” the boy finished with the ghost of a smile playing on his cracked lips. Never before had an insult felt so good.

“You’re back,” Johnny whispered, embarrassed by the sudden burning in the backs of his eyes. “Took you long enough.”

“Are you crying?” Jaehyun countered weakly, his smirk widening when Johnny turned away to furiously swat at the moisture on his face. “John, it’s okay. I’m not dying.”

“But you were,” Johnny shot back at once, a burst of resentment and anger shooting through him and prompting his fingers to tighten their grip on Jaehyun’s hand. “You were dying. For a while there, I thought you were going to.”

The younger boy’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly, his brows furrowing in the centre of his forehead as he tried to come to terms with what his hyung was saying. It was only then that he seemed to understand where he was.

“What happened to me?”
Johnny cleared his throat, drying his face with the back of one hand while keeping the other firmly wrapped around Jaehyun’s, before launching into an explanation of what he’d endured over the last few hours.

“You collapsed,” he said slowly and pointedly so as to be sure he was being understood. “And you had what they think might have been some kind of seizure.”

Jaehyun’s eyes widened at that, his lips springing open and his throat making a few unintelligible gurgles of shock before Johnny put him out of his misery and answered his silent question.

“We got you to the hospital, they pumped you full of electrolytes and managed to get your heart stabilised before you could go into cardiac failure.”

Saying it made it real. Before now, it had just been unintelligible slurs and slogans the doctors had spewed in his face at lightning speed but now that he was the one uttering the words, the truth was finally sinking in.

If Jaehyun wasn’t in front of him right now, eyes open, pulse steady and fingers tight around his hand, then Johnny wasn’t sure he would have been able to maintain his composure.

“The doctor said it was refeeding syndrome. You’ll have to stay here for a couple of days while they monitor your heart and reintroduce your body to food but then you can come home and we’ll look after you there.”

Jaehyun’s confusion seemed to have turned to numbness, as though he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

“What’s refeeding syndrome?” he finally rasped out, and Johnny felt his gut twisting.

“It’s when you start eating again after a long period of fasting and your electrolytes shift, meaning that you can’t metabolise food properly.”

He relayed the information robotically, trying to remember every word the doctor had told him, before his own emotion broke through.

“Jaehyun, it means you starved yourself for so long that your body forgot what it was supposed to do when you got to eat again. You were so addicted to an empty stomach that, when you finally did swallow something, your body basically went into withdrawal. You were so malnourished, Jaehyun, that you almost killed yourself with a fucking protein bar.”

And only now did Jaehyun seem to understand how thin the thread that kept him tethered to life had been.

There were tears pooling in the corner of his eyes when he finally managed to gasp the words, “I’m sorry,” and that simple sentiment had Johnny’s heart tearing itself into pieces inside his chest.

“I’m sorry,” Jaehyun repeated desperately, the heart monitor beside his bed starting to spike as his anxiety grew. “I didn’t know … I swear, John, I didn’t know. I thought … I thought it was under control. I never had any of those thoughts that Taeyong-hyung or Ten had and I knew I was being forced to do it so … so I thought it was different. I thought I … I thought I was okay. I’m sorry, John. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know how badly I was hurting myself …”

“It’s not your fault,” Johnny interrupted, shuffling onto the very edge of his seat so that he could be close enough to take Jaehyun’s face in his hands. “It’s not your fault, Jaehyun. It’s not your fault. Please don’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault. You were just doing what they told you to do.”
Jaehyun reached up with both hands and fastened a grip on each of Johnny’s wrists, probably using the contact to ground himself as his hyung brought their foreheads together so they could share some kind of soothing connection.

“It’s not your fault,” Johnny repeated over Jaehyun’s gentle mantra of apologies. “It’s not your fault. It’s not ever going to be your fault.”

Jaehyun nodded, their foreheads still pressed up against each other, tears gliding down both cheeks as his fingers tightened their hold on Johnny’s wrists.

It was clear that he was trying to believe what he was being told but the thought of shifting the blame from his own shoulders to somebody else’s was obviously too much to handle at this exact moment.

“I want to go home,” he whispered hoarsely and Johnny finally drew away so he could look his friend directly in his teary eyes. “Please, John, I want to go home.”

“Soon. I promise. Soon.”

Jaehyun hiccupped one final time before he seemed to realise how pathetic he looked and cleared his throat sharply, shuffling slightly higher up on his pillows and using the heel of his hand to dry his eyes.

And if sentences could be made of gold then the next one would be beyond priceless.

“Can I get something to eat?”

They had been in this position too many times before – with Taeyong, with Ten, with Chenle – and the recovery period had always been a billion times harder than the catastrophic medical emergency that had led to it.

If that had been the case with Jaehyun then Johnny knew for a fact that he wouldn’t have been able to handle it, but here he was, lying in this bed after everything he’d been forced to go through, asking for sustenance.

It was singularly the happiest moment of Johnny’s life.

“Not yet,” he said, wishing he had another answer to give but knowing that, so long as Jaehyun was willing to chew and swallow, he would be okay. “They have to reintroduce your body to food pretty slowly so that you don’t get sick again.”

There was a moment of silence where Jaehyun seemed to mull over Johnny’s words before something clicked inside his head and his eyes went almost comically wide.

“What about the comeback?”

Johnny’s words caught in his throat, leaving him sitting there with his mouth hanging open like a dumbstruck lemon. He couldn’t tell Jaehyun that the dates had been pushed back because of him. He would be terrified of the punishment the managers would bestow upon him.

“Don’t worry about the comeback,” he said instead. “Taeyong and Taeil-hyung are sorting that out. You just focus on you right now.”

Maybe there would come a time when they didn’t have to be afraid of voicing their opinions, of sticking up for themselves and each other, of passing out on stage due to the diets they’d been
forced to go on.

Maybe there would come a time when managers didn’t hit the idols in their care, call them fat and deliberately humiliate them publicly. Maybe there would come a time when they felt safe in their line of work.

But that time wasn’t now. That time wasn’t even approaching anytime soon.

It was going to take a lot more than a couple of abused and broken individuals to change the industry that had been running the same way for decades now. Thinking they were powerful enough on their own was bordering on delusional.

Maybe one day. Maybe.

But even if ‘maybe’ was never going to turn into ‘definitely’, they still had the strongest support system any of them could have ever asked for in the form of the people who were willing to take the punches, endure the punishments and sit at a hospital bedside for hours on end just so that they would feel just a little safer than they really were.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much, George Weasley, for requesting this fic. I had so much fun (maybe a little too much fun) writing it and I know I'm not very good at endings but I hope this one was satisfactory enough. I wanted to conclude with something truthful instead of wishful thinking.

Please remember that you're beautiful xx

End Notes

Comments and Kudos really help with my motivation and confidence so, if you have a spare moment, let me know what you think! Have a great day!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!